

Handout D

Active listening

Active listening is an essential basic skill in good communication. It means to give someone your full attention, and try to understand what the person means to say – from their perspective, without judging them (i.e. you have to set your own opinions aside for a while).

Active listening is important because:

- it is the best way to get good information
- it makes the respondent feel good – he/she has the full attention of another person
- stimulates openness and creativity: easy to formulate own ideas and opinions
- the respondent feels respected and valued, personally and professionally.

How do you do active listening?

- show interest, both verbally and nonverbally
- accept and value what the person says, and the emotions behind it
- use open questions, and probe
- focus on partner – give full attention
- communicate positive feelings nonverbally
- set your own prejudices aside
- check that you have understood



Check whether you have understood the other person by reformulating – use your own words:

- do I understand you rightly to say ...
- what you are saying, does this mean ...
- I hear you saying that ... Have I heard you right?

You can interrupt, if done nicely/gently, with the aim of understanding better.

What *not* to do when you listen actively:

- judge/evaluate what the person says, does or feels
- think about how you are going to respond/think about other things
- inject comments that “show” you know better.

Why is active listening a difficult practice for most of us? Because:

- we have bad habits (judging without thinking)
- standing up for ourselves/our ideas: our culture values strength
- good listener = feminine, weak (men act – women talk).

Active listening is a very important skill in effective communication. Awareness, practice and feedback are needed to improve this skill over time.

Exercise for asking open questions, listening, and giving feedback

In pairs, take turns to obtain information on two given topics agreed to by the larger group (trainer can suggest topics, to save time). Your trainer will clarify this before you start the exercise.

Your task is to make your co-participant feel comfortable and willing to talk.

Use your personal communication style, raise your antennae, ask good questions and listen actively.

Part 1 - One participant is the interviewer, and asks a colleague questions on the given topic. Use as many open questions as possible, listen carefully to the respondent's answers, then decide on your next question. Try to understand how your colleague sees these issues, and make him/her feel you are trying to understand.

The aim of the exercise is to ask, listen and understand – NOT to give your own views.

After five minutes, the one who was responding gives feedback on the personal communication style of the interview, using feedback rules.

QUESTIONS: Did the interviewer ask open questions?

LISTENING: How did he/she listen in order to understand your ideas?
How did you feel about his/her interest and concern?

Part 2 - Change roles and repeat the exercise using the second topic.