

EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION: ACTIVE/EMPATHIC LISTENING

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Communication: *the imparting or interchange of thoughts, opinions, or information by speech, writing, or signs* (Webster's College Dictionary, 3rd Edition)

"I am so frustrated. I can't get John to do anything I ask."

"Betty took credit for my idea. I am going to tell her a thing or two!"

Background

As conscientious employees, supervisors and managers we take pride in our ability to work effectively with others and solve problems. However, in our zeal to solve problems, we may not listen to a person or group well enough to understand what the problem really is. This can result in our trying to solve the wrong problem and/or gaining a reputation as someone who doesn't listen to people.

One of the most critical skills possessed by good team players is their ability to effectively communicate. Effective communication is not simply talking clearly; it is, in many cases, and often more importantly, **listening effectively**. By effective listening, we are not referring to someone speaking and someone else simply hearing the words. Rather, effective communication often requires that the listener understand the emotional content of the speaker's words as well as the words themselves.

This is easier said than done. Throughout life we are told to speak clearly, say what we mean, use proper english. Rarely are we taught how to listen effectively. We are taught to listen and understand words in their literal sense, but not to listen for the emotional context in which they are spoken. We tend to listen to prepare a reply, instead of understanding what the speaker is trying to tell us. Yet, it is through understanding the emotional content of the words and what they mean to the speaker that will allow you to unlock the effective communicator within you.

Active/Empathic Listening

To be an effective communicator, it is important to understand how things appear to the speaker. We need to understand the person who is speaking and what he or she is really trying to convey. Often simply listening to the speaker's words alone will not do the trick.

Think about the times you have tried to convey your thoughts or feelings to someone, and in spite of your best efforts, they didn't get it. You may have ended up frustrated or angry with the

listener because of it. Or perhaps you were listening to someone and they told you that you “just don’t understand.” It could have been a peer, a direct report or perhaps a spouse, child or friend.

The listening skill that will help you be an effective listener is called **active listening** or **empathic listening**. In this type of listening, the objective is to seek understanding of the speaker’s words and feelings, so that you genuinely understand how that person sees things. As put by Stephen Covey in Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, **seek to understand first, then to be understood**.

In active or empathic listening, you listen with your ears, your eyes, and your heart. Your objective is to understand how the other person views a situation. By understanding the other person’s point of view, you see the world as they see it and you understand how they feel. As a result, you are in a better position to respond to that person in ways that make sense to him or her, not in ways that make sense to you. That’s one of the big challenges in empathic listening — you need to work at it in order to really understand the other person’s point of view.

The good news is that research has shown you will have a better chance of gaining trust and achieving more effective communications if you do try to understand the situation from the other person’s world than if you focus on your own frame of reference or own needs.

It Takes Courage

Empathic or active listening is so powerful because you focus on the needs of the other person, not your own. And if you do this in a genuine way, you will unlock the potential to establish true effective communications. So how do you do that? Can you learn how to be an effective listener? The answer is an unqualified **yes**, if you are willing to apply a few proven principles of effective listening and work at it — really work at it. Make no mistake, developing good listening skills takes **commitment** and **practice**. It also takes **courage**. By being an empathic listener and understanding the other person’s point of view, you run the risk of agreeing with him or her. But so what? Maybe their idea or way of proceeding is better than yours. If not, at least now you know how they see things and can seek solutions that best meet everyone’s needs.

Active/Empathic Listening Skills

It’s time to take this discussion out of the *what* and *why* and start focusing on the *how*. How do we listen effectively? How can we apply the principles of active listening? For one thing, the very word *active* implies that you are working at listening, not simply along for the ride.

Stop What You’re Doing. When you want to engage in effective listening, to really understand what is going on with the other person and what is being communicated and felt by the other person, stop what you’re doing and give him or her your full attention. Don’t take phone calls. Don’t type on the keyboard or connect to the Internet (these can be seen in person and heard over the phone, and convey the message “you’re really not that important to me”).

By stopping what you are doing and giving full attention to the person, you are sending a powerful message that he or she is the most important person in the world to you at that moment. That alone helps set a positive communicating environment that fosters trust and openness, and conveys that you truly want to understand what is going on with that person.

Look At the Person. Give the person *face time* in the literal sense as well as the figurative sense. Make eye contact. Show concern and interest in what the person is telling you.

Listen. To the person's words, tone, feelings. Focus on the message, not on whether the person is well-spoken or has an accent different from yours. In today's multicultural environment, you will see and hear an increasing number of people who speak differently than you. You may have to work at it. Don't think how you are going to respond or solve the problem. Just listen — seek to understand.

Get Comfortable with Silence. The person may be telling you about a very private matter (e.g., a harassment situation, death of a family member, or other personal situation) and may need time to marshal his or her thoughts and words. Usually the pause or silence only lasts a few seconds or minutes, but it can seem like a lot longer. Don't rush the person. Avoid the temptation to fill in the blanks or complete the person's thought.

Don't be Judgmental. You may be shocked at what you hear. You may disagree or agree with what you hear. But reserve judgment while you are listening. Remember, you are seeking to understand first. This is about the person speaking and you listening, not your own values or your own set of do's and don'ts.

Encouraging. Let the person know you are listening by comments like “Yes,” “I see ...” or “Uh-huh” at appropriate times. Non-verbal encouragement such as a nod or smile is also encouraging behavior on your part. This does not imply that you agree with the person, but rather an acknowledgement that you are interested in what the person is telling you and making it easy for him or her to continue talking.

Restating in Your Own Words. To let the person know you have indeed heard and understood what he or she is saying, restate the other's basic ideas in your own words. “It sounds like you are upset because ...” “If I understand your position, you believe ...” or “In other words, you think we should take this approach because” Pause to let the speaker react. If you got it right, the person may say “yes and” Or if you are incorrect, the person can correct you right then so you do know what he or she meant. Either way, you have listened effectively in the sense that the person knows you want to understand and you have correctly captured the person's content. This allows the person to develop trust in you and more readily accept your comments when you do offer guidance or support.

Restate, yes, but don't start telling your own story about how you dealt with a similar situation. (“Yeah, I remember when I was faced with the same challenge ...”) Active listening is about listening to the other person, not about you and your autobiography. You may draw upon your own experience later on after you fully understand the other person's situation, but not while you are seeking to understand the person's own situation.

Observing and Reflecting Feelings. The emotions and feelings behind the words are often more important than what is actually said. Look beyond the mere words the speaker uses to understand what the person is feeling. Listen with your eyes and heart. Show you understand the person's emotional status by reflecting your understanding of the person's feelings. “You sound pretty upset, John.” Or “How are you today, Betty?” Betty answers, barely audibly, with her head down, “Oh, I'm okay.” You sense all is not right with Betty, so you might say, “Gee, Betty, you don't sound like you're okay.” Betty, sensing a genuine interest by you, might reply “Well, actually, everything is not alright. Last night I learned” Sometimes, you may not

have a clue as to what the other person feels. So, you might try, “How did that make you feel, Bill.” And then listen.

When the person believes you are genuinely interested in him or her and develops trust in you based on that belief, you are in a good position to understand what is going on with the person, communicate more effectively with them and possibly help them. That help might be in the form of providing options for them to consider, referral to a professional counselor or other type of assistance. Often, just talking it out with an empathic listener will help them see the best solution options for them (and frequently, your organization).

When Can You Respond or Seek to Be Understood? The effective/empathic listener can respond or seek to be understood after you have applied the skills in this paper to truly understand the other person. If you have succeeded in listening to and understanding the other person, then you will be in the best position to offer your input and have it considered.

Make no mistake — empathic listening does take time, but not nearly as much time as it takes to backup and correct misunderstandings that could have been avoided if you had listened actively and empathetically in the first place. The payoff for your patience and skill in using active/empathic listening is a deeper understanding of the other person and the ability to fashion solutions that meet the person’s needs, the organization’s needs and your needs.

Okay, you’ve listened well.

Now you can solve the problem!!

Credit:

In addition to his own research and experience, Barry has drawn upon the writings of respected interpersonal communication professionals Carl R. Rogers and Stephen R. Covey in the development of this paper.

This paper may be copied and distributed to others interested in effective communication. It is included in and discussed as part of the *Leadership Excellence*® series of workshops available through BENATECH, INC.

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