

Active Listening

Listening is a conscious activity which requires attention. Listening fully - or actively means putting everything else out of your mind and acknowledging the other person so they have feedback that you are listening properly and valuing what they have to say. Understanding and valuing does not mean agreeing; active listening is particularly valuable in situations of conflict or disagreement where if the other party feels you understand their viewpoint, an atmosphere of cooperation can be created which increases the possibility of resolving the conflict.

Some of the key skills for active listening include:

- Listen with your whole body:
 - Face the other person and use an open posture to establish rapport
 - Use eye contact and facial gestures to demonstrate your attention
 - Be still and resist fidgeting
- Let the other person do the talking:
 - Be quiet and actively encourage the other person to talk; promote their willingness to communicate
 - Avoid interrupting
 - Don't finish their sentences or fill in the blanks – no matter how tempting!
- Notice non-verbal communication ie, body language, tone and pitch of the voice – listen for feelings and emotions as much as facts and words
- Be comfortable with silence. Staying silent gives time and opportunity for the speaker to share extra information. It may feel odd initially, but you will be amazed how often more information emerges after a moment's silence.
- Use questions effectively
- Reflect back the information you receive:
 - Repeat the information you have just heard to illustrate your understanding and provide opportunities for clarification.
 - Use paraphrasing, acknowledgment and reflective statements.

Active listening takes time and focus to achieve; used effectively it opens up a whole new level on which to communicate and build relationships.

Effective Questions

Asking effective questions is a key skill to develop. Questioning can help the other person reach conclusions beneficial to you as well as provide information and insights helpful to the discussion. Some of the skills of effective questioning include:

- Ask open ended questions - Open ended questions such as “How do you think this re-structure may impact your department?” provide far greater insights than closed questions such as “How long have you worked with Harry?” Closed questions will deliver Yes/No answers or flat facts such as “Two years”
- Don't be afraid to wait for the complete answer!
- Use active listening.....
- Avoid leading questions and ‘why’ questions (these can cause people to become defensive) focus on ‘what’ and ‘how’ questions that elicit facts and information without appearing to blame.

- Pre-plan the questions you are likely to need some examples of typical questions include:
 - Questions to identify an issue:
 - What seems to be the trouble?
 - What do you make of _____?
 - How do you feel about _____?
 - What concerns you the most about _____?
 - What seems to be the problem? (*not: 'Why did this go wrong?'*)
 - What seems to be your main obstacle?
 - What is holding you back from _____?
 - What do you think about doing XXXX this way?
 - Questions to elicit additional information:
 - What do you mean by _____?
 - Tell me more about _____
 - What else?
 - What other ways did you try so far?
 - What will you/we have to do to get the job done?
 - Outcome focused questions (can help resolve a conflict once the issues are understood):
 - How do you want _____ to turn out?
 - What do you want? Or What is your desired outcome?
 - What benefits would you like to get out of X?
 - What do you propose?
 - What is your plan?
 - If you do this, how will it affect _____ ?
 - What else do you/we need to consider?
 - Questions to elicit action:
 - What will you do?
 - When will you do it?
 - How will I know you did it?
 - What are your next steps?

Asking the right questions lets your hear the information you really need to understand as long as you are actively listening. You may not like the answers but need the information to move forward! It is impossible to fully resolve a problem if you don't fully understand the issues first.