**Active Listening – Reading Material**

**Overview:**

Communicating effectively enables an individual to perform optimally as individuals and as part of a team. The process of communication requires not only effective speaking, but active listening, with purpose and intent. Only by combining active listening with effective speaking is it possible to gain understanding and promote open communication.

**Objectives:**

This reading material is designed to help you:

* Understand the importance of active listening.
* Differentiate among facts, inferences and opinions.
* Classify, paraphrase, clarify and verify

**Introduction to Active listening**

Active listening involves more than hearing the words someone says. It takes effort to understand the ideas and feelings that another person is trying to communicate. Effective listening means paying attention to a person’s words and body language (facial expressions, eye contact, posture, voice tone, and gestures). If the listener lacks interest, has a closed mind, becomes distracted, or interprets the message incorrectly, the communication is ineffective. The listener and the sender are equally responsible for effective communication.

Think of a time when you felt that someone was not really listening to you. What let you know that the other person was not listening, and how did that make you feel?

Reflecting on your own experiences may help you understand the importance of active listening. Trying to communicate with someone who is not listening attentively can be frustrating and unproductive, and can lead to misunderstanding, conflict, or impaired job performance.

Becoming a good listener means being attentive to the person speaking and actively seeking clarification and understanding of what is said. Becoming a good listener involves three essential elements:

1. You must be open to the conversation—that is, you must be willing, and appear willing, to listen, demonstrating an open and respectful demeanor.
2. You must pay attention—focus on what is being said and show that you are really listening, through verbal affirmation and body language.
3. You must seek clarification for things you do not understand, and restate or paraphrase what you have heard to make sure that the speaker knows you are truly listening and that you understood what was said.

Taken together, these elements distinguish someone who listens from someone who actively listens.

**Tips for being a good listener**

Give your full attention on the person who is speaking. Don't look out the window or at what else is going on in the room.

Make sure your mind is focused, too. It can be easy to let your mind wander if you think you know what the person is going to say next, but you might be wrong! If you feel your mind wandering, change the position of your body and try to concentrate on the speaker's words.

**Let the speaker finish before you begin to talk**. Speakers appreciate having the chance to say everything they would like to say without being interrupted. When you interrupt, it looks like you aren't listening, even if you really are.

Let yourself finish listening before you begin to speak! You can't really listen if you are busy thinking about what you want say next.

**Listen for main ideas.** The main ideas are the most important points the speaker wants to get across. They may be mentioned at the start or end of a talk, and repeated a number of times. Pay special attention to statements that begin with phrases such as "My point is..." or "The thing to remember is..."

**Ask questions.** If you are not sure you understand what the speaker has said, just ask. It is a good idea to repeat in your own words what the speaker said so that you can be sure your understanding is correct. For example, you might say, "When you said that no two zebras are alike, did you mean that the stripes are different on each one?"

**Give feedback**. Sit up straight and look directly at the speaker. Now and then, nod to show that you understand. At appropriate points you may also smile, frown, laugh, or be silent. These are all ways to let the speaker know that you are really listening. Remember, you listen with your face as well as your ears!

Remember: time is on your side! Thoughts move about four times as fast as speech. With practice, while you are listening you will also be able to think about what you are hearing, really understand it, and give feedback to the speaker.

To summarize, you listen to:

* To validate your understanding
* To avoid confusion and misunderstanding
* To respond appropriately

There are four components of Active listening. We will go through each component in detail

Components of Active Listening

1. Classify
2. Paraphrase
3. Clarify
4. Verify

**Fact Inference and Opinion**

When you’re talking to someone or are in some other situation [i.e. listening to the radio, watching television, etc.] and someone says something that seems rather ambiguous, it’s important to decipher if what they are saying is a fact, an inference, or an opinion. Do they KNOW for a fact that what they are saying is true? Do they have evidence of it? Or are they merely judging from things they have heard? Or do they even have any reason being their words other than their own personal opinion?

**Objective:**

Learn to differentiate between a fact, inference and an opinion

1. A fact is a statement that can be proven true (or false) with some objective standard

e.g.: The biology students are in Science Lab 3A.

This is a “provable” statement. It can be determined that there are people,

Who study biology, who are in a room that has scientific lab equipment for

Scientific laboratory work. The room number (3A or otherwise) can also be proven.

2. An inference is a statement that appears to be true based on previous experiences. The greater the body of experience, the more an inference appears to be a fact.

e.g.: Biology class meets in Science Lab 3A.

This is probably true in most cases—the class is scheduled to meet in that room, and class is likely held there. There may also be occasions when the class is held outdoors or at another location.

e.g.: The school day begins at 8:00 a.m.

This inference seems to be a fact, but it is certainly possible that bad weather

that could cause school to begin later. This is much like the above statement.

The sun rises in the east and sets in the west.

This certainly seems to be a fact. No one anticipates that the rotation of the earth will change drastically overnight, but because it is written in a tense that implies both present conditions as well as future conditions, it could also be considered an inference.

1. An opinion is a statement that a person believes to be true but

it cannot be measured against an objective standard

Science Lab 3A is too small for the biology class.

Science Lab 3A is well equipped for biology classes.

The first statement is dependent on a number of factors, and may even enlist agreement from many different sources, but there is no “standard” for the appropriate size of a science lab.

The second statement is dependent on what the biology class does in the lab. Their work may be limited by the equipment, but because they have the materials they need for their work, someone might mistakenly believe the lab has sufficient equipment and materials.

**Paraphrase**

Paraphrasing is repeating in your words what you interpreted someone else to be saying.  Paraphrasing is powerful means to further the understanding of the other person and yourself, and can greatly increase the impact of another’s comments.  It can translate comments so that even more people can understand them.  When paraphrasing:

* Put the focus of the paraphrase on what the other person implied, not on what you wanted him/her to imply, e.g., don’t say, “I believe what you meant to say was …”.  Instead, say “If I’m hearing you right, you conveyed that …?”
* Phrase the paraphrase as a question, “So you’re saying that …?”, so that the other person has the responsibility and opportunity to refine his/her original comments in response to your question.
* Put the focus of the paraphrase on the other person, e.g., if the person said, “I don’t get enough resources to do what I want,” then don’t paraphrase, “We probably all don’t get what we want, right?”
* Put the ownership of the paraphrase on yourself, e.g., “If I’m hearing you right …?” or “If I understand you correctly …?”
* Put the ownership of the other person’s words on him/her, e.g., say “If I understand you right, you’re saying that …?” or “… you believe that  …?” or “… you feel that …?”
* In the paraphrase, use some of the words that the other person used.  For example, if the other person said, “I think we should do more planning around here.”  You might paraphrase, “If I’m hearing you right in this strategic planning workshop, you believe that more strategic planning should be done in our community?”
* Don’t judge or evaluate the other person’s comments, e.g., don’t say, “I wonder if you really believe that?” or “Don’t you feel out-on-a-limb making that comment? “You can use a paraphrase to validate your impression of the other’s comments, e.g., you could say, “So you were frustrated when …?”
* The paraphrase should be shorter than the original comments made by the other person.

If the other person responds to your paraphrase that you still don’t understand him/her, then give the other person 1-2 chances to restate his position.  Then you might cease the paraphrasing; otherwise, you might embarrass or provoke the other person.

Tips to Paraphrase

* Use synonyms
* Break it into (multiple) simpler statements
* Switch voice

**Clarify**

Clarifying

What is it: Process of bringing vague material into sharper focus.

Purpose:

To untangle unclear or wrong listener interpretation.

* To get more information
* To help the speaker see other points of view
* To identify what was said

E.g. I’m confused; let me try to sate what I think you were trying to say.

You’ve said so much; let me see if I’ve got it all.

Clarifying involves asking questions of the speaker to ensure that the correct message has been received. Clarification usually involves the use of open questions which enables the speaker to expand on certain points as necessary.

The purpose of clarification is to:

* Ensure that the listener's understanding of what the speaker has said is correct, reducing misunderstanding.
* Reassure the speaker that the listener is genuinely interested in them and is attempting to understand what they are saying.

In communication, clarification involves offering back to the speaker the essential meaning, as understood by the listener, of what they have just said. Thereby checking that the listener's understanding is correct and resolving any areas of confusion or misunderstanding.

Clarifying can involve asking questions or occasionally summarizing what the speaker has said.

A listener can ask for clarification when they cannot make sense of the speaker's responses. Sometimes, the messages that a speaker is attempting to send can be highly complex, involving many different people, issues, places and/or times. Clarifying helps you to sort these out and also to check the speaker's priorities.

Through clarification it is possible for the speaker and the listener to make sense of these often confused and complex issues. Clarifying involves genuineness on the listener's part and it shows speakers that the listener is interested in them and in what they have to say.

Some examples of non-directive clarification-seeking questions are:

“I'm not quite sure I understand what you are saying.”

“I don't feel clear about the main issue here.”

“When you said ........ what did you mean?”

“Could you repeat ...?”

Clarifying involves:

* Non-judgmental questioning.
* Summarizing and seeking feedback as to its accuracy.

Clarification Questions

When you are the listener in a sensitive environment, the right sort of non-directive questioning can enable the speaker to describe their viewpoint more fully.

Asking the right question at the right time can be crucial and comes with practice. The best questions are open-ended as they give the speaker choice in how to respond, whereas closed questions allow only very limited responses.

Open Questions

If your role is to assist a speaker to talk about an issue, often the most effective questioning starts with 'when', 'where', 'how' or 'why'. These questions encourage speakers to be open and expand on their thoughts. For example:

* “When did you first start feeling like this?”
* “Why do you feel this way?”

Closed Questions

Closed questions usually elicit a 'yes' or 'no' response and do not encourage speakers to be open and expand on their thoughts. Such questions often begin with 'did you?' or 'were you?' For example:

* “Did you always feel like this?”
* “Were you aware of feeling this way?”

**Guidelines for Clarifying**

Clarification is the skill we use to ensure that we have understood the message of the speaker in an interpersonal exchange. When using clarification follow these guidelines to help aid communication and understanding.

* Admit if you are unsure about what the speaker means.
* Ask for repetition.
* State what the speaker has said as you understand it, and check whether this is what they really said.
* Ask for specific examples.
* Use open, non-directive questions - if appropriate.
* Ask if you have got it right and be prepared to be corrected.

**Summarizing**

As a further extension to clarification a summary involves reviewing what has taken place during the whole conversation.

It is important to keep only to the essential components of the conversation, and it must be given from the speaker's frame of reference, not an interpretation from the listener’s viewpoint. The aim of a summary is to review understanding, not to give explanation, to judge, to interpret or provide solutions.

Summarizing should be done at the end of a conversation, although sometimes it may be appropriate midway through as a way of drawing together different threads. At the start of a conversation, it is useful to summarize any previous discussions or meetings as it can help to provide focus. Whilst the summary is likely to be the longest time a listener will be speaking during a conversation, it is important to be as concise and straightforward as possible.

**Summary of Clarification**

In reflecting, clarifying and summarizing, speakers must be allowed to disagree with, and correct, what the listener says. They should be encouraged to express themselves again, if necessary, giving the listener another chance at understanding, and to check understanding until agreement is reached.Reflecting, clarifying and summarizing are the tools used by active listeners to enable them to demonstrate understanding and encourage a speaker to talk openly.

Tips to clarify

* Ask probing questions
* Summarize main points

**Verify**

Verifying

You are verifying information when you paraphrase the speaker’s words to ensure that you understand her meaning. For example, “As I understand it, your plan is . . .”; “It sounds like you’re saying . . .”; or “This is what you’ve decided, and the reasons are . . .”

Perception Checking

What is it: Request for verification of your perceptions?

Purpose:

* To give and receive feedback
* To check out your assumptions

e.g.

Let me see if I’ve got it straight. You said that you love your children and that they are very important to you. At the same time you can’t stand being with them. Is that what you are saying?