

Active Listening Skills

Active Listening is a very successful set of listening skills and techniques which enable the listener to accurately construe what the speaker is intending to say. In turn, the speaker feels heard, and understood. Soon the communication between the speaker and listener flows smoothly, free of messy misunderstandings. Consequently, the people in communication stand a far greater chance at solving problems, resolving conflicts, fostering deeper intimacy, and creating a more loving, harmonious relationship.

Active Listening skills and techniques include the following: Using your body language effectively; Incorporating Reflective Listening and Paraphrasing techniques into every day conversation; asking "Clarifying Questions" to make sure he or she accurately hears what the speaker is trying to communicate; and making astute "Content to Process shifts," which enables the listener to hear the many layers of thoughts and feelings that lie beneath the surface of what is being said out loud.

How we hold our bodies when communicating with others can tellingly reveal how we feel about what he or she is saying. For example, it is pretty evident that when someone begins rolling their eyes while someone is saying something to him, he is likely feeling frustrated, or bored. Yawning incessantly can certainly communicate boredom as well. Closing one's eyes can reflect apathy or disinterest, and so can slouching one's shoulders and drooping one's head towards the floor. Moving your hands restlessly can indicate that you're distracted, and not paying much attention to what is being said. Clenching your jaw and puffing out your chest can reveal that you are feeling angry with the speaker, or even defensive. Breathing shallowly can indicate that you may be feeling anxious, and avoiding eye contact may show that you feel intimidated. As you can imagine, the list goes on and on when it comes to the many ways our bodies don't serve us in our communications with others.

In order to use your body effectively when listening to someone, do your best to breathe deeply, and offer the person good eye contact. Meaning, soften your eyes, so they appear receptive to what the person is saying, and non-threatening. Do your best to make sure that your body appears relaxed, so that you appear open to what the person is saying to you. Be still if you can, so that you don't appear distracted or preoccupied by other things going on around you. Finally, nod your head from time to time, so that the person talking knows that you are following what he or she is saying. There are, of course, many other non-verbal ways to communicate to the person speaking that you are open and receptive to what is being said. When you make a conscious effort to use your body language in these ways, you will likely find that your verbal exchanges with others become more fluid, more respectful, and more productive as well.

"Reflective Listening" is a technique that encourages the listener to repeat back

to the speaker exactly what he or she has said, in their own words. For example, take the following exchange: A man appears exasperated because he believes his girlfriend rarely hears what he is saying. So he tells her, "I'm sick and tired of your not listening to me, and not caring enough to understand my feelings!! I want our kids to go to Church three times a week!! Going once a week won't do!!"

Clearly this man rarely feels that his girlfriend gets the gist of what he is saying. But one way for his wife to diffuse his anger and frustration would be to reflect back to him precisely what he has said. Using the reflective listening technique, she would say: "I hear you saying that you are sick and tired of me not listening to you. Moreover, you think that I don't care enough to understand your feelings. You would like our children to go to Church three times a week, and that going once a week won't do."

Often time's two very intelligent people don't accurately hear what one another is saying. The listener may simply hear what he wants to hear, and disregard the rest. Or he may make an inaccurate interpretation of what has just been said. Or intense feelings that are aroused in our interactions with others make it difficult for us to hear much of anything at all!! One way to lower the margin for error and significantly increase the likelihood that a speaker is heard involves mirroring back precisely what he or she has said, word for word.

"Paraphrasing" is an active listening technique that challenges the listener to accurately capture and paraphrase back the essence of what has been communicated to him or her. In this instance, he must do so in his own words. Doing so demonstrates that he truly gets the over all gist of what has been said. In turn, the person sharing his thoughts and feelings feels heard, and sufficiently understood.

Take the aforementioned example with regards to the man, his wife, and their kids: Remember, the man has said the following: "I'm sick and tired of your not listening to me, and not caring enough to understand my feelings!! I want our kids to go to Church three times a week!! Going once a week won't do!!"

In this instance, the wife might paraphrase back to him the following: "Honey, you're angry with me because you don't think that I care enough to listen to you, and that I don't even bother to understand your feelings. An example of this would be when it comes to our children, and how often they attend church. I get that you feel adamantly about our children attending church three times a week, and that you don't believe that going to church once a week is nearly enough."

In this instance, the girlfriend has communicated to he boyfriend what she has heard him say, but in her own words. In her communication to him, she uses her intuition and insight as well, and shares with him her own sense of what he is likely feeling. For example, she speculates that he is feeling angry with her. When she reads between the lines and names what he is feeling, his anger will

likely dissipate, and his tone of voice will likely soften, for he will feel accurately seen and heard by her. When she lets him know that she understands that he feels adamantly about this issue, he will once again feel as though she gets how important this matter is to him.

"Clarifying Questions" are asked in order to gain a deeper and more accurate understanding for what has been said. Such questions lessen the chances that a listener will walk away from a conversation feeling unsure of what the speaker has said. Therapists, for example, often ask clarifying questions, for they do not want to make assumptions about what their client is thinking and/or feeling. Instead they want to accurately distill what the client is saying, and they want to learn more about their clients' thoughts and feelings as well.

Take, for example, the following exchange. Jack and Jill are boyfriend and girlfriend, and they are taking a walk along the ocean on a cold, wintry day. Jack owns a beautiful cashmere sweater, and he happens to be wearing it. Noticing that Jill appears cold, he offers her his sweater. As he hands it to her, he says, "Just remember to give it back to me when you're done using it."

Suddenly Jill appears sour, and glum, and begins to tear up. She wraps the sweater up in her hand, and defiantly tries to give it back to Jack. In turn, Jack feels confused, and hurt. He doesn't understand what in the world has upset Jill. In his mind, all he is guilty of is lovingly and selflessly offering his girlfriend his cashmere sweater, as she appeared cold to him.

In his confusion, Jack could choose to respond to her strange reaction with anger: He could say, "What is wrong with you!! You're such a brat!! Why do you act like such a baby for no reason? I try to be nice to you, and what do I get in return? I get frowns, and scowls, and bad looks....You're nuts!!"

While Jack could go on a verbal tirade of his own, and go on to condemn her actions, and shame her, he probably knows that such a diatribe will get them nowhere. He'll feel angry, and she'll feel shamed, and hurt, and perhaps angry as well. The two will quickly reach an impasse, and neither will speak to each other. A silent treatment will likely ensue, the romantic walk will abruptly end, and their relationship will suddenly be on the rocks. Soon they will break up, and neither will know what in the world happened on their walk along the ocean. Jack will conclude that Jill is crazy, and Jill will conclude that Jack is an insensitive jerk.

Perhaps Jack and Jill could have salvaged their relationship had Jack asked Jill a clarifying question? What if he asked Jill, "Jill, what's wrong? You look mad at me, and hurt? I'm at a loss. What have I done to upset you? Help me to understand how my behavior has affected you, so that I can be more sensitive to your feelings from here on out? What about my lending you my sweater upset you? I can assure you that my intentions were good. What's going on?"

To Jack's surprise, Jill might say, "I was hurt when you asked me to remember to give it back to you. I thought you were questioning my integrity, insinuating that I'm the kind of person that would try to steal it from you. I felt like you didn't trust me to give it back to you, like you were questioning my integrity. I'm not a thief, you know. You don't need to remind me to give things back to you. Besides, in my family, what's somebody's is everybody's. Everyone shares. There are no boundaries between people. "

Alas!! Jill has given Jack some insight into how she experienced him when he reminded her to return his sweater back to him at some point. Moreover, she revealed to him some of her beliefs around giving, and how her family had shaped some of those beliefs. She also let him know how insecure she can be, and how she is liable to perceive criticism from others, and negative evaluations, even when such evaluations are not present. By asking Jill a clarifying question, Jack in turn learned a lot about his girlfriend, and how she processes things.

Armed with this new awareness of Jill, Jack would then be able to understand her ill-tempered reaction, and not take it so personally. And by not taking it so personally, he would likely feel less angry with her. He might likely feel some compassion for her instead. He would have an opportunity to reassure her that he doesn't question her integrity at all. Moreover, he could tell her that he cares for her deeply, and can now appreciate better how exquisitely sensitive she can be at times.

When a listener successfully makes a "Content to Process shift, he has been able to hear the hidden message that lies beneath the surface of what has been said out loud. Often, when two or more people communicate, the words that are spoken, or the content, don't tell the whole story. In fact, what has been said can be misleading, and can get the listener to lose sight of what the speaker is really meaning to say. Take, for example, a woman who scoffs at her boyfriend, and says, "You've become such a workaholic. All you care about is your work, and making money."

If the boyfriend in this instance listens only to what is being said (the content), then he will likely become defensive and angry. He might offer a rebuttal and say, "I do not work all of the time. And I am not only interested in making money." In this moment, he may feel attacked, and misunderstood. However, I ask you, what do you think the woman is really trying to say? What process is going on here?

Active listeners would know better. They would be able to see through her anger and frustration, and understand that more than likely she is trying to say, "I wish you wouldn't work so much. I miss you. I want to spend more time together with you. I want to feel like I'm still a priority in your life, and that you still love me, and want to be with me."

If the gentleman in this instance had the presence of mind to address her sadness, her insecurity, her self-doubts, and her anxiety, she in turn might feel attended to, heard, and cared for. The conflict between these two would resolve itself, and they would likely feel closer than they did before their altercation.

In conclusion, "Active Listening" skills play a significant role in helping people solve problems, resolve conflicts, foster deeper intimacy, and create more loving, harmonious relationships. These skills also help people to have more empathy for whomever is speaking, for they are better able to get into the other person's shoes, and listen to their perspective on things, and understand how reasonable it might be for him or her to feel and/pr think the way they do. Active listening skills also enable a listener to show that while they may not agree with the other person, they value his or her own unique point of view. People feel seen and heard, understood, and cared for. Needless tensions fall by the way side, and a sense of harmony and mutual respect between people take their place.