

The Scarlet Source

"Joust" What You Need for Organizational Success

Active Listening

Effective communication is arguably one of the most important characteristics of a successful organization. As a leader, you must learn how to actively listen to your constituents and understand all messages from group members in order to be effective.

It is first important to understand how active listening differs from hearing. Hearing is the act of perceiving audible sounds with the ear and is a passive act. Listening, on the other hand, is the active pursuit of understanding what the other person is saying and feeling. In active listening, the receiver tries to understand what the sender is feeling and what the message means. The listener puts his/her understanding into his/her own words and feeds it back to the sender for verification. This process helps to create an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.

To listen actively and understand requires hard work and is by no means a simple activity. The following tips will help you understand the characteristics of active listening as well as errors and responses that block effective communication.

Characteristics of a "Good Listener"

BE THERE—Be present in heart, mind and spirit with the person. Show interest through nonverbal behavior and acknowledging responses. You need to hear what the speaker has to say. If you don't have the time, or don't want to listen, wait until you do.

ACCEPT & RESPECT—Accept the person as she/he is without judgment or reservation, even though she/he may be very different from you. Accept and respect the person's feelings, whatever they may be or however they may differ from your feelings or from what you think a person "should" feel. Suspend judgment or evaluation, and avoid behaviors (verbal or non-verbal) that discredit or trivialize the conversation.

TRUST—Trust the person's ability to handle his/her own feelings, work through them, and find solutions to his/her own problems.

LISTEN—Don't plan what you are going to say. Don't think of how you can interrupt. Don't think of how to solve the problem, how to admonish, how to console, or what the person "should" do. Simply listen.

KEEP OUT OF IT—Keep yourself removed, stay objective and don't intrude physically, verbally or mentally. Stay quiet. This is hard work.

EMPATHIZE—Express concern for the other person. Don't become that person, but understand what he/she is feeling, saying or thinking. Stay separate enough to be objective, but involved enough to help.

Active Listening (Continued)

Listener Errors that Block Communication

- Closing your mind by calling the message “uninteresting”
- Planning what you’ll say next (your rebuttal, judgment, solution, etc.)
- Listening for facts only
- Using the same phrases over and over again, such as “You feel...”, “Sounds like...”, etc.
- Showing no empathy for the sender
- Faking attention to the speaker
- Using active listening when another skill is needed, such as confrontation, giving information, sharing resources, sharing personal experiences, etc.

Listener Responses that Block Communication

The Evaluator	“You should have...” “You should know better...”
The Solver	“Why don’t you try...” “It would be best if...”
The Topper	“That’s nothing...” “When that happened to me...”
The Shrink	“What you need is...” You feel that way because...”
The Lawyer	“Why...” “Who...” “When...”
The Boss	“You had better...” “If you don’t...”
The Professor	“Don’t you realize...” “Here’s where you went wrong...”
The Pollyanna	“You’ll get over it...” “It’s not really so bad...” “Don’t worry about it...”