

## ACTIVE LISTENING

In our active world of communication, one cannot afford to exclude the art of listening. As a leader you must listen to your constituents in order to be effective. Listen and correctly understand all messages from all group members.

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. It is important to feed back only what the listener feels the sender's message meant, nothing more, nothing less. This creates an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding in which the sender can explore the problem and determine a solution.

To listen actively and understand is not a passive or simple activity. The following are guidelines for active listening:

- Relaxed but attentive posture and comfortable eye contact, vs. rigid, or “laid back” posture and avoiding eye contact.
- Listen for associated feelings of the problem as well as the content vs. simply focusing on the facts of the problem and missing the feelings expressed or implied.
- Reflecting, clarifying or paraphrasing what the person has said to check out if you have heard it as the person feels it, vs. not taking the time to assure your understanding.
- Occasionally summarize what was said to show that you are following his/her concern.
- Be welcoming; convey a sense of acceptance and respect, vs. showing annoyance, restlessness or disdain.
- Being genuine, real and self-disclosing (when appropriate and relevant), but remembering that when honesty becomes offensive it's probably not necessary and rarely helpful, vs. playing counselor or trying too hard to be concerned and helpful.
- Being empathic vs. “putting down” or missing the concern the member attaches to the problem.
- Asking questions to get information that seems pertinent in order to get a clear, concise, understanding of the problem, vs. “firing” questions at the member or failing to ask any when necessary.
- Letting the member speak and ventilate his/her thoughts and feelings by offering leads of “door openers” to talk, vs. being quick to conclude the conversation or jump to conclusions and judgments.
- Being actively supportive and encouraging and offering hope through available resources and reassurance (i.e.: normalcy of the concern) vs. either alarming the member or indicating helplessness.
- Giving specific information when appropriate, vs. vague, general recommendations like, “You need to study more.”
- Remember when evaluating the impact of your actions; is it true? is it necessary? is it kind?
- “Silence is golden.” Silence helps to ease anxiety; it can convey acceptance and trust.

## GIVING EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

Feedback is communicating to a member or group how their behavior has affected us or other people. It is the information that flows between people that has to do with their interaction in the here and now. Effective feedback (1) can be heard by the receiver; (2) keeps the relationship intact, open, and healthy; and (3) validates the feedback process in future interactions.

Effective feedback, both positive and negative, is helpful to others. When you give feedback you are offering valuable information that will be useful to another person making decisions about how to behave. Also, feedback allows us to build and maintain closeness with others. Feedback is not criticism: Criticism is evaluative and feedback is descriptive. Evaluation is difficult to work with constructively. Feedback provides the individual with information that can be used in performing personal evaluation.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE FEEDBACK

- It is specific rather than general. To be told that one is “dominating” will probably not be as useful as to be told that “Just now you were not listening to what the others said, but I felt I had to agree with your arguments or face an attack from you.”
- It is focused on behavior rather than on the person. It is important that we refer to what a person does rather than to what we think or imagine he/she is. Thus we might say that a person “talked more than anyone else in this meeting” rather than that he/she is “a loudmouth.” The former allows for the possibility of change; the latter implies a fixed personality trait.
- It takes into account the needs of the receiver of the feedback. Feedback can be destructive when it serves only our own needs and fails to consider the needs of the person on the receiving end. It should be given to help, not to hurt. We too often give feedback because it makes us feel better or gives us a psychological advantage.
- It is directed toward behavior that the receiver can do something about. Frustration is only increased when a person is reminded of some shortcomings over which he/she has no control or physical characteristic about which he/she can do nothing.
- It is solicited, rather than imposed. Feedback is most useful when the receiver has formulated the kind of question that those observing him/her can answer to when he/she actively seeks feedback.
- It involves sharing of information rather than giving advice. By sharing information, we leave a person free to decide in accordance with his/her own goals, needs, etc. When we give advice we tell a person what to do, and to some degree take away the person’s freedom to decide for himself/herself.
- It is well timed. In general, immediate feedback is most useful (depending, of course, on the person’s readiness to hear it, support available from others, etc.) The reception and use of feedback involves many possible emotional reactions. Excellent feedback presented at an inappropriate time may do more harm than good.
- It involves the amount of information the receiver can use rather than the amount we would like to give. To overload persons with feedback is to reduce the possibility that they may be able to use what they received effectively. When we give more than can be used, we are more often than not satisfying some need of our own rather than helping the other person.
- It concerns what is said or done, or how it is said or done, not why. The “why” takes us from the observable to the inferred and involves assumptions regarding motive or intent. Telling a person what his/her motivations or intentions are, more often than not, tends to alienate the person, and contributes to a climate of resentment, suspicion, and distrust; it does not contribute to learning or development. It is dangerous to assume that we know why a person says or does something, or what he/she “really” means, or what he/she is “really” trying to accomplish. If we are uncertain of his/her motives or intent, this uncertainty itself is feedback, however, and should be revealed.
- It is checked to ensure clear communication. One way of doing this is to have the receiver try to rephrase the feedback he/she has received to see if it corresponds to what the sender has in mind. No matter what the intent, feedback is often threatening and thus subject to considerable distortion or misinterpretation.

*Part of this information was taken from “Resources for Leadership and Organizational Development,”  
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