

Effective Listening

Knowing how to listen is important for any effective communication. Whether in an interview, a meeting or during a one-on-one conversation you need to be able to focus on what the person wants to say and what they are asking from you. It involves several skills that can be learned.

How do I listen effectively?

1. *Prepare*

- Be aware of your own feelings and needs. Are you able to shut out distractions and focus on what this person is about to say?

2. *Listen and Clarify*

- Listen to the speaker's perspective, feelings and wants. If you don't feel as if you've clearly understood what they are saying ask for clarification or more information. Helpful phrases are "I'd just like to check that I've understood what you said correctly..." "Just let me run this past you..."

3. *Acknowledge*

- Communicate to the speaker that you've heard their point of view, for example: "I can hear that you are feeling very stressed at the moment." "You seem to be very worried about..."

4. *Your posture*

- Make sure your posture indicates interest in what the person is saying. This can be done by facing the person, at an appropriate distance. Having relaxed arms and legs rather than crossing or folding arms or legs "like a barrier" helps.

5. *Appropriate body motion*

- Move in a synchronized way with the speaker. A very rigid, still position or too much fidgeting is distracting and off-putting.

6. *Eye contact*

- Respect cultural difference. For Maori, Pacific Islanders and some other groups, direct eye contact may be considered offensive or aggressive. Be led by the speakers' comfort with eye contact. Effective eye contact usually consists of "bursts" of eye contact with movement to other parts of the person's face or hands and looking away.

7. *Suitable environment*

- Make sure the environment is welcoming – avoid physical barriers like desks in the way.

How do I indicate I'm listening?

1. *Use door openers*

- These are non-coercive invitations to talk. Statements such as "Want to tell me about it?" "What seems to be bothering you?"

2. *Use minimal encouragers*

- These are usually not so much words with content as sounds or movements that show the speaker you are interested in what they are saying. For instance “mmm.mm” “really” ... “right” ... “oh” ... “ok” and nodding your head.

3. *Use open questions*

- Open questions which require more than a “yes” or “no.” Examples would be “how did you feel about that?” “What would you like to have had happen?” Remember to only ask one question at a time.

4. *Use attentive silence*

- By not jumping in as soon as the person stops talking you may give them the space they need to think over what was said, to feel different emotions and sometimes to express new ideas.

How do I know I've heard right?

1. *Use paraphrasing as a reflective skill*

- This means providing the person with a synopsis of what they were saying. It should contain the essence of what the speaker has been saying. This is a very powerful way of showing someone that you've heard them – and most importantly – understood them.

2. *Reflection back their feelings or emotions*

- This is rather like being a mirror for someone. The idea is to go beyond words they use and pick up on their feelings. Look at body language, listen to their tone of voice, think of how you might feel in their position. Useful phrases include: “You seem pretty upset about...”; “it sounds like that shook you up quite a bit”; “I guess you're quite angry now.”

3. *Reflect meaning*

- This is an attempt to make some logical links for the speaker – trying to help them connect thoughts, events and feelings. For instance “You are upset because he had promised “x” and instead did “y.”

4. *Summarize*

- At the end of a discussion, it is helpful to revisit the main issues discussed and add any outcomes to them. “It seems that there are some issues which you have been worrying about and you've decided to talk to someone about them,” “so you are going to approach _____ about that and you also feel you need to go to _____ for help with that problem.”

**Remember: Effective listening can be learned
and improves with practice.**