

Active listening

Another required competence of a good mentor is “active listening”. A mentor has to be able to listen to the problems, stories, questions,... of a trainee and to other colleagues if they have feedback, in meetings etc.

1. THEORY

Active listening, what is it? ‘*Active listening*’ means, as its name suggests, actively listening. That is fully concentrating on what is being said rather than just passively ‘hearing’ the message of the speaker. Active listening involves listening with all senses. As well as giving full attention to the speaker, it is important that the ‘active listener’ is also ‘seen’ to be listening. Both verbal as non-verbal communication is important.

Non-Verbal signs of active Listening

This is a generic list of non-verbal signs of listening, in other words people who are listening are more likely to display at least some of these signs. However these signs may not be appropriate in all situations and across all cultures.

Smile

Small smiles can be used to show that the listener is paying attention to what is being said or as a way of agreeing or being happy about the messages being received. Combined with nods of the head, smiles can be powerful in affirming that messages are being listened to and understood. Even in phonecalls, this smile is important.

Eye Contact

It is normal and usually encouraging for the listener to look at the speaker. Eye contact can however be intimidating, especially for more shy speakers – gauge how much eye contact is appropriate for any given situation. Combine eye contact with smiles and other non-verbal messages to encourage the speaker.

Posture

Posture can tell a lot about the sender and receiver in interpersonal interactions. The attentive listener tends to lean slightly forward or sideways whilst sitting. Other signs of active listening may include a slight slant of the head or resting the head on one hand.

Mirroring

Automatic reflection/mirroring of any facial expressions used by the speaker can be a sign of attentive listening. These reflective expressions can help to show sympathy and empathy in

more emotional situations. Attempting to consciously mimic facial expressions (i.e. not automatic reflection of expressions) can be a sign of inattention.

Distraction

The active listener will not be distracted and therefore will refrain from fidgeting, looking at a clock or watch, doodling, playing with their hair or picking their fingernails.

Verbal Signs of active Listening

Questioning

The listener can demonstrate that they have been paying attention by asking relevant questions and/or making statements that build or help to clarify what the speaker has said. By asking relevant questions the listener also helps to reinforce that they have an interest in what the speaker has been saying.

- *LEADING: For example, “Would you like to talk about it?” “What happened then?” “Could you tell me more?”*
- *OPEN-ENDED Use open-ended questions to expand the discussion — for example, lead with: “How? What? Where? Who? Which?”*
- *CLOSED-ENDED Use closed ended questions to prompt for specifics — for example, lead with: “Is? Are? Do? Did? Can? Could? Would?” Answer is yes or no.*
- *REFLECTIVE Can help people understand more about what they said — for example, someone tells you, “I’m worried I won’t remember. . . ” Reflective Q: “It sounds like you would like some help remembering?”*

Reflection

Reflecting is closely repeating or paraphrasing what the speaker has said in order to show comprehension. Reflection is a powerful skill that can reinforce the message of the speaker and demonstrate understanding.

Clarification

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.

Summarisation

Repeating a summary of what has been said back to the speaker is a technique used by the listener to repeat what has been said in their own words. Summarising involves taking the main points of the received message and reiterating them in a logical and clear way, giving the speaker chance to correct if necessary.

Keypoints

- Don't interrupt and don't impose your "solutions", let the students think about a solution.
- Try to feel what the speaker is feeling.
- Stop talking about your personal life and your problems. It's not about you, it's about the student.
- Remove distractions. Don't pick up the phone, don't talk with others,...
- Avoid personal prejudice
- Silence is good stuff.
- ...

Communication blockers

- "Why" questions. They tend to make people defensive.
- Quick reassurance, saying things like: "Don't worry about that."
- Advising - "I think the best thing for you is to move to assisted living."
- Digging for information and forcing someone to talk about something they would rather not talk about.
- Patronizing — "You poor thing, I know just how you feel."
- Preaching — "You should. . ." Or, "You shouldn't. . ."
- Interrupting — Shows you aren't interested in what someone is saying.

2. POSSIBLE WAYS TO BRING THIS THEORY

- Exercise open-ended and closed-ended questions (appendix 1)
- Experience exercise on non-verbal signs (appendix 2)
- Telling vs. showing (appendix 3)
- List Less (appendix 4)
- Selective attention (appendix 5)
- Paper folding (appendix 6)
- Draw what you hear (appendix 7)
- ...

3. TIPS

- Use a lot of small exercises on every small topic before doing a big exercise.
- Don't forget to listen actively as a trainer.

4. Checklist

APPENDIX 1

Open-ended and closed-ended questions

Make groups of three participants. One person asks questions. The second one listen to this questions and the third one is the referee.

The person that asks question is only allowed the ask open-ended questions. The goal is that he knows in 5 minutes what the favourite holiday is of the other person. He cannot ask: how does your favourite holiday looks like? Or similar questions to this one. The referee listens carefully and every time when he hears a closed-ended question, he has to say: “stop” or “closed”.

You can see that this exercise looks very easy but it is very difficult. You can switch the roles and let them question about other topics.

APPENDIX 2

Non-verbal communication

One of the participants has to go outside the room. You tell him that he has to go inside again after five minutes and he has to tell a nice story (something that happened on the job, during the weekend, favourite holiday,...)

You tell the group inside that they have to listen carefully to his story (nod, smile, eye contact,...) and that they have to stop listening after 40 seconds (they can start talking, take their phone, ...)

Debrief:

- How was this exercise for the person who told the story?
- Group: what have you done to listen carefully? What have you done when you didn't have to listen?
- ...

APPENDIX 3

Telling vs. Showing

This quick exercise can be used as a “closer” or as a listening exercise, to reinforce the message that “actions speak louder than words.”

You say: “Please follow my words. Raise your right hand over your head. Stretch your left arm. Close your eyes. Open your eyes again. Bend your knees, stand up again. Keep following my words. Make a fist. Please make sure to follow my words. Round your fist three times and then put your fist on your forehead! (just before this moment, you put your own fist on your jaw!) You would find most of participant would follow your action and put their fists on their jaws! Someone would find their mistakes and repute their fists on their forehead.

Then you can say: What happened? I’ve asked you to follow my words for three times, but you follow my actions! Why?

APPENDIX 4

List Less

List about 18 related words. Pick any topic, for example, sleep, mattress, pillow, snore etc. Pick one word to be intermingled in the list three times, such as, the 3rd, 7th, and 12th word will be “sleep.” Leave out one obvious word from the list such as “bed.” Ask attendees to listen as you read the list to them.

Give them one minute to write as many words as they can remember that you said. Usually 60% will remember the first word, 75% will get the last word on your list, 80% will remember the word that was repeated three times and 20% will write down the obvious word you never said.

Debrief why all this happened and what we can learn from this.

APPENDIX 5

Selective attention test

Let the participants watch this video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vJG698U2Mvo>

The Selective Attention Test uses distraction and misdirection to test participants attention to detail - students think they are counting ball passes, but might miss a key event right before their eyes. This experiment reveals three things: that we are missing a lot of what goes on around us, even if we focus, and that we have no idea that we are missing so much. It has become one of the best-known experiments in psychology. And it got us thinking that many other intuitive beliefs that we have about our own minds might be just as wrong.

APPENDIX 6

Paper Folding

- Give everyone a sheet of paper.
- Tell everyone to close their eyes and follow your instructions.
- Start giving instructions about what to do with the piece of paper examples :
 - fold it in half
 - fold the lower left corner over the upper right corner
 - turn it 90 degrees to the left
 - fold it again
 - rip a half-circle in the middle of the right side
 - etc....
- Once you have given quite a few instructions (more than 10 at least for a great success), tell everyone to open their eyes and unfold their piece of paper.
- Even though they all received the same instructions and had the same starting material, pretty much everyone will have a different result.

Conclusions:

- We don't all start with the same base (some held their piece of paper vertically or horizontally) so we don't all have the same results. Our different reference of frame makes us see and hear things different.
- Some interpreted to rip a piece of paper as removing a big piece, some as a small piece, so your communication has to be very clear
- Having eyes closed = not receiving feedback on our performance
- Some instructions appear vague to some and clear to others.

Active listening is very important in this exercise. It will work way better with two-way communication, questioning, non-verbal communication,...

APPENDIX 7

Draw what you hear

Pair the participants up and ask your couples to sit back to back. One participant in each pair should have a piece of paper and a pen or pencil. Once everyone has settled, give the other person in the pair an abstract drawing (different shapes maybe joined up together) to describe to the other person in the pair. Give them two minutes to describe and draw without asking or answering any questions. In the next part of the exercise, you give the pairs a new paper and a new drawing. Then you allow another minute for the drawer to ask questions, they can say what they want to, but they just cannot see the drawing.

Debrief: When the time is up, ask them to compare the drawing to the original. Discuss why there were differences (there always are!). Was it the describing or was it the listening? Was it because they couldn't ask questions to clarify what was being described and what about not being able to see the person to get the visual clues of looking for understanding of what one is saying e.g. nodding or frowning etc. What about the noise in the room – is it a distraction when you want to listen to someone properly? What should you do to create a good environment for listening; how should you behave to show you are listening?

Variation: Conduct the exercise in a series of rounds. In every round the communicator will describe a picture we give them of assorted geometrical shapes. In the first round the listener/drawer can't ask any questions, just listen and draw based on what they hear. The second round a different picture of geometric shapes is described and the listener/drawer can only ask closed-ended questions. The third round a different picture of geometric shapes is given and the listener/drawer can use his/her active listening skills. We discuss how accurate were the pictures? How well the communicator describes the picture will determine how successful they want to be with a customer.

Possible drawings. But you can also let them draw their own drawing.

