Active Listening

When people are talking to you, are you really listening, or are you starting to think about what you are going to say next? Even if you hear their words, are you sure that you understand their meaning? Language lends itself to misunderstanding as easily as understanding. This makes for great comedy, unless the joke is at the expense of you and your team.

Information exists, independent of language, as: ideas, emotions, and facts. The speaker encodes these into words, imperfectly. Words are imperfect at capturing information and ideas. Add to this, that people are limited by their education, vocabulary, beliefs, culture, experiences, and background. On top of that, people often filter or edit how they speak and what they will say based on whom they are addressing and what the power and relationship dynamics are between them.

The words become sounds, which travel through the air (and possibly through some technology as well). During this transmission process, the speaker's voice, accent, intonation, and volume level will all influence and possibly interfere with the transmission of meaning. Environmental noise may reduce the clarity of the sounds.

As the receiver, the speaker's words compete with other things in the environment, as well as your own thoughts, for your attention. The words then pass through your own set of filters. You will interpret the same words differently, based on the how you are feeling, how much you think you know about the subject being discussed, your opinion of the speaker, your prejudices, and predispositions.

Active listening is a set of techniques that empower you to optimize communication with members of your team. You accomplish this by creating a comfort zone, establishing trust, focusing your attention, and providing feedback that lets the person you're talking to know they have been heard. It may sound simple, but the results can be profound.

An active listener:

- will be told more
- will be confided in
- will understand people better
- will resolve conflicts more easily
- will be listened to

Active Listening 101: The Basics

Focus your attention

Focus your attention on the speaker. Don't look at the pink elephant dancing behind them!

Voice your encouragement

Encouraging statements or sounds "Hmmm." "Umm Hmm." "That's interesting." "I didn't know that." "That's a surprise!" "I see."

Take notes

This allows you to capture ideas that you may want to ask about or have clarified, without the need to interrupt. It also indicates to the listener that you are paying attention and value what they are saying.

Paraphrasing

Use paraphrasing to confirm that you really do understand what they just told you. Repeat back, in your own words, what you have just heard. Doing so will give you a chance to confirm to both the speaker and yourself that you do understand. "So I think you are saying..." "It sounds to me like..." "I think I understand, but I want to make sure."

Summarizing

After a long discussion, it can be useful to try to summarize what you think the speaker's main points were. The summary is similar to paraphrasing, with the exception that you are trying to cover just the main points, not everything the speaker said.

Active Listening 201: Questioning

Prefer open-ended questions

Ask open-ended questions to get the speaker to elaborate. An open-ended question is one that invites an elaborate response, as compared with a closed-ended question, which can usually be answered with a word or two. Open: "What did you think of the workshop?" "How are things going with the new team?" Closed: "Did you like the workshop?" "Is the team getting along?"

Clarifying questions

"What do you mean by...." "When you say... do you mean like...?" "Like a..." Be careful with these! Make sure that your question is really aimed at clarifying your understanding, and not challenging the speaker's points or point of view. Avoid indicating your own preferences, judgments, or expectations in the form of questions. There is a big difference between: "Interesting, how did you go about creating that?" and "Did you use the approved process to create that?"

Ask for more information

"That's interesting; tell me more about that." "What else?"

Ask for their opinions and analysis

"Why do you think that is?" "What do you think was going on?"

When you aren't getting it, let the speaker know

"I'm not understanding." "Can you explain that part again?" Temper this with some patience and good note taking. Often, something that isn't clear now will clear up in a few sentences. Prefer not to interrupt, but don't let the speaker go on too long if you really don't understand what they are saying.

Listen all the way to the end

Attempt to listen all the way to the end. When you think they are done, it is often useful to ask: "Is there anything else?" or "What else do I need to know?"

Active Listening 301: Nuance

Use silence

After the other person has finished their thought, wait a while and don't say anything. You want to give people, including yourself, time to think. This gives them an opening to tell you more.

Body language

Use body language to indicate that you are listening. The occasional head nod or smile can let your speaker know that you are engaged. People tend to trust body language over the actual words we say.

Acknowledge, and ask about emotions

"It seems like this has you pretty upset." "How did you feel when that happened?"

Validate concerns

Let the speaker know that you not only understand but value their concerns. "I can see why you would be worried about that." "That's a real concern." Only once the person feels their concerns are both understood *and* validated will they be open to discussing solutions.

Verify assumptions

We make a lot of assumptions in order to facilitate talking about complex things without getting bogged down in the details. Sometimes this leads to misunderstanding. Be on the lookout for these situations. A question or comment to verify this type of assumption will clear up any particular misunderstanding, as well as reassure the speaker that you are familiar with the domain.