

Active Listening

Purpose: To give people the opportunity to speak, listen and observe the difference between good and bad listening so they can recognise active listening skills

Materials: Three chairs per group of three

Time required: 45 mins.

Introduction to the participants:

Have you ever spoken to someone and then realised that they didn't catch what you said? Perhaps you have found yourself hearing somebody else speak and realised that for some of the time, you weren't actually 'listening'. This exercise is all about the power of listening.

Activity

1. Begin by splitting the whole group into threes
2. Each trio then identifies one volunteer who is sent to the facilitator for a briefing (see *Briefing A1* below). A second volunteer is then selected from the remaining pairs; they are also briefed by the facilitator (see *Briefing B* below). The remaining person from each trio is asked to take on the role of observer (*Briefing C*).

These briefings can be handed out as notes to read but the exercise is likely to go better if instructions are given verbally by the facilitator.

3. After everyone has been briefed, they should rejoin their group of three and proceed with the activity. The speaker and listener should sit just a metre or so apart facing each other while the observer should sit to the side so s/he can see what both of them are doing (Fig 1). Allow the activity to run with the speaker talking for just one minute.

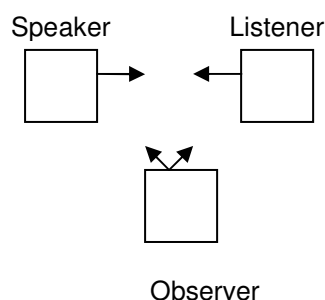


Fig 1: Seating plan for active listening exercise

4. Ask people to change roles: if they were speaking, they should observe; listeners should speak and observers are now listeners and should receive instructions from the facilitator (see *Briefing A2* below). Run the activity again in the new roles with the speaker talking for just one minute.

5. Gather participants for a whole group discussion.
6. Ask the observers from the first session what they noticed. Record any key points on a flipchart, this might include comments such as:
The listener didn't seem to be listening
The speaker dried up pretty quickly
The listener checked her/his watch at one point!
7. Ask the speakers how they felt about the situation. Record any significant points, this might include comments such as:
S/he just looked away when I was talking
They didn't seem interested
They were so rude!
8. Explain that the listeners were simply following their instructions and some appear to have done a really good job.
9. Ask the observers from the second exercise what they noticed, again writing up key points but on a separate list.
They seemed really interested (ask how they could tell!)
The listener helped with questions
They repeated back what they said
10. Ask the speakers how they felt. Did the listener assist them in any way?
I thought it would be difficult but I didn't dry up at all
They were very friendly
They nodded and looked me in the eye
11. Compare the two lists. They should provide a rough and ready list of Dos and Don'ts of active listening. Can participants add anything to the second list (i.e. tips for good practice) that has not yet been mentioned?
12. Ask participants to seek opportunities to practice active listening either in the workplace or outside of work. Be ready to compare notes with each other at the next session.
13. Show the PowerPoint presentation on active listening and distribute copies of the slides as a handout.

Possible concluding remarks to the participants:

When we are in the position of coaching or mentoring somebody, it is absolutely critical that we listen carefully to what our coachee is saying to us. Listening is the single most important skill that a coach or mentor needs to have. (You've probably heard the observation that having one mouth and two ears suggests that we should listen twice as much as we speak).

Active listening is more than just hearing; it's listening in such a way that reassures the speaker that they are being heard, it clears up any possible misunderstandings and it encourages the speaker to follow their train of thought further than they might otherwise manage.

Being an active listener can be so effective in putting people at their ease that it will probably pay you dividends in speaking 'up' to senior managers as well.

Active Listening: Briefings

Briefing A1

You are to play the role of a poor listener. The speaker opposite you will try to tell about a subject of their choosing for one minute. Take no interest in this. Do not nod or make any noise. Look away and avoid eye contact at all times. Don't smile. Without being too obvious about, look at your watch or stifle a yawn at some point.

Briefing B

You should speak on a subject of your choosing for one minute. Talk to the person sitting opposite you; their job is to listen. The 'observer' sitting to your side will tell you when the minute is up.

Briefing C

Your role is to observe the session carefully. Notice how the speaker performs. Are they helped in any way by the actions of the listener? What do you notice about the way the listener is behaving towards the speaker. Your other role is to time the session: note when the session starts and tell the speaker to stop after one minute.

Briefing A2

You are an active listener. Show a genuine interest in the speaker and what they have to say. Say things like. "Oh, that's interesting," when they start. Help them with prompts if they seem to be drying up: e.g. "why is that?," "tell me a bit more about...," "what do you mean exactly?" Look at the person as they speak to you. Use gestures, nod, smile or show concern as appropriate. Try to paraphrase them occasionally, i.e. repeat back to them a summary of what they have just said to ensure you have understood it correctly.

(Source: Adapted from session delivered on Living Earth Foundation's OCN-accredited course, *Community and Environment* for Nigerian civil society organisations.)

(PowerPoint presentation based on material from Simons Dickinson Ltd.)

