

L'ATELIER

de la TRANSFORMATION SOCIALE

Active listening

Active listening helps individuals and groups feel listened to, develops self-reflection and encourages people to find solutions on their own. It is a fundamental aspect of popular education and can be used in many contexts, such as:

- Coaching, providing individual support (when tutors help the “Pépins”, the people receiving support), for example;
- Conducting interviews or focus groups for current and future research;
- Leading a task force, debriefing an educational activity during a training course, etc.

Attitudes when actively listening

When listening to a person or a group, we respond spontaneously through physical and verbal reactions.

These spontaneous reactions can make people feel being listened to, enabling them to reflect, seek solutions, and understand more deeply what is happening... But other reactions can, on the contrary, close down the conversation, preventing people from self-reflection. That's why, as a mentor, facilitator or trainer, it is crucial to be aware of these attitudes and to question one's listening habits.

When actively listening, we listen to the person or the group without imposing our point of view or our opinion at all costs. Our objective must always be to help them share their story openly and with as many details as possible.

Physically, this will be expressed by how people look at each other and show signs encouraging them to continue talking (like nodding, etc.). On the other hand, we try to curb behaviours likely to block or limit communication and evoke the feeling of not being listened to (i.e., cutting the person off when speaking, looking away, looking at one's telephone, etc.).

Orally, we prioritise verbal communication that encourages the person or group to keep talking, provide expansive responses and reflect.

Verbal reactions

Here are the verbal reactions that facilitate communication and promote a feeling of being listened to:

- **Probing**: ask questions to learn more about the story or the person's feelings.
- **Rephrasing**: use what the person says as a starting point to help them share more.

Like our body reactions, some of our spontaneous verbal responses that can block or limit communication and evoke the feeling of not being listened to are:

- **Passing judgement**: when we give a positive or negative opinion on what the person has just said.
- **Making suppositions**: when we provide explanations but have little to go on; if we are wrong, the person does not feel listened to or understood. If we don't get it wrong, the person will think we have "read between the lines" and will no longer feel the need to share more.
- **Giving advice**: active listening aims to help the person or group create their own solutions. If the person does not ask for advice, it is better not to give it, at least not while you are actively listening, as this may give the impression that the person is unable to come up with their own solutions. What's more, the advice may not be appropriate to the situation.
- **Trying to reassure or console the person**: when they share something painful (in a private coaching session, for example), we may be tempted to comfort them. But be careful not to make light of their feelings ("Don't worry, it's not that serious"), as this could have the opposite effect: they won't feel understood.

Examples of verbal reactions

If someone tells you, "***It was really difficult when the former committee chair left,***" what do you say? Here are a few examples of replies and their possible consequences (the green boxes are positive, and the orange ones are what we try to avoid).

Attitude	Examples of verbal reactions	What can this mean for the other person
Probing	<i>Why was it so difficult? Why did the chair leave? How did it go? How did you feel?</i>	These reactions encourage them to tell more and to go into more detail about the facts or their feelings.
Rephrasing	<i>Was it difficult? Oh, the person left?</i>	These reactions encourage them to tell more, and to go deeper, allowing them to share openly and freely.
Judgement	<i>You can't always rely on the chair. It's important to overcome difficulties.</i>	Although the person feels they can express their point of view, they feel they are not really being listened to. They may also feel that you are judging them.
Interpretation	<i>Were you afraid you wouldn't be able to carry out the activities as planned? Were you very attached to this person?</i>	These interpretations may be true, but they may also be false. Thus, the person will feel misunderstood.

Advice, finding solutions	<i>You can start recruiting again straight away. You can find a silver lining to this.</i>	If the person already has these ideas, unsolicited advice will likely annoy them. This will discourage them from sharing any further.
Consolation	<i>It's not such a big deal. There are a lot of very good people out there who can replace the former chair.</i>	People may feel that what they are experiencing or have experienced is being played down. This will discourage them from sharing further.

How to develop active listening

Active listening is developed through practice by observing and reflecting on one's actions. Depending on the situation, you can use different tools and methods, such as the following:

- Keep a logbook to record your observations of the facts and your feelings after active listening sessions (i.e., training, interview, etc.)
- If you are co-facilitating a group in pairs, the pair can, after the session, share their observations on their listening attitudes.
- If you have conducted recorded consultations for current or future research purposes, you can listen to and analyse your verbal reactions in these recordings.

How to practise active listening as a team

If we want to work on this skill as a team, as part of a training course or during a facilitators' meeting, for example, you can use the following role-playing activities:

By pairs

The participants work in twos: one will play the sharer while the other actively listens. The rest of the group watches the role-play (an observation grid on verbal and physical reactions can be used). After the role-play, the sharer discloses the moments when they felt or did not feel listened to and why. The person who played the role of the listener also shares what they felt, what they found easy or difficult (for many people, not giving advice is difficult!). The rest of the group also share their observations. When the whole group has finished sharing, the trainers can finish up by underlining good and bad listening habits.

By groups of three

The participants are asked to group themselves into three: one sharer, one active listener, and one observer (possibly equipped with an observation grid). At the end of the role-play, the three people discuss their observations and feelings among themselves. Afterwards, they share them with the entire group for comments or evaluation. The trainers can add further tips on active listening when the whole group has finished sharing.

By teams

The trainers prepare snippets of conversations in different circumstances. They ask the participants to come up with responses suitable to each given situation. The participants can be grouped into teams, and the team that answers the fastest earns a point each time!

To find out more

The active listening technique was developed by the American psychologist Carl Rogers who worked extensively on client-centred therapy. Psychologist Elias Porter developed the counsellor's attitudes that promote communication.

Rogers, C. *L'approche centrée sur la personne. Anthologie de textes présentés par Howard Kirschenbaum et Valerie Land Henderson*, Genève, Ambre Editions, 2013.

Objective:

To know active listening attitudes that help individuals and groups to express themselves openly during consultations and lead them to self-reflection so that they can eventually find their own solutions.

Practical use:

Active listening can be used in different cases (i.e., coaching, research surveys, training courses, etc.)

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