

# Active Listening

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(drawn from *Communication in Organizations*, by Dalmar Fisher)

Reflective listening has its roots the fields of counseling and psychotherapy, particularly in Carl Rogers's "client-centered" therapy. This is not to say that people in organizations should become therapists, but rather that this one therapeutic skill can be very useful in many everyday work situations.

Reflective listening is used in situations where you are trying to help the speaker deal with something. As you will see, it is very similar to what Tannen would called rapport-talk.

There are two major aspects of client-centered listening – the "listener orientation" and the "reflective technique".

## Listening Orientation

In reflective listening, the listener adopts what Rogers called "the therapist's hypothesis". This is the belief that the capacity for self-insight, problem-solving, and growth resides primarily in the speaker. This means that the central questions for the listener are not "What can I do for this person?" or even "How do I see this person" but rather "How does this person see themselves and their situation?"

Rogers and others have made the underlying orientation of the listener more specific by noting that it contains four components: empathy, acceptance, congruence, and concreteness.

*Empathy* is the listener's desire and effort to understand the recipient of help from the recipient's internal frame of reference rather than from some external point of view, such as a theory; a set of standards, or the listener's preferences. The empathic listener tries to get inside the other's thoughts and feelings. The idea is to obtain an *emic* rather than *etic* understanding of the situation.

Expressed verbally and nonverbally though messages such as "I follow you," "I'm with you" or "I understand," empathy is the listener's effort to hear the other person deeply, accurately, and non-judgmentally. A person who sees that a listener is really trying to understand his or her meanings will be willing to explore his or her problems and self more deeply.

Empathy is surprisingly difficult to achieve. We all have a strong tendency to advise, tell, agree, or disagree from our own point of view.

*Acceptance* is closely related to empathy. Acceptance means having respect for a person for simply being a person. Acceptance should be as *unconditional* as possible. This means that the listener should avoid expressing agreement or disagreement with what the other person says. This attitude encourages the other person to be less defensive and to explore aspects of self and the situation that they might otherwise keep hidden

*Congruence* refers to openness, frankness, and genuineness on the part of the listener. The congruent listener is in touch with themselves. If angry or irritated, for example, the congruent person admits to having this feeling rather than pretending not to have it (perhaps because they are trying to be accepting). They communicate what

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they feel and know, rather than hiding behind a mask. Candor on the part of the listener tends to evoke candor in the speaker. When one person comes out from behind a facade, the other is more likely to as well.

In some cases, the principle of congruence can be at odds with the principles of empathy and acceptance. For example, if the listener is annoyed with the other person, they probably have to suspend empathy and acceptance until they sort things out.

*Concreteness* refers to focusing on specifics rather than vague generalities. Often, a person who is has a problem will avoid painful feelings by being abstract or impersonal, using expressions like "sometimes there are situations that are difficult" (which is vague and abstract), or "most people want..." (which substitutes others for oneself). The listener can encourage concreteness by asking the speaker to be more specific. For example, instead of agreeing with a statement like "You just can't trust a manager. They care about themselves first and you second", you can ask what specific incident the speaker is referring to.

In active listening, it is important not only that the listener have an orientation with the four qualities of empathy, acceptance, congruence and acceptance, but that the speaker feel that listener has this orientation. Consequently, a good listener tries to understand how the other is experiencing the interaction and to shape their responses so that other person understands where they are coming from. Furthermore, the listener must be prepared to deviate from the four principles if that's what the other person wants. For example, if the other person asks for an opinion, the listener should give it, rather than avoid it as implied by the principles of empathy and acceptance.

### **The Technique of Reflection**

A listener can implement the elements of listening orientation through a method known as reflection. In reflection, the listener tries to clarify and restate what the other person is saying. This can have a threefold advantage: (1) it can increase the listener's understanding of the other person; (2) it can help the other to clarify their thoughts; and (3) it can reassure the other that someone is willing to attend to his or her point of view and wants to help.

Listening orientation and reflection are mutually reinforcing. Empathy, acceptance, congruence, and concreteness contribute to the making of reflective responses. At the same time, reflective responses contribute to the development and perception of the listening orientation.

Some principles of reflective listening:

More listening than talking

Responding to what is personal rather than to what is impersonal, distant, or abstract.

Restating and clarifying what the other has said, not asking questions or telling what the listener feels, believes, or wants.

Trying to understand the feelings contained in what the other is saying, not just the facts or ideas.

Working to develop the best possible sense of the other's frame of reference while avoiding the temptation to respond from the listener's frame of reference.



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Responding with acceptance and empathy, not with indifference, cold objectivity, or fake concern.

Responding to what is personal means responding to things the other person says about him- or herself rather than about other people, events, or situations. If a co-worker said, "I'm worried that I'll lose my job" the reflective listener would try to focus on the worried "I" rather than on the job situation. A response such as "It's scary" would be better than "Maybe the cutbacks won't affect you." When the listener responds to personal statements rather than impersonal ones, the other usually stays at the personal level, exploring further aspects of his or her experience, improving his or her understanding of the situation, and developing a more realistic, active approach to solving problems.

Because the goal of the process is for the other person, rather than the listener, to take responsibility for the problem, reflective listening means responding to, rather than leading, the other. Responding means reacting from the other's frame of reference to what the other has said. In contrast, leading means directing the other person to talk about things the helper wants to see the other explore. The responsive listener addresses those things the other person is currently discussing, often testing his or her understanding of the other by restating or clarifying what the other has just said. This usually encourages the other to build on the thoughts and feelings he or she has just expressed and to explore further.

While questions can be responsive rather than leading, they very often work to limit the other's initiative by focusing attention on something the listener feels should be discussed. Though small, the question "Why?" can be particularly damaging, since it defies the other to find a justification or logical explanation that is acceptable to the helper. Instead, you might try: "That's interesting; can you tell me more about it?"

Perhaps most important, the reflective listener tries to respond to feelings, not just to content. Feelings emerge in the emotional tone that the speaker expresses, such as anger, disappointment, discouragement, fear, joy, elation, or surprise. Content refers to ideas, reasons, theories, assumptions, and descriptions -- to the *substance* of the speaker's message. As Tannen notes, in troubles-talk, the speaker is often not looking for the solution of the surface problem, but rather for a way to deal with the emotional and social ramifications.

In addition, Carl Rogers notes that a person who receives response at the emotional level has "the satisfaction of being deeply understood" and can go on to express more feelings, eventually getting "directly to the emotional roots" of their problem.

Usually, the listener can be most in touch with the other's frame of reference by responding to feelings that are expressed rather than unexpressed. Since many people do not state their emotions explicitly, this may mean responding to the emotional tone that they express implicitly.

It is extremely important for the reflective listener to respond to negative and ambivalent feelings because this communicates that the listener accepts the unpleasant side of the other's experience and is willing to join in exploring it. Such acceptance provides a major release form a person who has previously felt it necessary to suppress negative feelings. The energy that has been used to keep these feelings in check can now be devoted to exploring the problem.

Here is a little quiz intended to build your skill in applying the concepts just discussed:

A computer consultant, Jack Phillips, does work both for you and for another member of your department (Joyce Carton). One morning you walk up to Jack's desk and he greets you as follows:



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Jack: What am I supposed to do about Joyce? She throws more work at me than I can possibly handle. I've told her but she won't listen. I don't want people to think I'm trying to get out of doing my job but she's really got me totally buried

Which of the possible responses listed below would represent reflective listening. And which would not?

1. Hang in there: I'm sure it will work out eventually
2. I'll talk to Joyce about it
3. It sounds like this is really getting you down
4. You're worried people will think you are a slacker?
5. Joyce is really unfair, huh?
6. Have you discussed it with Jim [the boss]?
7. You were discouraged when Joyce didn't listen?
8. Why have you let things go on this long?
9. You're really getting fed up with the situation.

The next step is to actually try it out on people. It will be awkward at first. It is really hard to say reflective things in a way that sounds natural for you. But you'll find that even bad attempts tend to produce immediate results, maybe because most people rarely have the experience of being listened to in this way.

Advantages of Reflective Listening. Used appropriately, reflective listening may provide three very positive results:

The listener gains information. Reflective listening encourages the speaker to talk about more things in greater depth than he or she would be likely to do in simply responding to directive questions or suggestions. Such depth of discussion often exposes underlying problems, including ones the speaker had not recognized previously.

The relationship between the two persons develops. The elements of listening orientation --empathy, acceptance, congruence, and concreteness -- are likely to increase as the reflective listening process continues. These are the ingredients for an open, trusting relationship.

The activity arouses and channels motivational energy. Because the listener is an accepting and encouraging partner but leaves the initiative for exploring and diagnosing the problem mainly up to the speaker a normal outcome of the process is that the speaker will recognize new avenues for action and will begin making plans to pursue them.



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