



## Active Listening and Conflict Resolution Basics

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### Approaches to Conflict

1. Power based approaches use power to handle the problem.  
I'm the boss. We do it my way. You do the dishes.  
Can also use threats, manipulation, physical force, intimidation, strikes, acts of disobedience
2. Rights-based approaches appeal to a general standard and apply it to a particular case.  
Our policy says the interns do the dishes.  
May be explicit in laws, policy manuals, contracts, religious moral codes, or may be implicit in given contexts.
3. Interest-based approaches ask the question “what needs or underlying interests are you trying to address by taking a certain position?”  
You'd rather to do the dishes, I'd rather take out the garbage.  
Involves identifying underlying needs of the particular individuals in the conflict to generate new ways of meeting as many needs as possible.

Interest based approaches require good listening skills. Good listening require a certain amount of self-reflection and skills we can all learn and practice.

## Active listening Cheat-Sheet

### Some attitudes of a good listener:

- A willingness on the part of the listener to let the other guide the conversation
- Attentiveness, you don't necessarily know what the other person is going to say
- A sensitivity to emotions being expressed
- An ability to reflect back to the speaker the substance and feelings they have expressed
- Avoiding problem solving, or explaining.

### Active listening:

- Shows respect for values, concerns and feelings
- Relieves the pressure of high emotions, calms people down
- Helps the speaker organize their thoughts
- Recognizes concerns without endorsing them
- Helps the listener know what the issues are

### Active listening techniques

#### Non-verbal communicating

- Face the person
- Eye contact
- Stop all other activities, don't answer the phone et.
- Leaning in to the person
- "Open" body language
- Listen for what's being said and not being said (tone, rate of speech etc.)
- Allowing for moments of silence

#### Summarizing

- Pull together important ideas, and establish a basis for further discussion
- Restate, reflect and summarize major ideas and feelings
  - "So you've named a few things that are making you really worried and anxious about finishing the grant today; the fact that the computer exploded today, the 6 hour meeting you have scheduled this afternoon and the fact that you've haven't started yet. Did I miss anything?"

#### Clarifying questions (like the did I miss anything?)

- These questions can be about feelings, or information you've heard.
- Can invite more information, encourage further explanation
- They help you test whether you're hearing correctly
  - "What was that like for you?"

- “I’m not sure I understand correctly, do you mean...”
- “What happened after that?”

### Reflecting feeling

- Summarizing feelings, things said or not said can help de-escalate and relieve pressure of high emotion
  - “Sounds like your feeling pretty stressed out”
  - “It seems like that conversation has really made you angry”
  - “I can hear that your disappointed by the sound of your voice. Is that right?”
  - “I can imagine that you'd nervous about your evaluation on Friday.”  
“It's pretty nerve-wracking...”

### Validating (like it's a pretty nerve-wracking experience, only about values)

- You can validate, or acknowledge more than feelings, to show respect without necessarily agreeing with the speaker.
- Recognize the speakers positive values, efforts and intentions
  - “So the respect of your colleagues is very important to you. Is that right” (value)
  - “It sounds like it took a lot of courage for you to bring this up at the staff meeting?”(positive effort)
  - “So, you intended that statement as a compliment” (positive intention)

### Encouraging

- The purpose is to convey interest and keep the person talking.
- You don't agree or disagree, use non-committal words
  - “I see..”
  - “uh-huh...”
  - “mmm”
  - “That's interesting...”

### Open-ended vs. close-ended questions

Close-ended questions invite a yes or no answer.

Open-ended question invite the speaker to say more about a given topic and may encourage a deeper reflection on an issue.

Some tricks for good open ended questions:

- Start with “how” and “what”
- Avoid “why”

Close-ended: “Did you resent that?”

Open-ended: “How did that affect you?”

Close-ended: “After she yelled at you, did you call the board?”

Open-ended: “What did you do next?”

Close-ended: “Are you going to fire her or what?”

Open-ended: “What do you feel like your options are at this point?”

Close-ended: “Don't you think you over-reacted?”

Open-ended: “You mentioned earlier that 'maybe you raised your voice'. Can you say more about that?”

## Role of the listener in conflict situations

Dealing with complaints or conflict, your role as a listener is

- To be impartial
- Create a positive and 'safe' confidential environment
- Help the speaker tell what is important to them
- Acknowledge experiences, concerns, needs and values

### Listening priorities

1. Listen to **whatever is on the speakers mind**. Ask an open ended question, they'll answer with whatever is most important first.

Tell me how you see the situation

Tell me about what's been going on

You mentioned that X tends to happen – can you give me an example?

2. Give the person a chance to **tell all the events or facts** that relate to the problem. Gradually ask questions that help the person talk about the sequence of events.

What happened before she took out the compost?

So you said you went to talk to her about it last week. What was the effect of that?

You mentioned that you looked in the files and weren't able to figure out what you needed to know. What happened after that?

How have things been between you and Carlos since then?

3. Give the person a chance to put the **conflict in context**. As they give you background, it can help provide info about the person's positive values and needs. Careful not to pry, or ask leading questions.

Tell me about the degree your working towards

What were things like with the old board of directors?

*Desired ideal* questions are particularly useful:

What kind of relationships do you like to have, in general, with co-workers?

How would you like things to go between board and staff?

What kind of system do you think works best to handle this kind of project?

### Asking questions

Areas to consider include:

- History of the relationship between disputants
  - When did things begin to get tense between you two?

- Impact of events/actions
  - How was your relationship affected by the fight?
- Specific details
  - What did the kitchen look like when you got here?
- Positive intentions
  - What were you hoping for when you....
- Interests, needs and values
  - What are some of your concerns about...
  - What is important to you about...
  - What would you like to be different about...

Signs that things are going well...

- Person will show less tension in body, voice etc.
- Tears of relief
- Person says relatively more positive things about the situation or person
- Person may offer statement of regret or apology
- Possible solutions may be suggested
- Diffusing tension means that speakers feel like they can move on (won't keep repeating themselves)
- Solutions may be presented. Jot them down...save them for the end of the conversation.

### **When it's not going well...**

- More tension in the body and voice
- Person repeats the same thing over and over
- Uses stronger words, more insults
- Person adds new complaints
- Appealing to you directly (“What would you have done?”, “Don't you think so?”)

To turn it around, try to provide stronger and more thorough acknowledgement of concerns:

- Acknowledge concerns more often. “I hear that this has been really stressful for you.” “Sounds like that made you really angry.”
- Use stronger words
- Acknowledge concerns at greater length
- Acknowledge each separate aspect of the concerns
- Restate facts in more detail
- Give the person more opportunities to express positive values (desired ideal questions)
- Validate more

## Active listening tips

Some tips to help difficult conversations go more smoothly...

- Be attentive, and try to remain open minded. You don't necessarily know what the other person is going to say.
- Respond sensitively to emotions being expressed. (Avoid "Don't cry, don't cry, it's gonna be fine!")
- Remember to reflect back to the speaker the substance and feelings they have expressed.
- Avoiding problem solving, or explaining. (Avoid "I'm sure she was just trying to help" etc.)
- When asking questions, don't ask "why?". Try starting with "how..." or "what..."
- If you can't think of anything to say, start with "It sounds like you're feeling..." and take a stab at an emotion you think you're hearing.
- Listening well is not the same as agreeing. (~~"You're right. She sucks"~~ instead "That's terrible. It seems like that was a brutally frustrating conversation you just had")

When you want to be listened to...

- Try to focus on the impact of the person's behaviour, instead of attacking the person. (~~"You're a bitch"~~, instead try "When you yell at me that way, (behaviour) I have to say, it's really not helping the situation. It makes me feel disrespected, and like you're not interested in solving the problem. (impact)")
- Have a friend or someone who is not involved in the conflict help to facilitate the conversation and help both of keep the conversation productive.
- Think about setting a communication goal that you have control over. ~~"I want her to apologize."~~ instead; "I want to understand what happened." or, "I want to investigate her openness to hearing how I see things".