

Active Listening and Good Quality Questions

Listening is an important communication skill. Very often when we think we are listening to someone, we aren't really because our mind not focusing on the speaker, but doing something else, for example:

- Comparing my experience to the speaker's
- Deciding early on what the speaker is going to say, then not listening any further
- Formulating my answer
- Thinking about something else entirely
- Solving their problem for them
-and many others.

What do you do when you are listening to someone?

Active listening does what it says on the tin – it is an active skill and when you are practising it your focus is on the speaker and not on yourself. To get a sense of what this means, think about a time when you felt someone was really listening to you, focusing on what you were saying and what it meant to you. How did it feel? What was the effect on you? What was the effect on your relationship with the other person?

To practice active listening:

- Stop talking!
- Notice when you attention wanders and bring it back to the speaker
- At appropriate moments, reflect back what you think you have heard and / or summarise it. This helps the speaker feel you have listened and understood their situation. (NB Listening and understanding do not mean you agree.)
- Ask good quality questions that explore and progress the topic rather than closing it down
- Observe how you respond - do your responses seek to explore, clarify, understand and enable productive outcomes – or is the effect they have less positive?

Good quality questioning

There are two basic types of question – open and closed. Both are useful for specific purposes.

Open questions

Use these to explore and broaden a subject, and to help you develop your understanding of it. Open questions typically start with 'How?', 'What?' 'Tell me about', and encourage the

speaker to tell you more about their perspective. The length and nature of the response is determined by them.

How are you feeling about this?

What has happened so far?

What would you like to happen?

How could that be done?

When, Where and Why need to be used with more care as they can become more closed.

'Why?' can have a judgemental feeling about it so try instead to ask for the speaker's reasons.

Closed questions

These control the length and form of the other person's reply, and can be usefully used to start defining what is going to happen next. They tend to restrict the speaker's answers to only two or maybe three answers.

When shall we do that?

Shall we use option 1 or option 2?

Are you happy with that?

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