

Active Listening Exercise

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This exercise may be used by current adopters of:

S. L. McShane *Canadian Organizational Behaviour*, 5th ed. (Toronto: McGraw-Hill Ryerson, 2004); S. L. McShane & M. A. von Glinow, *Organizational Behavior*, 3rd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2005); S. L. McShane & T. Travaglione, *Organisational Behaviour on the Pacific Rim*, 1st ed. (Sydney: McGraw-Hill Australia, 2003)

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Purpose

This exercise is designed to help you understand the dynamics of active listening in conversations and to develop active listening skills.

Instructions:

For each of the four vignettes presented below, student teams (or students working individually) will compose three statements that demonstrate active listening. Specifically, one statement will indicate that you show empathy for the situation; the second asks for clarification and detail in a nonjudgmental way; the third statement will provide nonevaluative feedback to the speaker. Here are details about each of these three types of responses:

Showing empathy – Acknowledge feelings. Sometimes it sounds like the speaker wants you to agree with him/her but, in reality, they mainly want you to understand how they feel. “Acknowledging feelings” involves taking in their statements, but looking at the “whole message” including body language, tone of voice, and level of arousal, and trying to determine what emotion they are conveying. Then you let them know that you realize they are feeling that emotion by just acknowledging it in a sentence.

Asking for clarification and detail while withholding your judgment and own opinions. This conveys that you are making a good effort to understand and not just trying to push your opinions onto them. To formulate a relevant question in asking for more clarification, you will have to listen carefully to what they say. Frame your question as someone trying to understand in more detail, often asking for a specific example is useful. This also helps the speaker evaluate their own opinions and perspective.

Providing non-evaluative feedback – feeding back the message you heard. This will allow the speaker to determine if he/she really got the message across to you and help prevent troublesome miscommunication. It will also help the speaker become more aware of how he/she is coming across to another person (self-evaluation). Just think about what the speaker is conveying and paraphrase it in your own words, and say it back to the speaker (without judging the correctness or merit of what they said), asking him/her if that is what they meant.

After teams (or individual students) have prepared the three statements for each vignette, the instructor will ask them to present their statements and explain how these statements satisfy the active listening criteria.

VIGNETTE #1

A colleague stops by your desk and says, “I am tired of the lack of leadership around here. The boss is so wishy washy, he can’t get tough with some of the slackers around here. They just keep milking the company, living off the rest of us. Why doesn’t management do something about these guys? And YOU are always so supportive of the boss; he’s not as good as you make him out to be.”

Develop three statements that respond to the speaker in this vignette by: (a) showing empathy, (b) seek clarification, and (c) provide nonevaluative feedback.

VIGNETTE #2:

Your co-worker stops by your cubicle, her voice and body language show stress, frustration, and even some fear. You know she has been working hard and has a strong need to get her work done on time and done well. You are trying to concentrate on some work and have had a number of interruptions already. She just abruptly interrupts you and says, “This project is turning out to be a mess, why can’t the other three people on my team quit fighting each other?”

Develop three statements that respond to the speaker in this vignette by: (a) showing empathy, (b) seek clarification, and (c) provide nonevaluative feedback.

VIGNETTE #3:

One of your subordinates is working on an important project. He is an engineer who has good technical skills and knowledge and was selected for the project team because of that. He stops by your office and appears to be in quite agitated, his voice is loud and strained and his face has a look of bewilderment. He says, “I’m supposed to be working with four other people from four other departments on this new project, but they never listen to my ideas and seem to hardly know I’m at the meeting!”

Develop three statements that respond to the speaker in this vignette by: (a) showing empathy, (b) seek clarification, and (c) provide nonevaluative feedback.

VIGNETTE #4:

Your subordinate comes into your office in a state of agitation, and asks if she can talk to you. She is polite and sits down. She seems calm and does not have an angry look on her face. However, she says, “It seems like you consistently make up lousy schedules, you are unfair and unrealistic in the kinds of assignments you give certain people, me included. Everyone else is so intimidated they don’t complain but I think you need to know that this isn’t right and it’s got to change.”

Develop three statements that respond to the speaker in this vignette by: (a) showing empathy, (b) seek clarification, and (c) provide nonevaluative feedback.