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June 2018

# Listening Skills

**“Those who know do not talk.  
Those who talk do not know.”**  
–*Lao Tsu, Tao Te Ching*



# Learning Objectives

By the end of this module, you will be able to apply the basics of active listening skills.



# Exercise

Pair off and each choose a number 1 or 2.

Person 1 close your eyes and put your head on your desk and think about what you plan to do after graduating and why. When I say to open your eyes, please explain to person 2 your plans.

Person 2 while listening to person 1, make it very clear that you are listening intently to what person 1 has to say. (You may use words and/or body language.)



# Exercise

Person 2 now close your eyes and put your head on your desk and think about what you plan to do after graduating and why. When I say to open your eyes, please explain to person 1 your plans.

Person 1, while listening to person 2, make it very clear that you are **NOT** listening to what person 2 has to say. (You may use words and/or body language.)



# Listening Skills

- School teaches us to read, write, and speak, but rarely focuses on the skill of listening.
- This omission is unfortunate as listening skills are the most important foundation for any relationship, including marriages, families, working on a team, and talking with users or clients.
- Listening often misunderstood as a **passive** activity.
- Better to view listening an **active** experience that requires attentive engagement with the speaker.



# Active Listening

## Four key components to active listening

- Attending responses
- Open-ended responses
- Reflecting/Clarifying responses
- Summarizing responses



# Attending Responses

## Verbal Indicators

- “Uh-huh,” “I see,” “Yes,” “Interesting,” “Hmm,” etc.
- Friendly, informal, tentative tone of voice
- Short statements and questions
- Simple language (“talk” rather than “communicate,” “write” rather than “correspond”)
- Speaking less than 50% of the time



# Attending Responses

## Non-verbal Indicators

Note that many of these are cultural in nature:

- Head nods & tilted head
- Suitable facial expressions & natural smile
- Open posture (rather than crossed arms)
- Open palms (rather than clenched fists or fidgeting)
- Regular eye contact (but don't stare)
- Gestures that suit the context
- Appropriate distance (arm's length in North America)





# Open-Ended Responses

- Open-ended questions are ones that require more than a simple “Yes” or “No” answer
  
- Usually start with or imply “What” or “How”
  - *How do you see things changing?*
  - *How did you feel?*
  - *What do you think is the problem?*
  - *What do you see as the most important issue?*
  - *What have you thought of?*
  - *I’m wondering . . . ?*
  - *What would you like to do about . . . ?*
  - *What do you think that means?*



# Open-Ended Responses

## Be Cautious with Questions

- Avoid leading questions that suggest you know the answer to the question (e.g., *You don't really want to do that do you?*)
- Avoid **why** questions that imply judgments about the speaker's actions or motives (e.g., *Why didn't you try to solve the problem that way?*)
- Avoid too many questions as that may suggest to the speaker that they are being interrogated



# Reflecting/Clarifying Responses

- **Reflecting** checks your understanding of the content, words, or feelings expressed by the speaker:
  - **Content:** “*You mean John hasn’t completed his part of the design specs?*” (Gathering information)
  - **Words:** “*You say John is not doing his share of the work?*” (Clarifying meaning)
  - **Feelings:** “*You feel angry at John?*” (Looking for contradictions)



# Reflecting/Clarifying Responses

- **Clarifying** gathers further information:
  - *Do you mean you don't want this assignment?*
  - *Correct me if I'm wrong, but . . . ?*
  
- **Silence** (a brief pause) encourages people to talk.
  - Increase the length of your pauses to encourage the other person to talk more
  - Avoid excessively long periods of silence as that may be interpreted as a lack of interest or attention



# Summarizing Responses

- Summarize the conversation and then ask a question such as “*Is that accurate?*”, “*I’m unclear on . . .*”
- Wait 5-10 seconds for an answer



# Other Features of Effective Listening

- Minimize distractions (turn off cell – communicates attention)
- Listen with respect (can be hard to do when you disagree strongly or dislike someone)
- Avoid assumptions & stereotypes (feel bad about death?)
- Avoid superficial reactions (listen for underlying message not surface details)
- Situate facts in context (get enough info to understand)
- Remain focused (brain works at 400 wpm; mouth at 125 wpm) – easy for mind to wander



# When Not to Listen

- Speaker is verbally abusive
- Speaker monopolizes conversation
- Speaker is out of touch with reality
  
- In these sorts of circumstances
  - Be assertive
  - Point out that the person is behaving inappropriately
  - State that you will not continue conversation unless you are treated with respect
  - In extreme circumstances, end the conversation until the person has calmed down (be cautious here!)



# Difficult People for Listeners

- Hostile-Aggressive
- Complainer/Negativist
- Silent and Unresponsive
- Super-Agreeable
- Know-it-all Expert
- Indecisive





# Conclusion

Person 2 again close your eyes and put your head on your desk and think about why you came to SFU and whether it has met your expectations. When I say to open your eyes, please explain to person 1 your ideas.

Person 1 while listening to person 2, make it very clear this time that you are listening intently to what person 2 has to say. (Try to use the techniques outlined in the lecture.)