

Module: Key Skills - Listening

Module in Communication Skills for Supervisors

Why focus on listening?

When we think about how to enhance communication there is often a focus on how to speak and articulate something clearly. This is of course important; however, effective listening is central to good communication.

We often think we are listening but what we are really doing is waiting for our turn to speak, thinking about something else, building our opinion, being distracted or looking at our watch or phone.

Full listening is something different to this. It is about giving our full attention to another person. When we listen fully, we give space to the other person to express what they need to express to us.

When someone experiences being fully heard, it can build trust and rapport and it supports relationship-building. Listening is connected to where we place our attention and as Nancy Kline says in her book 'Time to Think'¹, *'The quality of your attention determines the quality of other people's thinking.'*

The Fifth Habit in Stephen Covey's book 'The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People'² is 'Seek first to understand, then to be understood'. He describes what he calls 'empathic listening' which is about listening to really understand another. He says: *'Empathic listening gets inside another person's frame of reference. You look out through it, you see the world the way they see the world, you understand their paradigm, you understand how they feel.'*

This type of listening can transform communication.

Trainer Reflective Exercise

Think of a time when someone did not listen fully when you had something important to say. What was that like?

Now think of a time when you felt fully heard and understood by someone who listened to you. What was that like?

The three levels of listening

A useful way to think about listening is to consider the three levels of listening model developed by the authors of Co-Active Coaching.³

Level 1 Listening

In level 1 listening the focus of attention of the listener is with themselves. The authors describe this as 'internal' listening. The listener is relating what is said back to themselves or their own experiences, thoughts and feelings.

This might be necessary if the listener is assessing a situation and needs to make a judgement or form an opinion. It might be important to gather information and so the listener will ask questions based on their agenda.

However, level 1 listening can also involve the listener being distracted by other matters or – for example – looking at a computer screen or phone rather than making eye contact and facing the other person. The listener might be wondering how long this is going to take or be worrying about something else. We could call this 'half-listening'.

Level 1 listening is about meeting the needs of the listener rather than focusing on building a relationship with the speaker and finding out what is important to them.

Level 2 Listening

Level 2 listening is sometimes called active listening. This is where the focus of attention is with the person speaking. If face to face, the listener is looking at the speaker and making eye contact. The listener might be reflecting back words used by the speaker to demonstrate that they are listening and have understood what is being said.

The attention of the listener is fully with the other person and what they are saying.

Level 3 Listening

Level 3 listening includes level 2 listening and goes beyond it. It is sometimes called intuitive listening or could be thought of as Covey's empathic listening. The listener's attention is fully on the speaker and also the wider environment of the speaker. As well as the words being used, the listener may notice what's not being said, pick up hunches about the speaker and may notice emotions.

Level 3 listening includes noticing body language. There might be silences or pauses in the conversation while the listener notices that the speaker is thinking. Rather than come in with a question or opinion the listener allows the speaker to have that thinking time.

The attention is fully on the speaker and what they are saying plus what they are not saying.

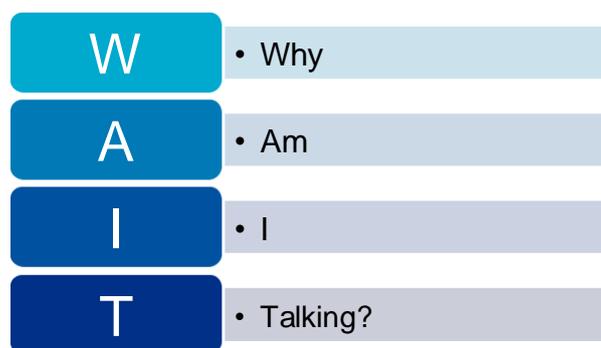
Powerful listening happens at levels 2 and 3.

Trainer Tips and Exercises:

1. Listen to someone for 2 minutes without interrupting and reflect on your experience.
 - i. What was it like to listen fully?
 - ii. What did you notice?
 - iii. Did you want to come in and speak? If yes, what was it like to **not** come in?
 - iv. Or did you come in? If so, try the 3-second rule (see 2. below).
2. When you think someone has finished what they are saying, allow 3 seconds before speaking. Quite often they will have more to say.
3. Think of a trainee you could listen to differently this week. Aim to give them your full attention and notice what happens.
4. Think of a trainee you have been struggling with recently. Aim to give them empathic listening – really try to understand what is going on with them and what they are experiencing in their world. Notice what difference this makes to the communication and your relationship with them.

Top tip!

When in doubt **WAIT** before speaking!



Bonus exercise:

Practise listening more fully every day for a week. There is almost no relationship that cannot benefit from enhanced listening.

References and Further reading:

1. *Time to Think: Listening to Ignite the Human Mind*, Nancy Kline. (First published by Cassell Illustrated 1999), p36
2. *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen R Covey, (First published by Simon & Schuster 1989), p240
3. *Co-Active Coaching*, Henry Kimsey-House, Karen Kimsey-House, Phil Sandahl, Laura Whitworth, Co-Active Coaching, (First published by Davies-Black Publishing 1998). Nicholas Brealey Publishing (4th edition 2018)