

Active Listening Skills Workshop



WHY?

- Most important skill to learn for any mediation, negotiation, but also for good leadership and cooperation.
- Remember that goal of mediation is not to judge parties or decide their case, but to help them arrive at the solution on their own. Active listening helps to nudge parties along in this process. With the right questions, we can help others see their problem from angles not previously considered, think about consequences of their actions, multiple scenarios of outcomes, imagine other side's perspective, etc.
- Mediator, negotiator, or a leader can also model exemplary communication by using active listening skills
- Bridge over silence
- We can structure and shape the dialogue progressively
- Being listened establishes an atmosphere of trust with the mediator
- Helps to establish information relevant to the story (facts, feelings, positions, interests,) and check whether parties understand and have access to information
- Defuse inflammatory remarks, focus the party on identifying their interests

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### Active listening exercise

Work in pairs. Take two minutes to think about a frustrating experience in your personal life, when you encountered a lousy service at a public office, or were involved in a tense family dispute. Decide who will relate his or her experience first. You will have two minutes to tell your story. Imagine you are talking to a good friend of yours.

Listener: try to be the worst listener ever. Don't pay attention and do everything you hate other people do when you are trying to talk to them.

Q: How did you feel? Did you feel heard? What did your listener's attitude make you think about him/her?

What did the listener do/ say?

How was his/her tone of voice? Body language?

Now switch roles. Listener will relate his/her story while the person who told his experience first listens.

Listener: do your best to listen attentively. Focus on your friend's story, be as helpful as you can. Do whatever you see people doing when you feel you are really being listened to.

Q: Was there a different atmosphere? How did the listener make you feel?

Was his or her voice or posture different from the previous round?

What kinds of questions did the listener ask?

Did it feel unnatural to listen this intently?

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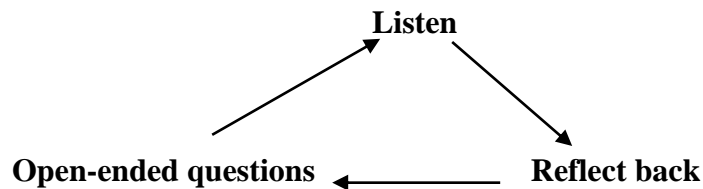
HOW?

Active listening “tool kit”

- Attentive, open body language
- Open-ended questions
- Clarifying questions
- Mirroring
- Silence
- Summarizing
- Reframing
- Reality testing

TOOLS: definitions and examples handout

Moshe Cohen’s communication triangle:



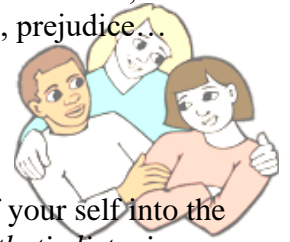
Fishbowl with David

WORKING IN EMOTIONALLY CHARGED SITUATIONS:

Stories you will listen to will often not be about a simple matter of ‘what belongs to whom’, but may deal with complicated issues of identity, painful family history, hurt feelings, prejudice...

Pay special attention to:

- Balancing empathy with neutrality
- Sensitivity to facts and their links to emotions
- Encourage empathy with the other side – (re-humanize the other)
- Be empathetic yourself. Honesty is the key to empathy. It takes input of all of your self into the person’s story, an honest attempt to understand and feel what they feel; *empathetic listening*
- Watch for negative emotional response – insult, jealousy, anger...
- Being concrete and transparent.
- Positive encouragement – focus on progress the person’s made, acknowledge his or her desires for resolution, any good sentiments or attitudes (“It seems you have dealt with it very well...”, “I hear you say your community is important to you...”)
- Never dig for feelings connected to a traumatic experience in the past. Focus on progress, change; what the person has learnt from the experience. Listen. Ask what he or she wants to talk about, about the change itself and its significance for his / her future life.
- Watch your non-verbal communication. Stay calm, maintain eye-contact.



Note taking

- You will most likely take notes while you listen.

- Design a note-taking style that will be least disruptive to you and the parties. Create symbols to identify different elements you are looking for: interests, options...
- Be transparent, but adhere to confidentiality principle (don't share notes from private session with the other party, etc...)
- Inform them about the purpose of your notes and assure them of confidentiality
- You may choose to have paper and pen for everybody to give them option to take notes, too

AVOID:

- Focusing on how you'll phrase your next question instead of listening
- Fact finding / cross-examining their story
- Problem solving or giving advice
- Judging (the case or a party)
- Advocating for one party against another



Sources:

Harvard Mediation Program and Mediation Works Incorporated training materials

Halpern, Jodi & Harvey M. Weinstein, *Rehumanizing the Other: Empathy and Reconciliation*, Human Rights Quarterly, 26(3)561

Virginia Satir network; www.avanta.com