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# Active Listening

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Long gone are the days where leaders demanded only compliance from their teams. Instead, the modern leader strives to build the capabilities of those around them and foster a team approach to achieving organisational outcomes. A key tool in establishing such a productive, inclusive work environment is the professional conversation where leaders and coaches engage others to process information and come up with their own solutions. As such, it is critical that an environment of trust, authenticity and fairness is built and an effective technique for building trust between yourself and others is to demonstrate active listening skills when they are sharing information with you.

We can define active listening as *being actively involved in the conversation, even if you are not the speaker*, with the primary intent being to understand, interpret, and evaluate what you hear the other person say. Naturally, suspending judgment and minimising distractions are essential if you are to fully attend to the other person and objectively explore their point of view, and it is worth being mindful of the fact that each and every comment, mumble, and question is like fuel in a car... driving the process forward – or backward. Careful language selection and engaging in active listening can do much to improve personal relationships, strengthen co-operation and foster understanding and accountability.

**There are many techniques that can demonstrate active listening, including the following:**

**Before the conversation:**

- Put your frames aside – Do not go into a conversation with your own frames and opinions at the forefront of your mind, as this will likely block you from really understanding where the other person is coming from.
- Find an appropriate location – If somebody wants to talk to you or you want to hold a coaching session, find a place where you can listen to them without distraction.

**During the conversation:**

- Eye contact and body language – Ensure appropriate eye contact throughout the conversation to let the other person know that they have your full attention. It may be appropriate to lean forward and use open body language to let them know you are listening.
- Encouragers – Use non-verbals and words to indicate that you are listening. Particularly if they are talking about something that they feel quite strongly about, consider using ‘ah, I see, okay, mmm’ etc.

- Paraphrasing – Perhaps the most important component of active listening is the technique of paraphrasing what you have heard in order to check your understanding.
- Asking questions – Only AFTER the other person has finished what they have to say, it may be appropriate to ask questions to obtain more clarification from the speaker.
- Summarizing/Reflecting - We may also choose to restate a participant's comment or question using our own words. This allows us to incorporate our own ideas, organisational priorities, or specific language into the ideas of participants. It also facilitates a deeper understanding of the concept under discussion. When people feel misunderstood, the result can be withdrawal and resistance. Summarizing and reflecting fosters a common understanding of the discussion.

### Things to consider:

- Try not to offer advice unless it is requested
- Resist talking over the other person, or interrupt them
- Avoid correcting them on details or asking questions about specifics until the end of the conversation

During your next one-on-one conversation, we invite you to consider the following questions:

- How well were you able to put aside assumptions, opinions or biases and listen to what was being discussed with open mind?
- How well did you maintain eye contact with the person you were speaking with?
- Did your facial expressions and body language indicate you were personally interested in the conversation?
- Did you use encouragers throughout the conversation?
- Did you consciously identify the speaker's body language?
- Were you able to quickly regain your focus towards the speaker if you became distracted or your mind wandered?
- Did you paraphrase what has been said before you responded?
- How well did you use questions to completely understand what had been said?
- Did you let the speaker finish what they were saying before you spoke?

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