

DEEP LISTENING

Listening is a critical skill that can all too often be taken for granted. There are many techniques designed to enhance our ability to listen effectively. We are unlikely, however, to employ them unless we recognize how complicated listening is, and how flawed our assumptions can be based on our inaccurate and incomplete interpretations of messages. Sometimes we assume what we think we heard is what was actually said. People communicate not just data or facts, but emotion and intent, and it is the totality of what is being communicated that we must listen for to truly understand the speaker.

PURPOSE

To challenge our assumptions and heighten our insight into the listening process. Directions

1. Introduce the Session:

Pass out small cards and pens

Assign participants a number (count off) to print on their card that is big and easy to read. Have the participants find a partner and designate one partner as an “A,” the other as a “B”.

2. Sharing in Pairs: Have the A’s tell the B’s a true story from their lives.

The story should be only sixty to ninety seconds long. It may be from any period or aspect of their lives (e.g., something that happened this week, something that happened in childhood).

- The B’s should LISTEN ONLY. They should not interrupt or ask questions.
- When the A’s finish, have the B’s tell a story.
- Have the partners exchange cards. Each person now has the card with the number of the story just heard.

3. Sharing in New Pairs:

- Each person now tells the new partner the story that she or he just heard, in the first person (i.e., “I took the goldfish...”), as accurately as possible, as if it is her or his story. Stress that each participant is to attempt to tell the story exactly as they heard it. (Note to facilitator: Do not tell the participants that they will have to repeat their partner’s story until this point.)
- When both participants have told their stories, ask them to exchange cards.

4. Sharing in New Pairs: Have everyone find another new partner.

- This time, ask people to make sure that they are not paired with someone who has a card with a number they have already seen. This process ensures that people will not get their own story back or hear the same story more than once.

- Again, have the participants exchange stories (as above) and swap cards.

5. Large Group Discussion: Have the participants form a circle and one by one tell the story that they just heard. Debrief the exercise, using the following tips:

Have the participants share randomly, rather than going around the circle. This will enhance their ability to stay present and be receptive.

Ask people to listen to the stories without commenting or “claiming” their own story, until all of the stories have been told. The impulse may be strong to correct the stories in the moment, but the flow will be smoother and the debriefing richer if the participants can wait until everyone has spoken.

DEBRIEF

Debrief the story-telling experience using some of the following questions:

1. How many of you felt your story remained accurate?
2. Did anyone not recognize her story?
3. Did you listen differently once you knew you were going to have to repeat the story you heard?
4. How did it feel to have your story repeated in its current form?
5. How did it feel to tell someone else’s story?
6. What kinds of things can we listen for? (e.g., information and facts, emotions, the intent or point of the story) Which were the easiest to discern? Which were the most important? How do they relate to each other? Which are the most “real”?
7. What kind of things did we change in our telling? Why? (e.g., we forgot some details; we wanted to make connections to close gaps in logic; in telling the story as our own, we inadvertently or deliberately made it more personal, for example, we changed the gender of key people)
8. What did we “make up” that we were sure we heard?
9. How did the tellers interact with the listeners who were silent?
10. Did you change the story based on the non-verbal cues of the listener? Why or why not?
11. Why bother listening if no one truly gets it right?

12. How is it we are able to function in the workplace when we misunderstand one another so easily?

13. What should we do with this information to improve the effectiveness of our listening?