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15.281 Advanced Managerial Communication
Spring 2009

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Active Listening and Reflective Responses

One of the basic building blocks of communication--and one of the most difficult skills to learn and practice--is effective listening. We all spend much of our time hearing other people speak, but not necessarily listening to what they are really saying. Instead, for example, we daydream, start formulating responses before hearing the whole point, and interrupt to make a tangential comment. Meanwhile, we have failed to understand the speaker's real point and the thoughts or feelings underlying that point.

As a consultant or manager, you will be called on to listen in many different contexts and for many purposes. You will need to gather data about a problem in order to help solve it. You will need to listen to a subordinate's career problems in order to help him develop. You will need to understand the point of view of another person in order to carry on effective negotiations for something you want from her. You will need to interview candidates for positions in your group. Before you can communicate effectively as managers you need to learn some useful approaches and techniques for effective listening. This teaching note describes active listening, a comprehensive approach to the task of listening. It also describes reflective responses, a particular responding technique that is based upon Western concepts of the role of feelings in interpersonal relationships. Reflective responses can be especially useful in certain types of listening situations.

Active Listening

Active listening is a term often used to describe a general approach to listening that helps you gain more information, improve your understanding of other points of view, and work cooperatively with superiors, subordinates, and peers. This approach requires not just that you learn and remember more of what the other party has said, but also that you communicate your interest and involvement to that party, as well. Active listening requires effective use of verbal and nonverbal communication, as well as mental and emotional discipline.

An active listener:

Looks and sounds interested in the speaker. By conveying your interest, you can encourage the speaker to communicate more extensively and to clarify and expand on thoughts and feelings. Communicate your interest by maintaining good eye contact. (In American culture and many Western cultures, this means looking into the other person's eyes much, though not all, of the time. Too much eye contact may make the speaker feel self-conscious, but too little will make him feel ignored). Maintain a body position and facial expression that indicate attentiveness, not boredom. Nod encouragingly to show understanding and interest. Avoid drawing, playing with your pen, or other distracting behaviors. (Conversely, try not to be distracted by the speaker's mannerisms.) Use vocalizations such as "uh-huh" and "yes" to encourage him to continue.

Adopts the speaker's point of view. You will understand and remember the speaker's points most effectively if you try to see things from her point of view, at least initially. Try to listen, not to interrupt, finish sentences, or rush the speaker. Most of all, try to suppress your initial reactions and to hear and understand the speaker's perspective. Try to listen and respond from the

speaker's frame of reference, not your own. Listen for her feelings, not just her words. Try to empathize with her position. Depending on the context and purpose of your communication, you may later shift modes into a discussion in which you also present your own point of view, but to be a good active listener, you shouldn't do that until you thoroughly understand the speaker's point of view.

Clarifies the speaker's thoughts and feelings. You will listen better if you are not talking too much yourself. When you are in active listening mode, limit your talking to things that will contribute to getting the fullest informational and emotional content from the speaker. Avoid inserting your own marginally related experiences and minimize interruptions. When the speaker pauses, ask open-ended questions (e.g., "How do you feel about X?" "Tell me about X." "What concerns you about X?") rather than questions that can be answered in a single word or phrase ("Are you satisfied with X?" "Is X on schedule?"). Use reflective response techniques (described in more detail below) to check the accuracy of your understanding of the speaker's ideas and especially feelings (e.g., "So you are frustrated at your inability to progress on X?").

You may adapt active listening techniques to different types of listening, with your role ranging from minimal intervention to more active solicitation and even into giving advice, depending on your needs.

Reflective Responses

Reflection, or reflective response technique, borrowed from certain types of counseling techniques, is designed to elicit as full a sense as possible of the speaker's thoughts and especially feelings. It is a way of helping someone explore her own personal meanings. This technique involves reflecting back to the speaker what you believe she has said in order to verify (or clarify) your understanding and to encourage the speaker to continue elaborating on her point of view.* An active listener is already using aspects of this technique, but reflection requires taking even greater care in the following areas:

Reflect the speaker's thoughts and feelings. Restate what you believe the speaker has said to check for the accuracy of your understanding (e.g., "So you couldn't finish the assignment on time." "Then you think the time allotted was inadequate?"). Even more importantly, reflect back the speaker's feelings as you have heard or inferred them (e.g., "You seem to feel anxious because you couldn't finish the assignment on time."). This interpretation of feelings is, of course, more tricky in that it often requires you to read between the lines, to infer feelings underlying what has been said (e.g., "You seem angry about the reorganization," rather than "So the department was reorganized."). Thus you may want to use wording or voice tone to make your inferences into questions, rather than statements (e.g., "So you feel anxious because you couldn't finish the assignment on time?" "Do you feel anxious because you couldn't finish the assignment on time?").

Respond rather than lead the conversation. Let the speaker's thoughts and feelings be your guide in the conversation. Don't guide the conversation by asking questions or interjecting ideas or suggestions that take the speaker into

*This description of the technique is based on Chapters 9 and 10 of *Interpersonal Behavior: Communication and Understanding in Relationships*, by Anthony G. Athos and John J. Gabarro (Prentice Hall).

new areas of interest to you (e.g., "Have you thought about X?" "Maybe you should ask about Y."). Instead, respond to and reflect back what he actually said or what you sense is implied by what he said (e.g., "So you feel trapped by this project?"). Try to stay within the speaker's frame of reference, rather than asking questions or making suggestions that come from your own frame of reference. Even asking "Why?" may distract the speaker from one line of thoughts or feelings into defending and justifying feelings or actions.

Respond to feelings, rather than content. As suggested earlier, feelings are generally a better indication of personal meanings than content is. Thus you will help the speaker's self-exploration more by responding to her feelings (e.g., "So you resent Susan's frequent absences?") than to the content (e.g., "How often was Susan out of the office?") There is a corollary to this guideline: You can get at a person's feelings better by responding to the more personal aspects of what she says. Whenever possible, choose the specific, personal points (e.g., "So your subordinate, John, tends to challenge you in front of others.") rather than the abstract generalizations (e.g., "So the firm's hierarchy is weak") to respond to and reflect back at the speaker. This encourages her to explore those personal feelings more thoroughly and to make clear her own assumptions.

Reflective vs. Directive Responses

Obviously, this reflective technique is not always appropriate to the circumstances and to your needs or purposes. At times you may want to be more *directive* and less *reflective* in your interactions. You may want to argue, advise, or confront. Thus once you have learned to use the reflective mode of listening, you need to consider when to use it, when to shift from that mode to a more directive mode, and when not to be reflective at all. Here are some reasons and times for using this reflective technique:

- When you need or want to understand the other person's feelings more completely
- When you sense that the other person has not yet revealed his thoughts and feelings about the situation
- When you sense that the other person is not sure of his true feelings

Thus active listening with reflective responses is often the first stage of an interaction. Then, once you feel you really understand the person's perspective, you can switch to a more directive or confrontational or persuasive stance. Here, you can lead as well as respond and speak from your own frame of reference as well as the other person's.

Conclusion

Listening is a critical communication skill for managers and consultants, as well as for all of us in our personal lives. Advising someone well on a career, personal, or organizational issue requires that you understand that person's point of view. You can't negotiate effectively until you understand what the other person wants. Effective persuasion depends on a clear understanding of the other person's perspective. In all of these situations, active listening, often beginning with reflective responses, is crucial to achieving your ultimate communication objectives.

Active listening is a skill that, like other communication skills, must be developed. It does not come naturally to most of us. Practicing active listening and particularly reflective responses can feel artificial when these skills are isolated from a real communication need. Still, only by practicing can you develop these skills and then integrate them with your other communication skills.