



LISTENING TIPS

OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

In order to productively resolve conflicts, it is important not just to listen, but to also find out as much information as you can about the conflict you are involved in. One way to do this is to ask open-ended questions. Open-ended questions allow people to provide fuller answers than close ended questions, which result in yes-no or one-word answers. Don't completely forget about close-ended questions, though, as they can be helpful if you are trying to clarify something specific.

FOR EXAMPLE

- What happened?
- How did this situation affect you?
- What concerns you?
- What kind of solution works for you?
- How can this relationship be fixed?
- What would you like to see happen?

VERSUS

- Did he annoy you?
- Do you feel upset?
- Are you concerned?
- Would it work for you to meet up once a week?
- Do you want to be friends again?
- Would you like her to apologize?

HOW QUESTIONS

Especially when brainstorming for solutions, "How" questions help the people in conflict with one another take a forward-looking, or future-oriented approach. "Why" questions tend to focus on a past orientation, and don't help disputants come up with as many ideas for solutions.

An example is "How can you solve this conflict with one another?" as opposed to "Why aren't you able to get along with one another?"

BODY LANGUAGE

Our body language lets people know if we are listening to them or not, and can also send messages to others about how we are feeling. For instance, if we are looking around while someone is speaking, they may think we are bored and not listening. It is especially important as a mediator to use calm body language that does not indicate that we favor one side over the other.



LISTENING BLOCKS

In some circumstances, there are also things we can say that – especially during a conflict – will cut people off or make them think we don't really want to listen to them. Even when we are trying to listen with our best intentions, we sometimes do not respond in ways that make people feel heard.

For instance, people often provide unsolicited advice.

- “Here is what you need to do...”
- “What about trying this...”
- “It is not as bad as you think...”

People give advice to others because at times it can be helpful. However, if a person hasn't asked for it, it may come across as an annoying cut-off to the conversation.

People also make judgments about others and the information they are sharing.

- “You are overreacting to the situation...”
- “You are too emotional. Deal with it!”
- “You are such an idiot!”

No one likes to be negatively judged.

Similarly, asking questions in a judging way is not helpful:

- “Umm ... Did you really wear that?”
- “Why did you go over there in the first place?”
- “Are you sure you understand what is going on?”

Telling someone what you think is going on with him/her may make the person feel you don't respect their self-awareness.

- “Here is what is going on with you...”
- “You're just being insecure...”
- “Your problem is that...”

People also dismiss the problems others are sharing with them because they want to cheer up the person, don't care, don't have the time, etc:

- “Stop worrying. I'm sure you did a great job.”
- “Relax! There is nothing you can do now. You have to let it go.”
- “Who cares? Just forget it and move on.”

We want to make people feel better, but these minimizing statements might make a person feel cut-off if the matter is important to them.



ACTIVE LISTENING SKILLS

When resolving conflicts, it is extremely important to use active listening skills, including:

- Encouraging, or requesting more information by showing interest. The more information we can gather about a conflict, the more details we have about what really needs to be resolved in order to move forward.
 - “Tell me more about ...”
 - “Why do you say ...”
- Clarifying, or understanding more clearly. It is really important to make sure that everyone is on the same page on the big picture and specific details.
 - “What do you mean when you say ...?”
 - “Can you explain in more detail?”
- Restating, or checking your understanding of what the other person is saying. This skill also helps for everyone to be on the same page.
 - “What I hear from you is Is that right?”
 - “So are you saying ...?”
- Reflecting, or checking your understanding of what the other person is feeling. It is really important to acknowledge the emotions involved in a conflict, as this acknowledgment allows people to feel heard and move forward.
 - “You seem to be upset / happy / etc.”
 - “It’s _____ to have that happen.”
- Summarizing, or pulling together the main points, or the big picture of the conversation. This skill helps everyone to keep track of the whole situation and what suggestions are being made about the best way to move forward.
 - “What you’re saying seems to indicate ...”
 - “What I’m hearing as the main points are ...”
- Validating, or stressing the value of the person you are talking to whether or not you agree with their statements. Often, it is more important for people to feel heard than to get their way.
 - “I’m glad you talked with me about this.”
 - “I understand now why you feel that way.”

Here are some examples of how these skills might sound:

- Encouraging: “Tell me more about why you think your teacher doesn’t like you.”
- Clarifying: “How is your friend being hard on you?”
- Restating: “So you’re upset that she borrowed your dress and then spilled on it.”
- Reflecting: “You seem to be sad that you’re not spending as much time together.”
- Summarizing: “You thought she had offered to share notes, and so you took notes when you thought it was your turn, and not the day you thought it was her turn. Now you don’t have notes for that day, and the test is coming up in a couple of days. Is that correct?”
- Validating: “Thanks for being willing to share how this conflict is affecting you.”

Using these listening skills when resolving conflicts will lead to mutually satisfying and lasting resolutions.