

## Topic Seven – Active Listening



## Coaching, Evaluating and Delivering Constructive Feedback – Learning Series

We are pleased to bring you “**Active Listening;**” the seventh in a series of communications that discuss the value that coaching brings to your management practice and team leadership. The content presented will provide a number of benefits and keys to adding active listening to your coaching practice. In addition to this message, this topic also includes a Knowledge Check which presents scenarios for your consideration, and a Job Aid that outlines the five primary types of Active Listening to support your practice.

To reference previous topics, please click on the Coaching Series Home link located in the Quick Links section of this web page.

Thanks for all you do.

### Overview: Active Listening

An important skill in the coaching toolkit is the ability to listen to your employee, understand what he or she is saying, retain that information, and respond appropriately.

Active listening is a method of receiving and responding to information in order to improve mutual understanding. It is a structured form of conversation that puts the attention on the employee and focuses on both what he or she is saying as well as the feelings behind the words. Understanding what your employee is feeling gives you greater insight into what motivates or discourages him or her. This supports your coaching practice by helping you to tailor your coaching to what is meaningful for the employee.

Active listening requires some discipline and a willingness to turn off or set aside distractions and attend to the person speaking. Recognize that fully listening to another person means not formulating an answer in your head while the person is still speaking.

This can be a difficult habit to establish; one that requires commitment and a practice of validating the other person’s words without necessarily having to agree with them. It makes the speaker feel understood, not judged.

Understanding and empathy can be demonstrated in your response to the speaker, regardless of whether you agree with an action or not. Typically, as an active listener, you should paraphrase what you heard from the speaker using phrases such as “Let me see if I understand what you are saying...” or “What I hear you saying is....” Try to validate the emotion behind the words, for instance “You sound frustrated...” or “That must have upset you....” Once you have reflected the speaker’s words back, you can then respond with your side or suggestions.

### Benefits of Active Listening

The benefits of active listening are outlined below:

- Helps to avoid miscommunication; confirmation of understanding is part of the conversation
- Encourages more open conversations, as speaker feels understood
- Strengthens relationships over time
- Validates and encourages employee to be more receptive to feedback; employee is more likely to hear feedback after the coach has demonstrated understanding

## Keys to Active Listening

When having a coaching conversation:

**Be present and focused:** By devoting yourself, even for a short period of time, to your employee, you give them positive feedback by making them feel important. To stay “present,” face your employee, use a comfortable amount of eye contact (which varies across cultures), and use non-verbal cues to communicate your engagement. Remove distractions (e.g., incoming e-mails, incoming cell phone calls). Taking notes or paraphrasing what you’ve heard also communicates your interest in what the employee has to say and can increase your own understanding. For example, you can paraphrase by stating “What you’re saying is…” or “It seems that you…”

**Let the employee speak:** You can’t listen when you’re speaking or when the employee isn’t saying anything. If your employee stops talking, encourage him or her with non-verbal gestures, such as nodding, and verbal cues such as “uh-huh” and “go on.” Good questioning techniques can also encourage your employee to speak more freely.

**Suspend judgment:** Empathy requires that you ignore your own opinions and biases to view the world from the employee’s perspective. Resist the urge to react instinctively to what you are hearing; even though your initial reactions can be correct sometimes, they also prevent you from hearing the employee’s whole story. In addition, withholding answers promotes self-reliant problem solving and self-discovery by the employee. Instead of judging, ask questions about your employee’s position: “Could you help me understand…” or “Did I understand you to say…”

**Identify the feelings behind the words:** What people say reflects what they are feeling inside. Instead of just listening for comprehension, listen with empathy; try to understand the motivation driving the message. Look for body language that can express aggression, discomfort, or insecurity. By taking the time to comprehend what your employee is feeling, you can help him or her to understand his or her emotions and reactions and provide more motivating feedback to facilitate development.

**Give feedback:** Share your perceptions of the employee’s message and behavior. Offer only feedback that focuses on the present and the objectives of the conversation. Give feedback when it is asked for and share your impressions with reserve and tact.

**Next Steps:** Make a specific request to change or continue the identified action or behavior – or ask for ideas on how to move forward. Not all employees will be willing or able in all instances to suggest next steps, but it is valuable to show your employees that you see him or her as part of the solution. You can also communicate that value by agreeing on next steps before you leave the coaching conversation.

Overall feedback should be:

- **Focused** – specifically on “what” and “how”
- **Frequent** – timely (e.g., occurring a day or two after the behavior is observed) and regular
- **Appropriate Environment** – employee should feel safe and open
- **Given with Attention** – share your feelings and perspective
- **Actionable** – behavior one can change or sustain
- **Balanced** – motivational and developmental

## Next Steps

**Activities:** For additional information on active listening, please take a moment to review the job aid and knowledge check below. Also for your reference, a link to the Knowledge Check – Key is included.

- [Topic Seven : Active Listening Job Aid](#)
- [Topic Seven - Active Listening Scenarios Knowledge Check](#)
- [Topic Seven - Active Listening Scenarios Knowledge Check - Key](#)

**Coming Next: Avoiding Bias in Observations and Judgments** is critical to building a strong coaching relationship, and the next topic in this series to provide you with strategies to become aware of and manage your biases when making observations and judgments.