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Active Listening Techniques

What is Active Listening?

Active listening intentionally focuses on the speaker in order to understand what he or she is saying. As the listener, you should be able to repeat back in your own words what they have said to their satisfaction. This does not mean you agree with the person, but rather understand what they are saying.

What Can You Do to Show Participants You Are Actively Listening?

As the facilitator, it is important to convey that you are listening to the group’s feedback. Below are several strategies you can adopt to show participants that you are listening and that you care about what they say.

Good listeners:

- Face the speaker and maintain eye contact (to the degree it is comfortable).
- Respond appropriately and show that they understand. Murmuring “uh-huh” and “um-hmm,” nodding, raising your eyebrows and asking direct prompts can be helpful.
- Focus on what the speaker is saying, not what they plan to say next. The conversation should flow naturally after the speaker makes his/her point.
- Avoid chiming in with their own similar experience or advice.
- Try to feel and understand what the speaker is feeling.
- Paraphrase what they heard by saying, “so, you’re saying...” or “what I’m hearing you say is...” or “so, if I understand correctly...” and restate key points.
- Ask questions that may provide more information.

How Do I Balance Active Listening with Assessment Expectations?

While it is important to demonstrate active listening skills, it’s probably inevitable that you, as the facilitator, will also feel pressure to keep the process moving along in a timely manner. As discussed in the Facilitator’s Guide, the ground rules and tone you set at the beginning of the meeting can help you and the group strike a good balance. Periodically reminding the group of the ground rule and expectations can be helpful.
Enhancing Your Facilitation Skills

Your Role as the Facilitator

As the facilitator, it is your job to guide the group through the assessment process together. Your role is to draw out opinions and ideas of the group members. You are not there to give opinions or take sides, despite your expertise. As the facilitator, you should care about how people participate in the process, and not just on what gets accomplished. It is your job to make sure your session is structured in a way that everyone can participate. This includes things like:

- Making sure everyone feels comfortable sharing their input, regardless of whether they agree or disagree
- Making group members feel valued
- Making participants feel good about their contributions to the assessment
- Making sure that decisions are made by the group
- Making sure to provide positive reinforcement

Tips to Enhance Your Facilitation

The Facilitator’s Guide includes tips and strategies throughout the document to help you in your role as the facilitator. This includes steps you can take to prepare for your role prior to the assessment meeting. We encourage you to review this guide prior to your session. Additionally, here are a few more suggestions:

- **Don’t memorize a script.** Although it’s okay to have notes and be prepared, if people sense that you have memorized your lines, you may not appear as flexible and natural. This may stifle the conversation and make some participants reluctant to respond freely. Be prepared, but also be flexible and engaging.

- **Watch the group’s body language.** Do people look bored, tired or confused? Are people fidgeting in their seats? If participants seem restless or nonresponsive, you may need to take a break, or speed up or slow down the pace of the discussion. And if you see confused looks on a lot of faces, you may need to pause and check with the group, to make sure that everyone knows where you are.

- **Be aware of your own behavior and actions.** Make sure you are not repeating yourself, saying “ah” between each word, or going too fast for the group. Are you standing still or walking around the room to engage all participants? Don’t stand in the front of the room for the entire meeting.
Facilitating Difficult Situations

What Can You Expect as the Facilitator?

While most participants will quickly jump in and provide feedback, you can expect that there may be some participants that disrupt the process. The most common kinds of disrupters are people who try to dominate, keep going off the agenda, have side conversations with the person sitting next to them, or participants who think they are right and ridicule or minimize other's comments.

What Can You Do to Prevent and Manage Disruptive Behavior?

As the facilitator, it is important to convey confidence in the assessment process. It’s also important to minimize any potential behavior that could stifle the process, deter the group’s efforts, alienate participants or cause frustration. Below, several tips for dealing with disruptive behavior are provided.

- **Create a sense of shared accountability and group investment in completing the assigned assessment questions.** This can be done by getting buy-in and agreement on the process, ground rules, expectations and anticipated outcomes.
- **Don’t be defensive.** If you are criticized, pause before responding calmly. Once you become defensive, you risk losing the group's respect and trust, and might cause participants to feel they can't be honest with you.
- **Acknowledge the power players.** These participants can impact the success of your process if they don't feel that their influence and role are acknowledged and respected. If possible, give them acknowledgment prior to the start of your session. Additionally, consider checking in with them during breaks to see how they think the meeting is going.
- **Address the point.** If there is someone who keeps expressing doubts about the assessment process, puts down others' suggestions, keeps bringing up the same point over and over, or seems to want to derail the process try one or more of these approaches:
  1) Show that you understand their issue by making it clear that you hear how important it is to them. Legitimize the issue by saying, "It's a very important point and one I'm sure we all feel is critical."
  2) Make a bargain to deal with their issue for a short period of time ("O.K., let's deal with your issue for 5 minutes and then we ought to move on.")
  3) If that doesn't work, agree to defer the issue to the end of the meeting, or set up a committee to explore it further.
- **Use body language.** Move closer to conversers, or to the quiet ones. Make eye contact with them to get their attention and convey your intent.
Group Dynamics & High Performing Teams

What are the Typical Stages of Team Development?

Based on the work of Dr. Bruce Tuckman\(^1\), a researcher in group dynamics, there are five stages of team development:

1. **Forming**: the group is under development and generally people are concerned with being accepted by others. Team members may be getting to know one another and most try to avoid controversy or conflict.

2. **Storming**: the group is concerned with how they work together. They are testing out where they fit into the group. The group is likely to be showing signs of disagreement as well as lively debates and discussions.

3. **Norming**: the group is starting to feel more comfortable with working with each other. Far more is being achieved at this stage, and most team members take responsibility and care about the team’s success in achieving its goals.

4. **Performing**: the group is now a high performing team! The goals are being achieved in an atmosphere that is often relaxed and purposeful. The team is likely to be feeling confident at this stage with a really open and honest dialogue taking place.

What are the Characteristics of a High Performing Team?

High performing teams generally:

- Manage their time effectively
- Have clear roles and expectations
- Respect team members and team processes
- Work to achieve a shared vision

According to researcher\(^2\), Several behaviors have been shown to positively impact the performance of a team, including facilitators or leaders that:

- Provide positive feedback and reassurances that the team is on the right track
- Influence the group to reach their goals
- Encourage active participation from team members
- Present clear directions

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Ice Breakers for Breakout Groups

Why Use an Ice Breaker?

Ice breakers can be an important tool in helping people connect with one another in a group setting. They can create a good environment for participation and shared learning. They also encourage listening and often help attendees feel more comfortable interacting with each other by breaking down feelings of unfamiliarity and shyness. Ice breakers are especially helpful with a new group of people that do not frequently exchange ideas and may be hesitant to contribute to a discussion.

How Do I Use an Ice Breaker if I Have Limited Time?

Below, we’ve provided three easy and quick approaches for using ice breakers in your small groups based on your selected assessment approach (e.g., core team versus retreat style meeting). All three of these approaches can be done during the introductions.

Introductory Remarks – What if Scenario

Ask participants to introduce themselves, identify their organization and name one (select from options below)...  
1. Place they would like to visit.  
2. Super power they would like to have for a day.  
3. Thing they would hate to live without.  
4. Snack they would like to enjoy while participating in the assessment.

Introductory Remarks – True or False

Ask each group member to write down one true and one false or fanciful fact about him/herself. In a round robin fashion, have each participant introduce him/herself, identify their organization, and tell the group one fact they wrote down (true or false). Ask for a show of hands if the fact is true or false for each participant.

Introductory Remarks – Using Adjectives

Ask each group member to introduce him/herself, identify their organization, and attach an adjective that describes them to their name. The adjective should start with the first letter of their name. The facilitator and note-taker can start. Example, Hi, I’m bossy Brenda from Plum County Health Department.
SPHSA Notes Template

**Purpose:** This template can be used to compile feedback, comments and ideas generated during the group discussion. It provides a standard approach for recording information across all groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model Standard #</th>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
<th>Immediate Improvements</th>
<th>Priorities</th>
<th>Other Comments</th>
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Role Play: Getting Comfortable in the Role of Facilitator

Purpose: This activity is intended for new facilitators to help them prepare for a situation they may be concerned about through a role play exercise designed to be conducted in a supportive environment.

Duration: This activity requires 20-60 minutes.

Directions: Convene a group of facilitators. Each participating facilitator should make a list of three situations they are concerned about. Read the situations aloud and as a group pick one scenario to role play. Assign roles and “act out” the issue of concern. Each role play should last no longer than 3-5 minutes. Following the role play, address the questions below. Repeat the process as necessary with different scenarios.

Questions: After each role play, discuss:

1. What were the major issues that posed a facilitation challenge?
2. How did the facilitator try to address the situation?
3. What are some additional strategies that can be used to manage the situation?
4. How could the situation have been handled differently?
Role Play: What if Scenarios

Purpose: This activity is intended to provide facilitators with an opportunity to practice specific strategies for managing participants that may be domineering, silent, distracting, unnecessarily inquisitive or a bit too focused on process.

Duration: This activity requires 20-60 minutes.

Directions: Convene a group of facilitators. Review the examples and strategies provided below regarding different types of participants you may encounter. As a group, identify additional ways for dealing with each situation. Then select a situation to role play. Assign tasks and conduct the exercise for 3-5 minutes using the strategies identified below or discussed as a group. Answer the questions below and repeat the role play with different scenarios, including situations you may add to the list.

Questions: After each role play, discuss:

1. How did the facilitator try to address the situation?
2. What did you like about this approach?
3. Was there anything you didn’t like about this approach?
4. What are some additional strategies that can be used to manage the situation?

Example Participants and Strategies:

- **The dominator:** This person tried to monopolize the meeting.
  
  **Strategy:** Look for a place to interrupt him, quickly summarize his point of view and turn to the group and say, "Does anyone else have an opinion about this?"

- **The wallflower:** This person has good ideas but is too shy to share them in a group setting.
  
  **Strategy:** Set him/her up with a little encouragement. "Connie, I know you have a lot of experience in this area. Is there anything you can share that might be helpful?"

- **The distractors:** These individuals will often huddle together and start talking about something.
  
  **Strategy:** Call on someone who is sitting next to one of them. That may startle them enough to stop, without embarrassing them. Alternatively ask them to share their good idea with the group.

- **The pessimist:** These individuals may have legitimate points, but they love to express concerns.
  
  **Strategy:** Quickly legitimize their concerns and use the group to diffuse the concerns
Role Play: Let’s Practice Answering the Questions

Purpose: This activity is intended to provide facilitators with a “dry run” or “practice run” in guiding the group through an assessment question, the discussion and the actual vote.

Duration: This activity requires 30-60 minutes.

Material: A copy of the glossary and assessment tool or facilitator’s guide is needed for this exercise.

Directions: Convene a group of facilitators. Cut out the attached role “assignments” below and distribute as many as needed so that everyone has an assigned role. Although copies can be made, only one “facilitator” should be assigned per group. Ask the facilitator to select a question they would like the group to address and begin by posing the question to the group. Role play the exercise for 7-10 minutes using the assigned roles. Answer the questions below and repeat the exercise using different assessment questions and switching participant roles.

Questions: After each role play, discuss:

1. What facilitation techniques worked well?
2. What did not work well?
3. What are some strategies that might make the transition to voting a smooth and efficient process?

Assigned Roles:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Facilitator</th>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pick one assessment questions to discuss and vote on with the group. Total time for exercise: 10 minutes</td>
<td>Your role is to try and rush the group to quickly vote. You are concerned about having time to answer all of the questions</td>
<td>Your role is to contribute as an active participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your role is to contribute as an active participant</td>
<td>Your role is to try and dominate the conversation</td>
<td>Your role is to contribute as an active participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Participant</td>
<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your role is to frequently interrupt with questions. You are particularly concerned with terms that may not be in the glossary</td>
<td>Your role is to be withdrawn during the discussion</td>
<td>Your role is to contribute as an active participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant</td>
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<td>Participant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Your role is to contribute as an active participant</td>
<td>Your role is engage in a side conversation with your neighbor</td>
<td>Your role is to question the decision, if voting occurs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Voting: A Proposed Approach

How Do I Get the Group to Vote?

As the facilitator, it is your role to guide the discussion and decide when the group should vote. Although there are multiple approaches that can be used for voting, we propose the following process which has been used successfully by many states.

This process includes the use of individual color coded voting cards that coincide with Table 1. These voting cards are distributed to participants prior to the discussion and reviewed during your opening remarks. When it is time to vote (e.g., there are no new comments or there is general agreement on an item), everyone is asked to hold up a card. The note-taker records the final response on the paper copy of the instrument based on review of voting cards.

Table 1. Voting Response Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Optimal Activity (76-100%)</th>
<th>The public health system is doing absolutely everything possible for this activity and there is no need for improvement.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Significant Activity (51-75%)</td>
<td>The public health system participates a great deal in this activity, and there is opportunity for minor improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moderate Activity (26-50%)</td>
<td>The public health system somewhat participates in this activity, and there is opportunity for greater improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minimal Activity (1-25%)</td>
<td>The public health system provides limited activity, and there is opportunity for substantial improvement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Activity (0%)</td>
<td>The public health system does not participate in this activity at all.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tips for Handling Tricky Voting Situations

Here are a few potential concerns that may arise and tips for addressing each.

- **Concern #1: Some participants may be concerned about not capturing all of the votes.**
  - Assure participants that their comments are being recorded in the notes. Let group members know that the data collection system only records one final vote per item. Alternatively, consider recording all votes and recruiting participants to help.

- **Concern #2: There is vocal disagreement on the vote that may alienate participants.**
  - Ask the group if they need more time for discussion and if there are points of view that have not yet been heard. If the group reaches the same conclusion, assure participants that the notes will reflect the lack of agreement in this area.

- **Concern #3: The votes seem arbitrary.**
  - Convey your confidence in this assessment process and, if possible, refer to elements of the discussion that have already identified opportunities for improvement.