

Active listening & powerful questions



FairWork
Commission

“We think we listen but we don’t. We finish each other’s sentences, we interrupt each other, we moan together, we fill the pauses with our own stories, we look at our watches, we sigh, we frown, tap our fingers, read or walk away, we give advice, give advice, and give advice.”

Nancy Kline: A Time to Think

Active listening

Active listening is a listening technique that can be used to resolve disputes or conflict.

To listen actively we must recognise how we react to others when we are under pressure. We must make a choice to focus on the other person and give them space to talk. We should foster a safe atmosphere and ask questions to encourage them and us to think openly. We should give feedback to convey how we understand the speaker’s message.

Other listening styles

Second guessing

Listeners who second guess a speaker usually miss important details. This can be because they are distracted by:

- imagining the speaker has hidden motives for saying what they’re saying, and
- trying to work out what those hidden motives might be.

Rehearsing

Some listeners think about how to respond while they are listening. Rehearsing responses can block the chance to listen effectively. A rehearser is often waiting for the speaker to finish so they can start talking again. Rehearsed responses are often cliché, scripted and use jargon.

Relating

This listener continually relates what the speaker is saying to themselves. The listener can appear self-centred because everything is compared to their own experiences. This listening style shifts attention from the speaker to the listener.

Pretending

A person who is pretending to listen is not present in a conversation. They may be thinking about something or someone else. Overusing ‘I know’, ‘OK’ or ‘I see’ might be a sign that a person isn’t really paying attention to the speaker.

Discounting

Some listeners discount what the speaker is saying when they don’t respect the speaker. The speaker might be perfectly correct. However, a Discounter will internally or vocally reject what the speaker says. This can result in solutions being missed or dismissed.

Active listening – The A4 Model

ATTEND

Acknowledge what the speaker is saying by:

- making direct eye contact or nodding (non-verbally), and
- saying “right”, “uh-huh” or “yes”.

ASK

Ask questions:

- May I clarify that I have understood this correctly?
- Are you saying that you are concerned with how the workers in the factory may react?

ACKNOWLEDGE

Acknowledge both the business and emotional/personal issues:

- I realise that this may not sit well with the workers as this is a whole new bargaining process.
- I know that this will require a shift in thinking and that you are concerned about people supporting it.

ANSWER

Give options, advice, and collaborate on an answer:

- How about we work together on a strong yet collaborative message to send the workers in advance?
- How about we enrol some of the key stakeholders beforehand and explore the benefits of this new process?

Choose your words carefully

- ✓ “Certainly, we could do the following”
- ✓ “I can hear, I realise, I recognise...” with a specific emphasis on the emotion and business need/concern
- ✓ “We...”
- ✓ “May I suggest...”
- ✗ “We can’t do that...”
- ✗ “I know where you are coming from, I understand how you are feeling...”
- ✗ “You...”
- ✗ “You should do the following...”

“Knowledge is having the right answers, intelligence is asking the right questions.”

Anonymous

Open questions

WHO

Who would be the best stakeholders to involve?

WHAT

What do you think of the options outlined?

WHEN

When would we need to communicate this by?

WHERE

Where would be the best venue for this mass meeting?

WHY

Why do you think that is important for the team leaders?

HOW

How do you suggest we manage this meeting for the different shift workers?

“The Mind resists commands and responds to questions.”

Nancy Kline: A Time to Think

The 5 essential questions

INFORMATION

Facts:

- Can you tell me what the process has been so far?
- Please elaborate on your current enterprise agreement?

CHALLENGES/ CONCERNS

Problems:

- What do you think the biggest challenges will be?
- Is this your most important concern right now?

CONFIRMATION

Clarification:

- May I confirm that A, B and C are your top 3 priorities now?
- Can I check that I understand this correctly?

OUTCOMES/ NEW DIRECTIONS

Future focused:

- How do you envision this panning out in the next 6 months?
- What would your ideal outcome be?

NEXT STEPS

Where to from here:

- What would you like us to do as the next step?
- How do you suggest we follow this up?

“The important thing is not to stop questioning.”

Albert Einstein