Active Listening

Listening is a conscious activity which requires attention. Listening fully - or actively means putting everything else out of your mind and acknowledging the other person so they have feedback that you are listening properly and valuing what they have to say[1]. Understanding and valuing does not mean agreeing; active listening is particularly valuable in situations of conflict[2] or disagreement where if the other party feels you understand their viewpoint, an atmosphere of cooperation can be created which increases the possibility of resolving the conflict.

Some of the key skills for active listening include:

- Listen with your whole body:
    - Face the other person and use an open posture to establish rapport
    - Use eye contact and facial gestures to demonstrate your attention
    - Be still and resist fidgeting
- Let the other person do the talking:
    - Be quiet and actively encourage the other person to talk; promote their willingness to communicate
    - Avoid interrupting
    - Don't finish their sentences or fill in the blanks – no matter how tempting!
- Notice non-verbal communication ie, body language, tone and pitch of the voice – listen for feelings and emotions[3] as much as facts and words
- Be comfortable with silence. Staying silent gives time and opportunity for the speaker to share extra information. It may feel odd initially, but you will be amazed how often more information emerges after a moment's silence.
- Use questions effectively
- Reflect back the information you receive:
    - Repeat the information you have just heard to illustrate your understanding and provide opportunities for clarification.
    - Use paraphrasing, acknowledgment and reflective statements.

Active listening takes time and focus to achieve; used effectively it opens up a whole new level on which to communicate and build relationships.

Effective Questions

Albert Einstein said, *"If I had an hour to solve a problem and my life depended on the solution, I would spend the first 55 minutes determining the proper question to ask, for once I know the proper question, I could solve the problem in less than five minutes."* Far too many people focus on having the "right answer" rather than discovering the "right question"[4]. In Germany, the job title *Direktor Grundsatzfragen* translates as "Director of Fundamental Questions." These are the people who are always thinking about what the next questions will be. The German understanding and appreciation of *Grundsatzfragen* stems from a culture that highly values philosophy and the ongoing questioning of priorities and the meaning of life. We can all

---

[1] For more on communication theory see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1066_Communcation_Theory.pdf

[2] For more on managing inter-personal conflict see:
http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1041_Managing_Conflict.pdf

[3] For more on emotions see: http://www.mosaicprojects.com.au/WhitePapers/WP1008_Emotional%20_Intellegence.pdf

[4] See **Good questions outrank easy answers**:
http://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2011/05/21/good-questions-outrank-easy-answers/

benefit from adopting this approach to thinking, which makes asking effective questions a key skill to develop. A powerful question:

- generates curiosity in the listener
- stimulates reflective conversation
- is thought-provoking
- surfaces underlying assumptions
- invites creativity and new possibilities
- generates energy and forward movement
- channels attention and focuses inquiry
- stays with participants
- touches a deep meaning
- evokes more questions.

It has the capacity to spread beyond the place where it began into larger networks of conversation throughout an organization or a community. Powerful questions that travel well are often the key to large-scale change.

But this is not straightforward; whilst asking and answering questions is part of everyday conversation for all of us and we might think that questioning is a natural skill that we all possess; it is not as easy as we assume. Questions need to be designed to help the other person reach a conclusions, or to provide information and insights helpful to the discussion.

There are a range of question types that can be used for different purposes. Some questions provide structure, others direct flow, and some help us to reach closure. Question types include:

- Open questions, to gather information and facts, for example "What are your concerns and worries about this situation?"
- Probing questions, to gain additional detail, e.g. "Can you explain why that matters?"
- Hypothetical questions, to suggest an approach or introduce new ideas. An example might be "If you could get additional funding or resources, how might that help?"
- Reflective questions, to check understanding, such as "So would you prioritise the most critical areas for attention first and make sure that everyone knew what was most important?"
- Closing questions, to bring agreement, commitment and conclusion, e.g. "When will you talk to your team and the client about this?"

These questions are often used in a structured *question funnel*. The funnel starts very wide, with open questions to consider a broad range of possibilities, then it uses probing and hypothetical questions to fill in missing information, increase understanding and suggest additional ways of thinking about the situation. Finally the question funnel focuses things down by using reflective questions to ensure that all the main issues have been considered, and ending with closing questions to produce an agreed way forward.

Each of these steps involves answering questions, but to get the right answers we must ask the right questions. Some of the skills of effective questioning include:

- Asking open ended questions - Open ended questions such as "How do you think this re-structure may impact your department?" provide far greater insights than closed questions such as "How long have you worked with Harry?" Closed questions will deliver Yes/No answers or flat facts such as "Two years".
- Don't be afraid to wait for the complete answer!
- Use active listening…..

- Avoid leading questions and 'why' questions (these can cause people to become defensive) focus on 'what' and 'how' questions that elicit facts and information without appearing to blame.
- Pre-plan the questions you are likely to need some examples of typical questions include:
    - Questions to identify an issue:
        - What seems to be the trouble?
        - What do you make of _____?
        - How do you feel about _____?
        - What concerns you the most about _____?
        - What seems to be the problem? *(not: 'Why did this go wrong?')*
        - What seems to be your main obstacle?
        - What is holding you back from _____?
        - What do you think about doing XXXX this way?
    - Questions to elicit additional information:
        - What do you mean by _____?
        - Tell me more about _____
        - What else?
        - What other ways did you try so far?
        - What will you/we have to do to get the job done?
    - Outcome focused questions (can help resolve a conflict once the issues are understood):
        - How do you want _____ to turn out?
        - What do you want? Or What is your desired outcome?
        - What benefits would you like to get out of X?
        - What do you propose?
        - What is your plan?
        - If you do this, how will it affect _____ ?
        - What else do you/we need to consider?
    - Questions to elicit action:
        - What will you do?
        - When will you do it?
        - How will I know you did it?
        - What are your next steps?
    - Questions to define a risk, issue or problem:
        - What is the uncertainty?
        - How uncertain is it?
        - Why does it matter?
        - How much does it matter?
- If necessary test the reliability of the person by asking questions to which you already know the answers. This is important in several areas:
    - To test the reliability of a person's memory (or perceptions); if they correctly answer the test questions you can reasonably expect other answers to have a similar level of reliability. It is important to remember everyone's perceptions of an event will be different and no-one's memory is perfect.
    - To graduate subjective answers. What do you mean by an 'expensive meal' and does the other person have similar perceptions. Depending on circumstances 'expensive' may be

www.stakeholdermapping.com

$50, $100, $200 or even $500. Knowing someone believes something is 'very important' is of no value unless you understand what they mean by 'very important' compared to merely 'important' and/or 'extremely important'.

There are many other questions and everyone with responsibility for managing people needs to know how to ask the right questions. Asking the right questions lets your hear the information you really need to understand as long as you are actively listening. You may not like the answers but need the information to move forward! It is impossible to fully resolve a problem if you don't fully understand the issues first.

Here are some questions you might ask yourself as you begin to explore the art and architecture of designing effective questions. They are based on pioneering work with questions being done by the Public Conversations Project, a group that helps create constructive dialogue on divisive public issues.

- Is this question relevant to the real life and real work of the people who will be exploring it?
- Is this a genuine question - a question to which I/we really don't know the answer?
- What "work" do I want this question to do? That is, what kind of conversation, meanings, and feelings do I imagine this question will evoke in those who will be exploring it?
- Is this question likely to invite fresh thinking/feeling? Is it familiar enough to be recognisable and relevant - and different enough to call forward a new response?
- What assumptions or beliefs are embedded in the way this question is constructed?
- Is this question likely to generate hope, imagination, engagement, creative action, and new possibilities or is it likely to increase a focus on past problems and obstacles?
- Does this question leave room for new and different questions to be raised as the initial question is explored?

The Lens Collective:

An Association for Project Management (APM) publication focused on asking the 'right questions' to be sure you understand your project. For more information see: ***Good questions outrank easy answers*** at http://mosaicprojects.wordpress.com/2011/05/21/good-questions-outrank-easy-answers/

To buy a copy of the Collective, see: http://www.apm.org.uk/TheLensCollective

_____

For more on the **Stakeholder** Circle® including White Papers, Published Papers and books, see:
http://www.stakeholdermapping.com/