

HOW TO ACTIVELY LISTEN TO YOUR MENTEE



Active listening is the most valuable skill you can bring to your mentoring relationship.

It can be very tempting to come to meetings with mentees with a set idea of advice you would like to offer them and ready-made “solutions” for their issues and concerns. Actively listening to them, however, will empower them to find their own answers and it will help you build a mutually trusting and respectful relationship with them.

Actively listening to young people shows them what they have to say is valued and over time it will encourage them to voice their opinions and share their ideas and concerns. If they have positive experiences of voicing their opinions and of being heard they will learn to see talking as a constructive way of dealing with issues and difficulties and are more likely to seek help when they need it.

PREPARING TO ACTIVELY LISTEN

The distinction between active listening and the way we typically ‘hear’ the world around us is purposeful focus. To actively listen you are required to intentionally give your whole attention to the person speaking in order to ‘hear’ and ‘understand’ what they are saying. If you have undertaken to actively listen to someone, you are using both your ears and your eyes and ‘listening’ to the words, the emotions and the body-language. Someone who is actively listening should be able to accurately reflect back what they have heard in their own words demonstrating that you have understood the full meaning of what was said. This doesn’t mean you have to agree with what was said, just that you are empathetic to their situation.

Active listening is a learned skill but with practice it will become routine. Learning to be an active listener will be a real asset to your mentoring relationship and – as the foundation of effective communication – it can also be an advantage in all other areas of your life. The following tips will help you hone your active listening skills.

- **Bring a positive mindset**

Mentally prepare for your time together – spend a few minutes before you meet with your mentee concentrating on why it is you want to be a mentor, the purpose of your mentoring relationship and on bringing a positive, engaged attitude.

- **Schedule enough time**

Make sure you allocate sufficient time to be with and listen to your mentee. If you are in a rush for your next commitment you will find it very difficult to give your undivided attention to what is being said.

- **Avoid distractions**

Avoiding distractions may mean thinking carefully about where you meet – if you are meeting in an office, for example, you will need to block out time and make it clear that you are not to be interrupted. Noise and movement can also be a distraction from what is being said so a busy cafe is not an ideal environment for active listening. Other distractions to avoid are mobile phones, computers, music – switch them off.

- **Physically engage**

By sitting at a close but comfortable distance, turning your body to face your mentee and looking at them while they speak, you will help yourself focus on what is being said and how it is being said. Open body language will also be encouraging to the young person talking, showing you are open to hearing what they say. Physically engaging also means not having anything else in your hands, such as a mobile phone, that will take your attention away from the person speaking.

- **Set aside your prejudices**

Be non-judgemental. Focus on understanding the meaning of what is being said and try not to be distracted by your reaction to it or by planning your response. Your mentee is honestly sharing their experience or view. It is your responsibility to hear what they are saying.

- **Do not interrupt**

If you are interrupting your mentee, you are not listening. Interrupting can also send the message that your opinion is somehow more valid than theirs and it may discourage them from continuing or opening up to you in the future. Concentrate on understanding what they are saying this is their time; you can always express your thoughts, if appropriate or relevant, when they have completely finished speaking.

- **Acknowledge, recap and respond**

When your mentee has finished speaking thank them for honestly sharing their experience/feelings/views with you. Check you have understood what they said by mirroring back what you have heard in your own words. Ask them open-ended questions if you are unclear about anything and then share your thoughts about what they have said remembering you are not there to judge them, fix them or tell them what they should do.

Although we are constantly listening to people in our day-to-day life many of us have learned bad habits, such as multi-tasking or planning our response before the other person has finished talking. These sorts of poor listening habits can mean what we hear and what is actually said are very different. Applying active listening to mentoring relationships will help you avoid misunderstandings and build a sense of trust – it will also mean your mentee is far more likely to listen to your thoughts and ideas.

FINDING FOCUS

TIP

If you are very tired or you are finding it difficult to switch off from other unrelated thoughts and pay attention to your mentee, try mentally repeating their words as they say them.

This will stop your mind wandering and allow you to hear what is being said. This is also a useful exercise if you feel yourself beginning to plan your response or wanting to interrupt.

SHOW THAT YOU ARE LISTENING

When you are learning to actively listen it can be hard to know how to respond to what you are hearing without jumping in to share your views. There are non-verbal cues you can use to ensure the conversation is still interactive and to show that you are listening:

- Nod occasionally
- Smile and use other facial expressions to respond to what is being said
- Think about your posture and try to make sure it is open and inviting
- Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments such “yes” and “uh huh”.

TIME TO TALK

Active listening doesn't mean you don't get to share your ideas – it just means you understand what has been said before you start talking. Our own personal judgements, beliefs and assumptions can distort what we hear, so before you respond take one more opportunity to repeat back what has been said and ask questions to fill in any gaps.

- Reflect what has been said in your own words, prefacing it with comments like: “what I'm hearing is...” and “it sounds like you are saying...”
- Ask questions to clarify information: “what do you mean when you say...” or “is this what you mean?”

When you are confident you understand what has been said and you are ready to respond remember not to diminish the young person by disagreeing with what they have said or dismissing how they are feeling.

- Take your time to order your thoughts. When you have been actively listening you have not pre-prepared what you want to say. This will also give your mentee and you a chance to calm down if you are dealing with an emotive subject
- Be frank, open and honest in your response but remember to explain these are your thoughts based on your experiences in life
- Assert your opinions respectfully – don't attack the young person or what they have said
- Treat the young person with the courtesy and respect you would like to be treated with.

READING THE SILENCE

TIP

Sometimes young people can communicate a lot even when they are not talking. Be aware of your mentee's body language and take note of the subjects that bring out a lot of emotion or cause them to clam up.

You shouldn't force your mentee to talk about anything but you can encourage them to open up by listening patiently and by asking open-ended questions – what sort of things do you like about yourself? What have you got on your mind? What have you got on this week? How would you like me to help you?