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## Building Reflective Listening Skills

Effective communication with workers is important for managers – and can be particularly important when workers are emotionally distressed. Reflective (or active) listening can be an effective communication method that involves the following two elements:

1. *Listening to and understanding* what workers are saying, thinking and feeling.
2. *Reflecting and paraphrasing* the feelings, thoughts and opinions we hear back to the other person in our own words, to make sure we have understood their message correctly.

In order to more accurately understand workers' messages, it helps for managers to not only pay attention to what a worker is saying (*verbal communication*), but also to read non-verbal signals (*non-verbal communication*). Any message usually has two components: the content of the message (words) and the underlying feelings, thoughts and opinions. Workers' non-verbal signals (e.g., tone of voice, eye contact, facial expression, body language) can give important clues about their feelings and opinions.

Reflective listening can be essential for effective communication and strong workplace relationships:

- It can help build rapport and respect.
- It can promote understanding between people.
- It can demonstrate recognition and acknowledgment, which may prompt others to keep talking and share their experiences, problems and feelings more openly.
- It can give reassurance that someone is willing to help and to view things from another perspective.
- It can help avoid conflicts and misunderstandings.
- It can help reduce defensiveness, resentments and false assumptions that occur through misunderstanding.

Informing others that we have understood what they have said (or otherwise indicated) can be useful in any day-to-day event at work (e.g., meetings, customer contacts, performance reviews). But reflecting back to workers can be particularly valuable for dealing with conflicts and helping individuals understand one another.

Here are some tips that can help you better understand workers.



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### Practice Attentive Listening

- **Give your full attention to your communication partner.** Active listening takes concentration. In order to pay attention to a worker carefully, you must minimize distractions. If your mind drifts to something else, or you start daydreaming, or you become distracted by your environment, you not only demonstrate disinterest, but probably also miss important non-verbal signals the other person is sending.
- **Show that you're listening and understanding.** By letting a worker know you are listening and understanding, you may encourage them to keep talking and also give them an opportunity to clarify their thoughts and feelings if you seem to be off track. Make eye contact, smile, nod your head, and make comments such as *yes, ok, aha, ah, um, oh, go on.*

### Seek Total Understanding

- **Note all the clues.** Be mindful of non-verbal communication: non-verbal clues can often give a more accurate picture of what a worker is experiencing than do their words.
- **Listen to the total meanings.** Listen not only to the literal content of the message but also to the feelings, thoughts and opinions underlying this content. For example, if a worker *appears* angry after a performance review, but says *"I understand, and I'll work harder on those things"*, a perceptive manager will note that they may disagree but for some reason do not want to speak up.
- **Empathize with the other person's point of view. Try to view things from the worker's perspective.** Consider their background, history and previous behaviour at work. Remind yourself that the worker has different life experiences and may not see things the way you do. What he or she means by a statement might be very different from what you would mean if you used the same words.

### Reflect Back

- **Paraphrase what the other person has said.** Reflect what you heard back to the other person. Don't parrot back the same words, but rather use your own words to rephrase what they said. This way you demonstrate your understanding.
  - Use phrases such as *"It seems that..."*; *"So you are saying..."*; *"It looks as though..."*; *"It sounds like..."*; *"What I'm hearing is..."*; *"In other words..."*; *"I get the impression that..."*; *"You mean..."*; *"You feel that..."*; *"I'm sensing..."*; *"I wonder if..."*.
  - *Example:* A worker approaches his manager wondering why another worker is leading the new project although she is less experienced and hasn't been with the company as long. The manager could reflect back: *"It seems as though you feel the project leader decision is unfair."*



- **Reflect the other person's feelings and meanings.** Sometimes the literal content of a message is less important than the underlying feelings, thoughts and opinions. When a worker talks to you while experiencing an intense emotional state (e.g., when they're upset, angry, frustrated, anxious), try to respond to their emotional message and mirror their feelings and meanings accurately.
  - o Use phrases such as *"It seems that he really upset you"; "I get the impression that you're pretty frustrated about that"; "I'm sensing that you're quite discouraged"; "I feel that you're unhappy with your situation"*.
  - o *Example:* If a worker says *"I'm finally finished with that stupid project!"*, you could reflect back: *"It sounds like you had a hard time with it"* or *"I get the impression that you're frustrated and don't feel like doing anything like that again."*
- **Summarize the other person's message.** A good way to capture the essence of what a worker has expressed is to summarize the main messages from time to time, or at the close of your conversation. This can be particularly important if you reached an agreement or decision regarding next steps, to help ensure that both parties have the same understanding of the agreement.
- **Ask clarifying questions.** If you don't completely understand the worker's message, ask clarifying questions. For example:
  - o *"What I thought you just said is... Is that what you meant?"*
  - o *"Sorry, I didn't follow that. What are you saying?"*
  - o *"What do you mean when you say...?"*
  - o *"Could you give me an example?"*
  - o *"Can you tell me more about...?"*
  - o *"How was that for you? What are you feeling about that?"*
  - o *"It sounds like you're pretty upset. Did something happen?"*
  - o *"So how will you deal with that?"*
  - o *"What do you think should be done about this situation?"*

You may also want to see the handout on **Verbal vs. Non-Verbal Communication**.