



## Listening for Understanding

Listening for Understanding is a concept developed for Mental Health Works™ to bridge the gap between active listening and crisis response. Active listening is a common approach to being respectful and attentive when someone is talking. It includes keeping your focus on the individual, demonstrating that you are paying attention and responding appropriately. Many individuals who have mastered this skill can be exasperated by the response (or non-response) they get when applying this technique to someone who may be experiencing a mental health issue such as depression or an anxiety-related disorder. Listening for understanding adds a few strategies to help in times of distress where the intention is to understand the perspective of the person in distress.

Those strategies include:

- **Allowing pauses**
- **Managing eye expressions**
- **Postponing evaluation or advice**
- **Seeking clarification**

### Allowing pauses

Many mental health issues or pressures take the form of repetitive thoughts. It is as if there is endless chatter in your head that you are unable to stop or even quiet down. While the person may seem unemotional to the observer, on the inside the person may be overloaded with constant, upsetting and fitful thoughts. In the case of depression, these repetitive thoughts can take the form of negative thoughts about oneself, others and the world in general or it can take the form of thoughts of despair or hopelessness including a focus on thoughts of suicide. In the case of anxiety-related disorders the repetitive thoughts (and often physical feelings) can be of impending doom, fear or worry. In these cases, concentration can be a challenge.

When you call someone who is experiencing something like this, and you ask them what is going on, the pause that you hear and see may not be them refusing to answer you. Rather it could be that they are flooded with a flurry of thoughts and/or questions that could include:

- Do I trust you?
- If I tell you who will you tell?
- Will you think less of me if I tell you?
- Will you want to get rid of me, or deny me a promotion if I tell you what I am dealing with?
- What should I tell you?
- How much should I share?
- Will you think I am making this up?
- Will you think I am being a baby?
- How can I even start?
- What words will I use?
- What if I start to cry?
- And so on...

When you interrupt the pause, you interrupt the thought process and you may shut the person down altogether. Instead, be open to pauses. Relax yourself so that the person feels that you are giving them space to think and not pressuring them to come up with a quick answer.

If, like many supervisors, you are not used to silence, be aware that this can feel uncomfortable for you, but it can also provide the breakthrough you need to understand the employee's perspective. The ultimate goal here is to understand their perspective so that you can focus on your job, which is to help them be successful at work.

### **Managing eye expressions**

Do you know that the majority of body language comes from the area around your eyes? Think about when you know someone has lied. Did you feel the corners of your eyes pull down a little? Now think of someone who is prone to ridiculous exaggeration. Not quite the same movement, but movement nonetheless. Think about someone who is delightful. Your eyes probably involuntarily smiled. Some say the eyes are the windows to the soul, but in this context we are concerned that the eyes are the window to your doubt, judgment and criticism of the distressed individual in front of you. Without meaning to give away any of your private thoughts, you allow your eyes to express these feelings on a regular basis.

Some have asked if they should wear sunglasses or close their eyes when addressing a distressed worker. Fortunately, we have a better option. It is called "Taking a Stance of Open Curiosity". The area around our eyes responds to our own inner chatter – those thoughts about people and ideas that are in our head. When someone says something that we don't believe, it is our thought that we doubt the truth of what they say that triggers the response. By slowing down or stopping the inner chatter, we can also manage the response. The way to do this (without hypnosis or mind-altering drugs) is to fill the mind with one message – "And what else?" This curiosity about what else the individual has to say can help us to maintain an open mind, hence the term "stance of open curiosity".

The reason that this is so important when working with individuals who may be distressed, depressed or anxious is that if they feel you are judging or doubting them, it would be reasonable for them to mistrust you. If they mistrust you, working with them and/or managing them will be much more difficult.

By minimizing your involuntary responses you also give yourself time to hear the whole story before jumping to any conclusions or assumptions.

### **Postponing evaluation or advice**

Many people who are in positions of authority were given their position because someone believed they could think on their feet, analyze situations, make quick decisions, and come up with solutions. All of these are important skills, but all can also backfire when trying to work with distressed workers. The reason for this paradox is that when someone is distressed (including us) he or she may have a difficult time in articulating what they are experiencing and an even greater challenge in stating what they need. The more we try to pressure or rush them to solutions, the more likely we are to make the situation worse. We do this by eroding their trust in us, their ability to handle the stress at work and ultimately their self-confidence. In addition, even if we call in the experts, consult the literature on the subject and agonize over the perfect solution for them...if it fails, whose fault do you think it will be? If we help the individual to come to a solution him or herself, it is much more likely that he or she will be committed to its success.

The skill of listening for understanding is intended to achieve one thing – your understanding of the perspective of the other person. It is not intended to provide the solution – that comes later. So resisting your own solution or evaluation of the problem is not only better in the long run, it is important to avoid having the worker simply agree with your version to make you feel right.

## **Seeking clarification**

Sometimes when we are upset we say things we don't really mean or react in an emotional way that what comes out is not what was intended. Although many of us may fancy ourselves good listeners and consider it a point of pride to have heard EXACTLY what the other person said, we need to resist jumping to correction when someone responds, "That's not what I said." Maybe it was exactly what they said, but what they meant to say is something different. Give them a break. Allow the person to clarify...to help you understand what they really meant. It is only when they agree you heard what they intended you to hear that you have reached your goal of listening for understanding.

Listening for understanding is a starting point from which you can engage workers in developing solutions to the problems as seen from their perspective. Developing solutions to performance problems as seen only from your perspective often results in a revolving door of issues and solutions that never quite resolve the real problem.