

COMMUNICATION AND LISTENING SKILLS

*“The heart of a fool is in his mouth, but the mouth of a
wise man is in his heart.”*

—Ben Franklin

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Introduction

Communication is any means by which an individual relates experiences, ideas, knowledge, and feelings to another. Communication can be expressed through both speech and gestures (Harryman, Kresheck, and Nicolosi, 1996). It is important that mentors know how to effectively communicate with mentees. This section is devoted to information and activities designed to develop active listening and communication skills effective for working with an adolescent population.

When establishing a mentoring relationship, it is important to create a comfortable communication environment. This can be done by using the theory of reciprocity. Following this theory enables mentors to control the flow and direction of a conversation by the rate at which information is revealed. For example, if the mentor reveals something about him- or herself, the mentee would likely respond by revealing the same sort of information. This pattern tends to repeat. If at some point the mentee does not respond in kind, the pattern of the conversation should be redirected to make the mentee feel more comfortable. This type of interaction pattern fosters the development of trust in the mentoring relationship.

Guidelines for Communication

To encourage the development of trust in the mentoring relationship:

- Make communication positive, clear, and specific.
- Recognize that each individual sees things from a different point of view.
- Be open and honest about your feelings and accept others' feelings.
- Ask questions for clarification on an issue.
- Learn to listen. Allow time for the student to talk without interruptions.

These suggestions should be used as guidelines. There may be situations that require mentors to act differently.

Active Listening Skills

Active listening is an essential mentoring skill. One of the most common mistakes mentors can make is confusing “hearing” and “listening.” Hearing is merely noting that someone is speaking. Listening, however, is making sense of what is heard and requires the individual to constantly pay attention, interpret, and remember what is heard. Hearing is passive; listening is active. The passive listener is much like a tape recorder. If the speaker is providing a clear message, the listener will probably get most of what is said. For mentors, this is not enough. They must be active listeners. *Active listening requires the listener to hear the words and identify the feelings associated with the words.* Mentors should be able to understand the speaker from his or her point of view. There are four essential requirements for active listening:

- Intensity
- Empathy
- Acceptance
- Willingness to take responsibility for completeness

An active listener concentrates on what the speaker is saying. The human brain is capable of handling a speaking rate six times that of the average speaker. Thus, the listener must focus on the speaker. Tuning out distractions will increase listening ability (Robbins, 1991).

Suggestions for Improving Active Listening Skills

- 1. Make Eye Contact:** Lack of eye contact may be interpreted as disinterest or disapproval. Making eye contact with the speaker focuses attention, reduces the chance of distraction, and is encouraging to the speaker.
- 2. Exhibit Affirmative Nods and Appropriate Facial Expressions:** The effective listener shows signs of being interested in what is said through nonverbal signs. Together with good eye contact, non-verbal expressions convey active listening.
- 3. Avoid Distracting Actions or Gestures:** Do not look at other people, play with pens or pencils, shuffle papers, or the like. These activities make the speaker feel like the listener is not interested in what is being said.
- 4. Ask Questions:** Questioning helps ensure clarification of what the speaker is saying, facilitates understanding, and lets the speaker know that the listener is engaged.
- 5. Paraphrase:** Paraphrasing means restating what the individual has said in different words. This technique allows the listener to verify that the message was received correctly.
- 6. Avoid Interrupting the Speaker:** Allow the speaker to complete his or her thought before responding, and do not anticipate what he/she will say.
- 7. Do Not Talk Too Much:** Talking is easier than listening intently to someone else. An active listener recognizes that it is impossible to talk and listen acutely at the same time.

Positive Feedback

Mentors should focus on providing positive feedback. Negative feedback inhibits the mentee from talking freely and usually meets more resistance. Positive feedback, however, is typically met with acceptance. Suggestions for providing positive feedback:

- **Focus on Specific Behaviors:** Avoid vague, general statements like “You did a good job” or “That was a really bad decision.” Instead, provide information that tells *why* you feel what you expressed. For instance, “You played a great game today. I liked the way you played defense.”
- **Keep Feedback Goal Oriented:** Make sure statements are relevant to what the speaker is saying.
- **Keep Feedback Well Timed:** Providing immediate feedback is much more effective than comments given at a later time.
- **Ensure Understanding:** Just as it is important for listeners to understand the speaker, it is also important for listeners to be understood by the speaker. Asking the mentee to rephrase what has been said helps to ensure confirmation (Robbins, 1991).

Effective communication requires practice. By following the advice in this unit and finding opportunities to practice the skills with other mentors or with friends and family (e.g., creating activities that use specific skills), mentors, over time, should feel more comfortable with effective communication styles.

Additionally, mentors can contact the mentee's parents. It is a good idea for a mentor to include the mentee in the letter writing so that the mentee knows exactly what is happening. Here are guidelines for writing a letter to parents.

- Introduce yourself as a mentor.
- Tell the parents about yourself—field of study, interests, where you are from, and how you became involved in the program.
- Express your desire to form a positive relationship with their child and your willingness to work in partnership on any particular issues they feel could be beneficial to their child. Express your sincere interest in the growth and well-being of their child.
- Include the day and time of the week that you and your mentee will be meeting. (This helps them remember to ask how it went, not to pick them up from school on that day, etc.)
- Tell parents how much you are looking forward to getting to know their child and express excitement about growing closer to them in the coming year!
- You may include an address for them to write back, if you choose. Use a neutral address such as a P.O. Box, school, or corporate address. Be aware that this may put you in an awkward situation.

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5 Guidelines of Communication

1. Make your communication positive, clear, and specific.
2. Recognize that each individual sees things from a different point of view.
3. Be open and honest about your feelings and accept others' feelings.
4. Ask questions for clarification on an issue.
5. Learn to listen actively and allow time for the mentee to talk without interruption.

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Essentials of Active Listening

1. Intensity
2. Empathy
3. Acceptance
4. Recognizing responsibility for completeness

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Ways to Improve Active Listening Skills

1. Make Eye Contact
2. Use Affirmative Nods and Appropriate Facial Expressions
3. Avoid Distracting Actions or Gestures
4. Ask Questions
5. Paraphrase
6. Avoid Interrupting the Speaker
7. Do Not Talk Too Much

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Providing Positive Feedback

1. Focus on Specific Behaviors
2. Keep Feedback Goal Oriented
3. Keep Feedback Well Timed
4. Ensure Understanding

Bibliography

Harryman, E., Kresheck, J., & Nicolosi, L. (1996). *Terminology of Communication Disorders*. Williams & Wilkins, Media, Pennsylvania.

Robbins, S. (1991). *Management*. Prentice Hall, Inc., Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey.