

## ACTIVE LISTENING

Perhaps the greatest secret to empathy is active listening. The purpose of active listening is to encourage talkers to put their total focus and attention on themselves and how they feel.

Most of us are not very good listeners. We tend to hate leaving silences in a conversation and we tend to see all conversations as dialogues, discussions and arguments.

If you discipline yourself and decide that you will just listen (*and, of course, clearly indicate that your following the points that are being made*) you will find that most people will open up and offer pieces of information they would never have revealed in a normal discussion.

If you restrict your expressions to simple supportive statements such as *'Yes'* and *'I see'* or *'Oh yes, I can see how you feel'* or *'I lost you, can you say that again please?'* you will begin to see how you can encourage a person to open up.

Carl Rogers, a well-known psychologist, who developed the 'non-directive' approach to finding out his patient's problems, used the technique of repeating the person's last statement. He found that this technique encouraged the person to go more and more deeply into their problem.

Thus, if the patient, which Rogers used to call 'clients', said *'I'm really having trouble with my parents at the moment'* Rogers would reply *'You're having trouble with your parents, are you?'* Almost invariably the patient would then go on to expand on the original idea. The technique of repeating the idea serves two functions:

- a) It passes no judgement on the original idea, and
- b) It shows that you are listening and have understood.

The technique has to be used sensibly. You can imagine the situation where the person says *'I've just burnt down the factory and caused about \$2 million worth of damage'* The reply *'You've burnt down the factory and caused multi-million dollars' worth of damage'* doesn't seem entirely appropriate, particularly if you happen to own the business.

It is an interesting aspect of our desire to protect our inner feelings that in most conversations we nearly always stop each other from learning too much about what we are thinking.

A person trying to make themselves understood will often be denied a sense of real communication by our desire, albeit well intentioned; to hand out advice, describe our reactions, and offer encouragement and reassurance. We model our listening style on that of our parents – and everyone knows that most parents are terrible listeners!

## **BASIC RULES TO IMPROVE ACTIVE LISTENING**

1. Give the speaker an accurate sense that you have understood them.
2. Never introduce ideas that the other person didn't express. The aim is not to push your own interpretation, not to mix your own ideas.
3. To demonstrate that you have understood exactly, you should state the basic ideas in your own words, but using their words for the touchy main things
4. Don't remain silent. Senders (speakers) need to hear you speak. They need to hear that you have understood every aspect of their argument. Don't try to alter their perception of the problem. Try to show them that you understand exactly the way they mean it and feel it.
5. If the person is saying something complex make sure that you respond to it point by point, checking all the time, listening, correcting your own understanding, and adding to what was being said

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW YOUR ACTIVE LISTENING HAS BEEN SUCCESSFUL?**

1. When a person is happy to discuss a problem in greater detail and is prepared to modify your understanding of what they are saying by making statements *like 'No, it's not like that, it's more like...uh...'* then it is reasonable to assume that the person is responding positively to your active listening.
2. The person may sit silently. You should be able to tell from their body language (*particularly the look on their face*) that they are satisfied that you have understood everything that has been said up to that point.

## **HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU HAVE NOT BEEN SUCCESSFUL? AND WHAT DO YOU DO ABOUT IT?**

1. If the person starts to repeat themselves there's a fair chance that they feel you haven't understood what they have said. If this happens you need to listen very closely to what the person is saying and how you are feeding that information back to them. If nothing feels different then you should repeat what they've said and add, *'But that's not all, is it?'*
2. The person's body language becomes very negative
3. The person moves the subject matter onto safer ground by talking about something that is very general or very impersonal. This can mean that they've abandoned the idea of trying to get more personal ideas across correctly. You can interrupt and say something like *'I still want to understand what you're feeling. I don't feel as though I've got it clearly.'* Then say only the part that you are sure of, and ask the person to move on from there.