

Active listening

Active listening is an effective skill in conflict management and or resolution. This can be when a party involved in a conflict works toward managing a conflict by approaching the one he/she has conflict with, politely venting his/her problems.

For instance, Jacob and Andy are group members, who have been grouped together for all projects in Cinematography, throughout the semester at school. They are working on a video shoot using an *after-dark* concept. They have a conflict. Andy has been skipping out on group meetings and his participation in group presentations is very low. The reason is that Andy's mother does not let her stay out after 7pm and all meetings hold at 8pm. Jacob feels that Andy is deliberately leaving the rest of the group to do all the work and he feels that this is not fair. Jacob does not know why Andy does this.

After school, Jacob buys Andy late lunch and decides to speak to her politely. He vents his issue, making Andy know that he and the rest of the group members are unhappy with her attitude towards group activities. Hearing this, Andy explains to Jacob the reason for her absence at meetings, concluding that she did not want to say this, so as not to feel excluded, or like she is a "mommy's-girl".

While Andy explains her situation to Jacob, he pays complete attention to what she is saying, makes gestures that prove he is following and takes note of important points she says. Jacob repeats a summarised version of what Andy says to her to make sure that he has understood her correctly. After this is confirmed, they both look for a suitable alternative to the problem, they change the project from being an *after-dark concept* to a *day-time concept* which will favour Andy.

The above scenario is an example of active listening.

Active listening may also involve a neutral third party in a monologue with parties to a conflict one after the other, where the neutral third party acts as the mediator. He/she pays complete attention to each side of the story, repeating important noted points to ensure that key matters are taken care of, and also to ensure that he/she has understood both sides of the story. The purpose of key points being repeated by the mediator is to ensure that assumptions or wrong inferences are made.

When resolving a conflict, it is important for communication to be effective.

"Communication is Key to successful relationships. Active listening is key to successful communication"

Communication helps interests of parties to a conflict to be understood and possibly acknowledged. By revealing interests, awareness is made of what each person really wants. It reveals perceptions, giving an avenue for wrong perceptions to be corrected, and is an avenue for emotions and hidden

feelings to be openly expressed. When interests are made known, the conflict becomes a step closer to being resolved.

For communication to be effective, the person that is spoken to must be able to completely understand what the speaker is saying.

In this write-up, I will be discussing two forms of communication. They are the verbal and non-verbal communication.

Verbal Communication

Verbal communication is the ability to give out opinions and express oneself by using words from an understood vocabulary. It is expressing oneself in a language that the interested party understands. Simply put, it is expression through words. For example, talking. Talking is the most popular form of verbal communication. It helps release clogged up emotions. It is being expressive through the words of your mouth. There is always a feeling of being lighter after you have talked to an active listener.

Non-verbal Communication

Non-verbal communication is passing a message without the use of verbal expressions or words. It can be through facial expressions, gestures, eye and lip movements and sighs. This is communicating interests through other means besides spoken words. Some feelings cannot be verbally expressed by everyone, at least not every time. This brings about the need to be expressive through other forms both consciously and unconsciously. Avoiding eye contact as a non-verbal form of communication could mean that a person is nervous, lying or is scared.

Communication helps reduce anxiety. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary defines anxiety over something as the state of feeling nervous or worried that something bad is going to happen.

Communication helps to reduce anxiety in the sense that; perceptions and opinions are aired so as to create an atmosphere free of hidden truths. This will bring trust. Often times when a third party is involved and allows the issue to be communicated from both angles, he/she builds trust. Trust enough to solve the issue. Whatever intentions that parties have will be made known.

Silence gives way for assumption. When thoughts are not being aired, it lays a foundation for misinterpretation, wrong assumption and distrust at times.

Active Listening is a very important tool in conflict management. It helps to understand the root cause of a conflict. It builds trust enough to allow conflict resolution and or reconciliation.

Key contents of Active Listening

There are a number of key contents of Active listener. These are the things that are done during active listening that qualifies it to be called active listening. These are some things done, that differentiate active listening from other forms of listening.

Paying complete attention to what is said

As an active listener, one must ensure that careful attention is paid to whoever is speaking in order to grasp what is being said well. Whatever is being told to the active listener should be listened to. In order to pay complete attention to what is being said per time, the active listener should avoid distractions, possibly stop whatever she/he is doing at that time. This shows good interest and the speaker becomes comfortable talking to the speaker. It motivates the speaker to go on; and this also helps in relieving tension.

Taking notes

An Active listener takes notes of important points made by the speaker in order to get understanding of what is being said. An active listener should take note of even minute details during the period of his/her listening. It helps open one's mind to new possibilities of the cause of the conflict. For example; There is an outbreak of a fight between two people 'because' of a broken chair, it takes an Active Listener to determine if the fight was really caused by the broken chair, or several other accumulated reasons. When a person involved in a conflict with someone has the opportunity to talk to someone about it, the active listener is able to point out core issues that lay covered by the conflict at hand.

Demonstrating concern

This is by asking questions to inquire about things that show concern for both the speaker and what is spoken. One can demonstrate concern by putting on an apologetic demeanour, inquiring about the personal wellbeing of the person and by asking questions.

One must also be patient when the speaker is talking. One must try to seem as patient as possible so that the speaker wants to keep talking. An active listener must make the speaker feel as comfortable as possible.

Brief Verbal Affirmations

Saying something in agreement with what the speaker says or just a simple nod, shows that the Active Listener is interested in what the speaker is saying. This is called a verbal affirmation. It is also when the active listener gives remarks to confirm that she/he is following. It allows the speaker to carry on with what she/he is saying. It builds trust and establishes rapport.

The listener could also share brief life experiences to show that the listener can relate with such issues.

Verbal affirmations should be as brief as possible, like a nod so as not to serve as a distraction or a break in communication then.

Paraphrasing

It is dangerous to assume that a person means this or that during conflict resolution. It is more beneficial to infer. Inferences should majorly be obtained from words the speaker has spoken. When the speaker is done talking, it is the responsibility of the Active Listener to paraphrase what she/he has heard, in order to be sure that this and that is what the speaker really means. The active listener

should repeat the words to the speaker for clarity. It also helps the speaker to hear her/his own words from another person's mouth. This helps the speaker also to rethink decisions.

Paraphrasing helps the Active listener give an accurate and summarised version or report to the speaker, of what she/he has said.

Finding a solution

Finally, the speaker and the Active listener, after talking things out will settle on a solution that will benefit both parties to the conflict. Coming up with a solution to the problem proves that there is co-operation.

Active listening allows not just the conflict in itself to be resolved, but also the root cause and issues surrounding it. Active listening like many others is a skill which can be developed overtime.ⁱ

ⁱ www.thebalancecareers.com <http://courses.lumenlearning.com> www.mindtools.com
<http://toolsyouneed.com> and my mom.