

Active Listening

Active listening is a key skill for trainers and facilitators. But more than that, it's a state of mind that we can work towards. When we're in the right state of mind, active listening enables us to:

- Hear underlying problems before they escalate and cause disruption
- Stay in tune with our group's needs and expectations
- Ensure everyone feels a valued and respected part of the meeting or training process.

Active listening for consensus:

In meetings we're often listening to find ways forward through a diverse range of views and opinions.

It can help to:

- Reflect back and summarise at regular intervals to help people deepen their understanding, and show any progress
- Restate the common ground first, however slight it may be, to remind people that we're trying to move towards agreement
- Challenge assumptions of disagreement – often we focus on the small details over which we disagree (because those are articulated most loudly), but if we actively listen we can hear that sometimes we agree on a whole lot more
- Identify the underlying issues where there is disagreement, and point us towards the conversations that we need to have to explore our differences most effectively.



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“So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.”

– Jiddu Krishnamurti

Active listening	Non-active listening
repeat conversationally back to them, in their words, your understanding of their meaning	give the other person your version of what you heard
don't talk about yourself	give your own opinions and advice. Talk about your experience
don't introduce your own reactions or well intentioned comments	if you're helping with a problem, try hard, make sure you know what to say next
let the speaker take the lead	introduce new topics to get off the subject if it's uncomfortable
ask for clarification	don't let them know, you don't know what you're talking about
let them correct your feedback	don't let them correct you
let them come to their own answer. Don't advise	give them your answers and advice
acknowledge their feelings. Don't diagnose, reassure, encourage or criticise them	reassure them; <i>'it's not that bad'</i> or talk them out of it
reflect back to them, not only so they know you understand, but so that they can hear and understand themselves	make sure you fix, change or improve what they've said, especially if you know you're right
support their feelings. <i>'You feel hopeless about it now'</i>	agree with generalisations. <i>'Yes, it is hopeless.'</i>
allow silences. Breathe	fill silences
reflect back tentatively - <i>'so what I think I heard you say was...'</i> to allow room for you to be wrong	state your reflection as fact: <i>'so you believe that...'</i>

Active listening and 'framing' overleaf >

Active listening and 'framing'

Active listening is commonly focused on listening to one person – to clarify what an individual speaker is saying in a meeting or workshop, for example. But it's equally useful in listening to what's happening in an entire group and reporting on it to move the group on. This is sometimes called *weather reporting* or *framing*.

Framing is using active listening to reflect on what is happening in the group and then to say what you perceive.

Weather reporting is framing the emotional state or mood of the group.

Framing can help a group move past moments of conflict, uncertainty and low energy. It works because:

- The group is reassured that somebody knows what is going on
- It presents the group with an opportunity to reflect, and decide how to respond to whatever is going on.

As with any form of active listening it needs to be:

- Used with empathy and without judgement
- Offered tentatively “*am I right in thinking that...*”, “*it seems as if...*”

“Everything has been said before, but since nobody listens we have to keep going back and beginning all over again.”
– Andre Gide

Uses of Framing

Active listening and framing can be used to:

- Highlight how much **agreement** there is in a group discussion:

“It looks like we are all in agreement” or... “There is a strong disagreement that doesn't look like it's going to be resolved”

- Report on the **emotional state** of the group:

“We're all a little tired and could do with a break... is that right?”... “It feels like things are getting a bit heated...”

- Summarise what people **think**:

“It seems to me that some people think X and others think Y”

- Highlight what the group has **achieved**:

“We've shared lots of interesting ideas. It feels like we're almost at the point at which we can move on to the next stage...”

- Raise issues around **time**:

“This exercise is taking longer than we planned for, do you want to stop or continue?”

Combining the elements

Individual reports can be rolled together: “*it seems like we're a little tired, and this exercise is taking us longer than we were expecting. But we're almost there. Shall we take a break and then come back for the final push?*”

Top Tips

- Use your own experiences as a way of checking out the group's experience: “*I know I'm tired, how do you feel?*”. This gives people an opportunity to admit thoughts and feelings.
- Frame only when the group seems to need it – for example if they are not acknowledging a problem. Groups need more framing when they are scared, in conflict, or when they are stuck.
- Groups need help to recognise achievements, resolutions and positive moments – not just problems. Without this help a group gets burned out, or repeats a cycle of conflict without realising that they've solved it!

Rhizome is a co-operative of experienced facilitators, trainers and mediators. We work with co-ops, and campaigning and community groups across the UK, and with those national organisations that support activism and participation in all its forms.

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