



USING ACTIVE LISTENING

Improve your communication skills with the most powerful tool available.

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One of your staff nurses pulls you aside to discuss a problem she's having with a patient's family. She talks; you listen. Who's active? Who's passive? The answer may seem clear-cut: The staff nurse is active and you're passive. But in reality you're both active.

Listening well requires an active mind and increased energy. In fact, listening is probably the most important factor in effective communication. In your next conversation, use these four tips to improve your listening skills:

1. *Ask open-ended questions.* Questions that command yes, no, or one-word answers produce responses that are less revealing to the listener. On the other hand, questions such as "What other factors are involved?" and "What else might influence the way we handle this problem?" encourage the talker to give details and force you to pick up the conversation where she left off.

2. *Paraphrase.* Paraphrasing verifies the accuracy of your listening and makes sure the other person's perspective is clear to you. If you can paraphrase accurately, you've been concentrating. When you push yourself to paraphrase occasionally, you become more actively involved with the talker. This opportunity typically occurs when you're listening to an employee's or a physician's complaints. Before leaving a conversation, say, "Let me make sure I understand you correctly. What I've been hearing is that..."

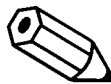
3. *Listen first; advise second.* When someone comes to you with a problem, your first impulse may be to offer advice or a solution. But some-

times all that person wants is someone to listen and understand. By listening first, you'll understand her problem better, and if she doesn't solve her own problem by talking about it, you'll be better prepared to offer advice. Ask her, "How can I help?" Many times, people will reply that they just want to talk.

4. *Commit completely.* Don't let anything distract you while you're listening. If you're in an office, forward your phone to voice mail. If you're tempted to watch other people in the hallway, turn your back to the action. These actions signal to the talker that active listening is your top priority.

WHAT'S YOUR CQ?

Take this quiz to measure your communication quotient.



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If your ideas sometimes fall upon deaf ears or your proposals are frequently met with indifference, you may not be communicating well. This quiz will measure your CQ—communication quotient. Answer true or false, then check the tips for improving your score. ↓

How did you do?

For questions 1 to 8, give yourself 5 points for every "true" answer. For questions 9 to 13, give yourself 5 points for every "false" answer. Out of a total of 65 possible points, the lower you scored, the better you are at communicating with others.

How can you improve?

Questions 1 to 5 address barriers to communication. If you scored poorly in this section, review the questions that caused your high score. Consider how your behaviors—however well intentioned—could be hampering your interactions with others.

Questions 6 to 8 address defensiveness. If you didn't fare well on these questions, you're not alone. But remember, the onus is on you to make yourself clear. Most important, take some time out if you can't erase that defensive feeling. Schedule a time to reconvene, and in the meantime, cool down.

Nonverbal cues can be tricky, so if you scored poorly on questions 9 to 13, you may want to read up on interpreting body language. Consider also how a tendency to make assumptions about others' behaviors can create communication problems.

- 1. When a colleague or staff member speaks with me, I nod my head and smile because I know what she's going to say.
- 2. It's easier to speak with people I like or people who are similar to me.
- 3. People frequently ask me, "What do you mean?"
- 4. I often think of what I'll say next when someone is talking with me.
- 5. On a hectic day, I can't always give my full attention to someone.
- 6. I've been told many times, "Don't get defensive."
- 7. No one ever understands my point of view.
- 8. I sometimes feel challenged or threatened by others when they ask me about my work.
- 9. If I'm unsure of how to react to a situation, I'll take the lead from the other person.
- 10. I always evaluate my perceptions before acting on them.
- 11. If I run into staff members who seem upset, I'll ask what's wrong.
- 12. Before interpreting what a facial expression might mean, I always check my perceptions verbally.
- 13. I make a conscious effort to get feedback on my own nonverbal cues.

Remember, good communication is vital in any relationship. The art of positive communication requires motivation *and* skill. Making the effort to increase your CQ is up to you.

NIXING FIX-IT SYNDROME

Tired of being all things to all people? Here are ways to change that unhealthy pattern.



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A friend of my chuckled recently at how she found herself in a similar situation both at home and work. "I feel as if I should change my name to *Ms. Fix-It*," she said. "Friends at work seem to expect me to fix their problems—and at home, there's a line at the door when I arrive. I hardly have time to catch my breath."

Sound familiar? Running a department may be your job, but being all things to all people isn't. The fix-it role that many of us acquire and have come to recognize as normal can lead to burnout at work, marital problems, and a general cynicism that pervades all our relationships.

Signs of fix-it syndrome

Do you:

- *always make yourself available?* Are you constantly checking your answering machine, or carrying a beeper or cellular phone, as if you were on call 24 hours a day?
- *have high control needs?* Do you find yourself thinking or speaking for others without being asked? Many of us have difficulty delegating or letting others make decisions. Getting caught in the "If I want it done right, I need to do it myself" pattern is easy.
- *try to be a people pleaser?* Do you tend to avoid conflict and try to keep everyone happy? Many of us swallow how we really feel and make excuses for others—all to keep the peace.

Over time, these behaviors set up a pattern in which you're always rescu-

ing, feeling frustrated, or finding yourself in a victim mentality. How can you break this pattern? For some, it takes a real wake-up call—a serious illness, the loss of a relationship, or some other upheaval. A better solution is to get to the root of the problem before that breaking point.

Finding a cure

You can break this troubling pattern before things escalate into a crisis if you focus on *ownership*. Quite simply, ownership starts with asking the question *What part of all this is mine to own—how am I helping this happen?*

If you reflect on that question, you'll quickly see ways in which you've contributed to the situation. Perhaps you've expected people to read your mind and been frustrated when they've failed to meet your needs. Or maybe you've talked with everyone but the person you need to talk with—setting up a communication triangle rather than a straightforward discussion. Whatever the motive, you need to recognize that you're contributing to the drama.

If you remove yourself from the drama, the situation changes. Rather than fixing everyone else, the key is recognizing your own contribution to the situation and choosing to behave or respond differently. Doing the following can help:

1. *Change how you communicate.* Ask for what you need. Remember these four letters: D-E-S-C. In a conflict, Describe the behavior (rather than attack the person), Explain the impact, and State what you'd rather have. For example, when someone interrupts you, say, "When you interrupt me, I feel discounted. I'd rather have a chance to finish my thoughts before you continue." If the behavior continues, then follow up with Consequences. Consequences could include reinforcing your requests with another one-on-one meeting or, if the issue is groupwide, taking the concern to a peer group for resolution. Also, ask the person you're in conflict with what she thinks the next step should be in

resolving the issue. Following up on an unresolved problem is half the battle.

2. *Relinquish the fix-it role.* Let go of your need to be in charge and encourage your staff or family own what is theirs. A good place to start is by delegating, agreeing on outcomes and next steps, then trusting that the job will get done—even though it might not be done the way you would have done it. You could also develop ground rules or team agreements so that unhealthy behavior isn't perpetuated.

3. *Manage your stress.* Don't get emotionally depleted and exhausted. Make self-care a "have to" rather than a "nice to." Take at least 30 minutes of quiet time each day: walk, meditate, write in a journal—or just be still. As a Buddhist saying reminds us, "Just as a jar of muddy water settles and becomes clear when it is still...so do we."

Schedule a regular break in your routine every 6 to 8 weeks with a long weekend or an activity to replenish and refill. Spend time with people who nourish you, make you laugh, and really listen. Getting more humor in your life helps a great deal. Developing hobbies and outside interests can help you regain a sense of balance.

The road to recovery

Remember to be specific about the behaviors you wish to change (one or two at a time) and to stay with the change until it becomes integrated into your normal routine (usually after 3 weeks of practice). You might find it helpful to share your resolve with a peer at work and celebrate your successes with her.

The key to curing fix-it syndrome is making a commitment to real change and sustaining that change over time. What does it take to make that commitment? For me, it was a bumper sticker that I saw years ago: "You get what you tolerate." ▲

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