

# Essential Skills for Engaging Conflict:

## Six Conversations in Support of Effective Collaboration

### **Module 3: Listening for Understanding**

A Professional Development Series offered by:  
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## **Module 3: Listening for Understanding**

When experiencing conflict, the thing nearly all people most want and need is to be heard and understood. How often we hear, “They are just not listening to me,” when taking requests for mediation. Have you ever experienced people with whom you are in conflict repeating themselves? This is often an indication that they do not believe they have been heard.

# Module 3:

## Listening for Understanding

In the book, *Difficult Conversations: How to Discuss What Matters Most*, the authors introduce the notion of a “conversational stance” when engaging in conflict. When taking what they refer to as a “telling stance”, we frame the conversation in the following context:

- You see the situation differently than I do.
- I know that I am right.
- We cannot both be right. Therefore . . .
- You must be wrong.

Once we have adopted this structure, the goal of the conversation is to “tell” everyone else where they are “wrong,” and to “tell” everyone why we are “right.”

The alternative to a “telling stance” (in their model) is a “learning stance.” In a learning stance we choose to frame the conversation as follows:

- It is a given that when engaging challenging conversations, we are always operating from different “personal pools of meaning.”
- Given that the issue(s) we are addressing is/are complex, let’s not waste our time arguing whose “personal pool of meaning” is the “right” one.
- Let’s commit to having a conversation that will create a “deeper, shared pool of meaning.”
- It is our belief that out of this deeper, shared pool of understanding will emerge options and possibilities we haven’t even considered.

A key characteristic of a learning stance is curiosity. Listening is essential to supporting curiosity. In this module you and your team will:

- See listening as more than just something to “do,” but as a way of “being” present in a conversation,
- Understand the five critical reasons for listening,
- Learn specific strategies for both attending and responding as a listener, and
- Practice the skills introduced.



## It's About "Doing" AND "Being"

Many have participated in training focused on the skill of active listening. There is significant value in training of this nature, and we will focus more specifically on development of this skill. However, before doing so, it is important to identify two critical dimensions of effective listening. Let me explain what I mean.

Often, when introducing the notion of active listening in a professional development context, a participant will raise their hand and state something like, "Oh yeah I know what that is. I hate it when people do that to me." When asked to explain, they typically describe someone who has learned to "do" active listening while not really understanding what it means to "be" an active listener. In many cases the person has learned a basic formula for responding, which encourages letting the speaker know you are listening with a statement such as: "So you're feeling \_\_\_\_\_ (name the emotion) because \_\_\_\_\_ (state the reason)." While, at a fundamental level, this may be a perfectly appropriate response, it is often perceived as disingenuous when delivered in a formulaic fashion. In other words, the person is perceived as just going through the motions.

A second experience described is someone listening just long enough to hear the flaw in your reasoning, or when they have identified their point of disagreement with what you are sharing. Once this happens, you can almost see the person disengage from the conversation. While their eyes may still be on you, behind those eyes they are busy preparing a rebuttal to what they have heard.

The impact of these same words can shift when they are delivered by someone who is truly engaged in "being" an active listener. In this case, their listening and responding is driven by a deep commitment to understanding and learning. They are not simply going through the motions. They are listening from a place of mutual respect and curiosity. They are listening from a desire to learn. They are listening from a true desire to understand. They have shifted



from a "telling stance" to a "learning stance" as described in the introduction to this module.

In Module 2, we introduced the notion of shifting your orientation to a challenging conversation from:



- Certainty to Curiosity
- Debate to Exploration
- Simplicity to Complexity
- “Either/Or” Thinking to “And” Thinking

It is this shift in orientation that is essential to move from doing active listening to truly being an active listener. This is where time spent in preparation can significantly change our engagement in the conversation.

Fundamentally, it is about bringing our listening into integrity with our commitment to collaboration and mutual purpose. As we shared in Module 2, we are operating “in integrity” when our intentions, actions, and speaking are all in alignment. When asked to describe the value in collaboration, many will quickly state the value found in diversity of opinion. In fact, many groups and teams will identify respect for diversity of opinion as a core shared value. However, my experience is that this is true only until the diversity shows up. Basic civility appears to go out the window with the arrival of diverse opinions about high stakes, complex, and often emotional issues.

Listening respectfully for understanding is essential to collaboration and mutual purpose. This is not about agreement or disagreement. It’s about listening in order to expand our thinking. It is about lis-

tening in such a way that we expand our “shared pool of understanding.” It is about listening in such a way that we leverage our individual thinking into shared thinking.

**Discussion:** As a group, use the following questions to increase your understanding of “being” an effective listener:

- Describe a time when you felt listened to and understood. What did you experience?
- Identify a situation when you have found yourself “doing” active listening. What was the impact on the conversation?
- Describe a situation when you found yourself “being” an active listener? What difference did it make in the conversation?
- What contributed to your ability to make the shift?

## Why Listening is So Important

We have identified, what might be considered, a number of more philosophical reasons for engaging as an effective listener. While these are essential, let's now identify some more pragmatic reasons for developing this skill. In his book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, Stephen Covey identifies the habit of “seek first to understand, then to be understood,” as a characteristic of personal effectiveness. And in his book, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Peter Senge introduces a process from the work of William Argyris called “balancing advocacy and inquiry.” What do these concepts mean in practice?

In a conversation committed to mutual purpose around a shared issue, some fundamental things need to occur:

- I need to understand the perspective, understanding, objectives, needs, and interests around the issue held by the other person(s)  
— Inquiry.
- I need to share my perspective, understanding, objectives, needs, and interests around the issue  
— Advocacy.
- We need to jointly clarify and understand where we share interests, and where we might have interests separate, but not necessarily opposed to each other  
— Advocacy and Inquiry.
- We need to create options that, to the greatest extent possible, will meet both our shared and individual interests  
— Balance.

When pursuing mutual purpose, mutual benefit, and mutual gain, we commit to decisions and solutions that we will both find acceptable. For this to happen, I choose to understand what is important to you, in addition to advocating what is important to me. I choose to be curious. I choose to listen for learning and understanding.

You may have noted that I started the process focusing attention on understanding of the other person. This takes us to “seeking first to understand, then to be understood.” This represents a fundamental choice when engaging in a challenging conversation; do I advocate my perspective first, or seek to understand the perspective of the other person?



In the introduction to this module, I introduced the distinction between a “telling stance” and a “learning stance.” When sharing this distinction, I often hear: “Okay, I get this and see the value. But what if you are dealing with someone who ALWAYS takes a telling stance?” I appreciate this question because it represents the opportunity to “be at cause” versus “at effect” in the conversation. In this case, I choose to model what I want. I take a learning stance. I “seek first to understand.” I listen and I stay in this stance until you know that I have heard and understand what you have shared. Only then are you ready to potentially take a learning stance and hear my perspective. Choosing to listen is fundamentally a way for positively influencing the structure of the conversation. It is an opportunity to be “at integrity” with our commitment to collaboration.

There are also a number of additional reasons cited in the literature regarding the importance of listening. While I have alluded to many of these, let me identify and clarify them specifically.

- Listening to the other person, and sharing your understanding of what has been shared, lets them know if they have been heard. People want to be heard and understood. They will often continue to repeat themselves, and advocate their perspective, until they know they have been heard.
- Listening and responding allows me to clarify if what I understand you to be saying is, in fact, what you intended to communicate.
- As I listen to you and provide feedback as to what I am hearing and understanding, it facilitates your ability to share what is most important to you. For example, upon hearing my feedback you might say, “Yeah, that is what I said, and it is not really what I meant. Let me try it again.”
- Effective listening can defuse emotion. People will often ask, “How do you deal with angry and hostile people?” My typical response is, “listen to them.” In my experience, people have often escalated the anger and hostility because no one

is listening to them. While working with at-risk adolescents, I learned the impact genuine compassionate listening can have in defusing a tense situation.

- Listening encourages us to slow the conversation down. For many who struggle with not having enough time, this may seem counterproductive. My experience is that we spend a lot of time generating solutions to problems that we have not taken sufficient time to fully understand. We then wonder why our plan does not meet our objectives. A favorite quote states: “Sometimes you need to slow down in order to go faster.”

**Discussion:** As a group, use the following questions to increase your understanding of the importance of listening to collaboration:

- In what types of situations do you find it easiest to be an effective listener?
- In what types of situations do you find it most challenging to be an effective listener?
- Describe a situation in which you were involved where participants demonstrated effective listening. What became possible for this group? What was the group able to achieve that might not otherwise have been possible?
- Where, specifically, are you committed to improving effectiveness with this skill? What action will you take to achieve this improvement?

# The Elements of Effective Listening

Effective listening has two dimensions—Attending and Responding. This distinction is found in the early work of social scientist, Robert Carkhuff, when describing listening in the context of a helping relationship.

Attending refers to those things we do in support of our ability to really pay attention when listening to one another. We have already identified a number of shifts in thinking and orientation that support this. For example, the shift from a telling to a learning stance increases our capacity for curiosity and will assist to increase our focused attention. In addition, there are a number of behavioral indicators of attending. Carkhuff identifies five:

- **Eye Contact:** Am I looking at you when you are speaking? While recognizing that there are cultural ramifications for this behavior, it is essential that I be looking at you to some extent as you share.
- **Squared Shoulders:** Have I oriented myself appropriately to you physically, or have I assumed a posture that may have you questioning whether you really have my attention?
- **No Distractions:** Am I attempting to multitask while I listen? Am I thumbing through my papers, grading assignments, or playing with my pen? Current brain research says that we are unable to multitask effectively. If I really need you to hear me and you are attempting to multitask, what does that tell me about your interest in, and respect for, what I have to share?

In a counseling context, Carkhuff identifies two additional behaviors that, while possibly less essential, are worth considering:

- **Feet on the floor:** When I sit leaning back, sometimes with my legs crossed, I may be conveying a more relaxed, possibly less caring level of listening. While there is nothing wrong with being relaxed, is it what is needed to convey my commitment to understanding?
- **Leaning slightly forward:** When I really want to focus my attention, I may actually lean into the conversation and become very focused on what you are saying.





It is worth stating, again, that these are not simply behaviors that we “do” in order to make it look like we are really listening. These behaviors are in service of both the speaker and the listener. In service of the speaker, they convey that what is being shared is important, and that I am putting all my attention into understanding what you need me to understand. In service of the listener, these behaviors position me to be receiving and processing all that is being shared. The ideas that people share are not only conveyed by their choice of words. We must also be attuned to body language, tone of voice, facial expression, and vocal inflections. It has been said that communication consists of words (7%), tone of voice (35%), and body language (58%). If I really want to understand what you are sharing, I must focus both on what you are saying and how you are saying it.

The second dimension of effective listening is Responding. Fundamentally, a person does not

know if they have been heard until you tell them **what** you have heard and **what** you now understand. Saying something like, “Yeah, I hear you,” or even, “I hear what you’re saying,” while well-intentioned, is insufficient for our purposes.

Responding is about creating a feedback loop. When you share an idea with me, it is said that you have “intent.” In other words, you intend to shift my understanding about some issue. You encode this intent in language, verbal and nonverbal, and convey it to me. I decode the message by interpreting the language, both verbal and nonverbal, and reach some understanding of what you are saying. The fundamental question is to what extent the impact of your message on me (my interpretation) matches your intent?

In a review of the literature, you will often find five distinct types of responding identified in support of effective listening. These include:

- **Encouraging:** is not technically responding. It does convey listening by encouraging the speaker to continue sharing, or to say more about what is being communicated. It is a response that says I am tracking you, and I really want to hear more of what you have to say.
- **Restating:** may be considered classic active listening. In this context, you, the listener, restate, in your own words, what you understand. It is not parroting. It is paraphrasing. More importantly, it is processing what has been shared. Then framing it in language that makes sense to you, in order to assess your understanding of the speaker's intent.
- **Reflecting:** focuses on the emotional elements of what is being shared. It has been shared earlier that Crucial Conversations are characterized by differences of opinion, high stakes, and strong emotions. In many difficult conversations, it is not sufficient to respond to what is being shared. It may be equally important to acknowledge the emotional content of the message.

- **Reframing:** is less about responding to what is being shared explicitly, and more about acknowledging what is being shared implicitly. For example, it has been said that “embedded in any complaint is a request.” When listening to someone share their frustration about circumstances, one can **restate** the content of the complaint and/or **reflect** the emotions being conveyed. This can be appropriate. One can also highlight the implied, request, need, or interest that is somewhat “hidden” in the complaint. The person speaking may be so focused on what is not working that they are unaware of what might work, or what they need. **Reframing** holds this up to them for consideration. It has the potential to shift a conversation from negative to positive, from past to future.
- **Summarizing:** takes a lot of information that has been shared, and summarizes the key, salient points in a succinct manner.

As a group, use the following questions and activity to increase your understanding of the importance of Attending and Responding?

- Where are you challenged when attending to another person?
- How do you currently demonstrate appropriate and effective attending?

- What do you do that impacts effective attending?
- What are your strengths when responding?
- Where are you most challenged when responding?

Activity: Practice



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