

# Leadership Guide:

## IMPROVING ACTIVE LISTENING

A lot of leadership comes down to skillfully engaging others. In almost all circumstances, this begins with active listening.

Here are some suggestions to keep in mind that will help improve this necessary leadership skill.

### **1. Be welcoming and open with trust –**

Much of the tone for a conversation is set in the first few seconds. A lot of verbal and non-verbal moves on your part can set the right tone: a smile; a general question about their work; a statement that you are glad the two of you have time to talk, can all contribute to a welcoming, trusting and safe environment for the conversation.

### **2. Focus on them –**

Stop whatever else you are doing and face them. Establish eye contact. Take a breath and orient yourself to them, their body language, their first few words, your sense of their level of comfort with the conversation. Even if they do not return a level of eye contact that you deem “normal” do not pass judgment. Some people are shy or find initial eye contact difficult. Just work through it and do a little more to make them at ease.

### **3. Actively engage what they are saying –**

Run questions through your mind as they are speaking. Wonder to yourself what might be driving their position or how they have come to hold their current understanding of an issue or situation. Recognize what they are saying by nodding or making a short comment of acknowledgement like: “I see.” Neither of these means you are in agreement just that you hear what they are saying and are following it. Don’t let any of this distract you from actually engaging what they are saying. Remain calm, relaxed and open to them as they share what is on their mind. In most situations it is fine to take brief notes to help you remember but keep the distraction short and if you see a negative reaction either stop or ask if taking notes is a distraction. If the emotional level is high, it is usually best to do without the note taking.

### **4. Don't Judge -**

Your job here is to listen and understand. If you rush to judgment you will fail to fully understand and probably send the message to them that you are no longer really listening. It is fine to ask questions, but make sure they are not hiding judgments you have made. Something like: “Why would you do something thoughtless like that?” is rife with judgments. On the other hand: “Can you take me through your thought process...?” leaves the door open for more conversation, understanding, and even actionable leadership later.

### **5. Create a framework of understanding for what they are saying–**

When someone is sharing, they will be telling you a story. You will want to correctly understand the elements of the story, but you will also want to understand what the story means, why they are telling you this story, the value to them of the story and what, if anything, you might be expected to do. This context is being created to help you understand, not judge. You will want to test it to see how it fits with their understanding of the situation.

### **6. Do not rush to solve the problem or interrupt them –**

Your real value is in listening, don't throw this away by interrupting. People speak at different rates of speed, have varying capacities to stay focused and deliver a story with different levels of detail. If they are seeming to meander, it is alright when they pause to ask a question that can bring them back to focus. Something like: "I'm not sure I see what is most important here to you. Can you help me?" It is also important to not try to solve the issue before they have had a chance to be heard. When it is time to respond, start with your explanatory framework and ask them if it fits or not.

### **7. Ask questions when they pause and to develop your understanding –**

When they do pause you might want to comment with something non-committal or judgmental like: "This seems like a tough situation." "You must have been delighted with this opportunity." "I can see how this would be confusing." Then ask your questions to clarify. Make sure the questions don't hide a judgment and that the questions keep them focused on what they are trying to tell you, not a distraction to another topic. Once you have a fair understanding of what is going on you might want to ask them if they would like your first impression. This is where you might try on your framework and see if it fits or not.

### **8. Be empathetic –**

Try to feel the emotions that your partner would likely experience in such a situation. There will be time later to help them reconsider these if needed, but first you will need to understand and appreciate where they are at this moment.