

Difficult Relationships at Work and the One Golden Rule

When things get difficult in work relationships, good one- on- one communication can be really hard. For it to work, good communication needs to be “supportive communication”.

Supportive Communication means that not only is the message being delivered accurately, **but the relationship between the people is supported and enhanced by the inter action, rather than made worse.** The importance of this cannot be underestimated in the workplace, particularly in the context of relationships between colleagues, and between managers and staff.

Remember there's one golden rule:

If there's no relationship there's no responsibility.

If you don't have a relationship with the person, or don't want one, then no-one will take responsibility for fixing the problem: there's nothing in it for them. Supportive communication is one way of rebuilding that relationship, even in difficult or negative circumstances.

Active Listening is one of the critical skills in supportive communication.

Active Listening Skills

Active Listening is an advanced communication skill and a vital part of achieving empathy with another person. It is also an act of generosity and a way to build supportive communication. **It is used when things get difficult, when you really need to understand where the other person is coming from.** It's particularly important to use when there's some problem being experienced, when there's anger or hurt or confusion. Active listening is essential in counseling someone, in working through performance issues and in trying to sort out problems which have an emotional dimension to them.

Active listening is not the whole conversation but a critical part of it. Thus, in working through a performance issue for example, active listening skills are used in those parts of the conversation when things get difficult. In working through a planning or problem solving session, active listening is used when there seems to be some tension or holding back, some emotions which are getting in the way of progressing the work.

Active Listening is different to ordinary every day "passive" listening because it's aim is to "enlarge" the world of the other person, i.e. help the other person articulate their ideas, feelings and needs. Sometimes people don't, or can't say what they really mean: the active listener helps them to fully express their ideas and feelings. In doing this, the active listener learns to better understand the other person and to see the situation from their point of view. So active listening is about them - not you. Nevertheless, when you really hear the other person, and can respond to them from that position, things start to change for the better.

Core Micro Skills in Active Listening

Active listening is made up of a number of core micro skills which can be learnt and practiced.

Attending Skills

These are about giving your total physical attention to the other person and really being there for them. Attending skills involve really “being there” for the other and are demonstrated through eye contact and warm, attentive non verbal communication.

Following Skills

These are about encouraging the other person to elaborate, by making space for their message and staying out of their way so as you can understand how **they** view their situation. Following skills involve you making it easier for the person to continue and explain their perspective and feelings. They include

- Attentive silences – take it slowly and give them space; when there’s a pause, let it be.
- Infrequent questioning – don’t interview them or bombard them with questions, and when you do question, keep the questions open:” tell me more about that...”
- Repetition – repeat their key words to show them you want to hear more

Reflecting Skills

These are about providing a mirror for the speaker. They involve restating the content and or feeling that the person has communicated in a way that demonstrates understanding and acceptance.

Listeners often miss the emotional dimensions of a conversation. There’s a tendency to rivet attention on only the content of what the person is saying.

Reflecting skills thus represent a higher order communication skill in which you reflect back the emotion which you intuitively feel is behind the other person’s message, and is in fact, often unstated. In doing so, you give the other person permission to talk about that feeling, you make space for them.

In reflecting feelings, the skill involved is to

- Recognise the emotion felt by the speaker
- Communicate acknowledgement of the feeling, and
- Indicate your openness to further expression of feeling.

Of’course, Active Listening is not a magic solution, and is only one skill in supportive communication. However engaging in active listening, particularly in difficult moments, gives you better data as to what’s going on for that person and thus gives you more realistic options as to how to respond. The other advantage is that it builds empathy and therefore relationship. Without that, you can’t proceed much further.

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