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Core Skills

- It is important that when we ask questions of people, we ask open questions. This is a method of inviting people to talk and to tell us their perspective.
- It is very important that we reflect what we hear from people. Using reflections is a way of communicating understanding.
- An advanced way of reflecting what we hear is called a summary. In a summary we pull together the major points of a conversation and add structure to our communication of understanding.
- We want to use affirmations. We want to affirm what we see as positive with people. This is a way of communicating encouragement and support.
- We want to share information selectively, and do so in a manner that builds collaboration and emphasizes choices. Specifically, we suggest that we broach sensitive topics carefully, ask for permission to give advice, provide a menu of options, and
- always end on good terms.

Open Questions

Many people are aware of the difference between open questions and closed questions. Just to review the basic difference: open questions cannot be answered with a number, a place, or "yes" or "no". They require the respondent to elaborate. Open questions typically begin with "in what way" or "how does this work for you."

Open questions are very important for building collaborative relationships because they invite discussion. They invite the speaker to express personal ideas, wishes or plans. Asking open questions encourages us to become listeners.

While most of us are aware of the difference between open and closed questions, we do not typically use open questions in most of our daily conversations. Try listening to one of your own typical conversations. See how many closed questions you ask. It is harder to ask open questions than it seems. Another good exercise is to take common closed questions and "open them up," finding ways of requesting similar information that elicit more description and elaboration.



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Reflections

Reflections are a form of speech that we, unfortunately, rarely use in most conversations. Reflections are both subtle and powerful—they express care, show that one is listening, communicate understanding, and demand less of the individual.

Since reflections are not often used nor taught, they can be difficult to master. Thoughtful use of reflective statements takes time and practice. But do try—you will be rewarded for your efforts.

To begin to understand the use of reflections, we first provide a brief analysis of one model of listening, Gordon's "Hypothesis Testing Model." It is shown in the chart below and provides a rationale for the use of reflections to enhance understanding.

Hypothesis Testing Model for Listening

The chart depicts a simple, four-step model of communication between a speaker and a listener.

In Step 1 the speaker thinks about something he or she would like to communicate: "what the speaker means." The speaker chooses some words and in Step 2 says those words. In Step 3 the listener hears those words and then in Step 4 interprets those words, resulting in an idea or belief, in short, "what the listener thinks the speaker means."

All of us know that there is a lot of room for error in communication. If you look at this four-step model you can see that there is the potential for error in almost every step of the model. First of all, we are not always clear just what it is we want to say. And we may choose words that are not terribly accurate. The way we say things can be highly varied in terms of our tone, inflection and enunciation. What the listener hears may be some, all, or very little of what the speaker intended to say. Critically, the way in which the listener interprets the words that he or she heard may be very different than the way the speaker interprets those same words. The result is that what the listener thinks the speaker means may be very different from what the speaker actually means.

When we become good listeners, we have to do what we call closing the loop. This process is depicted by the double arrow between Step 4 and Step 1. The listener checks to make sure that he or she accurately understands just what the speaker has said, and just what the speaker means. When we do exercises with these kinds of models we find that, in fact, there are many different meanings for very simple words.

Of course one can try to close the loop by asking a question such as, "Have I got it right?" But this can disrupt the flow of a conversation. A much more elegant way of closing the loop is by using what we call reflections.



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Reflections are statements that express the meaning of what was just heard. They often start with particular words like “so” or “it sounds like” or “you.” These statements are not and cannot be questions, like who, what, where, how, when or why. Also, the voice tone of the reflection must go down at the end. If one’s voice goes up, the words become a question.

A simple reflection can lead to a whole new level of understanding between two people. The power of reflections is that they show that you are listening, communicate understanding, encourage elaboration and build collaboration. All in one statement!

There are a lot of typical reflections we might use, such as “It sounds like you are feeling ...” or “It sounds like you are not happy with ...” or “It sounds like you are uncomfortable about ...”

As you become more familiar with and comfortable using reflections you can drop the “it sounds like.” You’ll simply say, “you’re feeling” or “you’re not ready.”

Reflections are the bread and butter, the backbone, the core, the heart of **Listen First**. We cannot overemphasize their importance in listening. We encourage everyone to use reflections early and often in almost all conversations!

Reflections are typically the most difficult part of **Listen First** for people to learn, and require the most practice. For people learning **Listen First**, it is important to start practicing reflective skills exercises and using reflections in as many everyday conversations as possible.

Summaries

Another communication strategy is a summary. Summaries can be defined as a series of reflections. Yet summaries provide an opportunity to do more—by selecting and emphasizing what one says within the summary, the conversation can be structured.

Summaries often begin with a stem like “Let me see if I understand...” or “Let me see where we’re at...” or “So, in general...” What follows is, essentially, a listing of reflections of ideas expressed in the last minute or two of conversation.

Summaries typically end with an open question: “What else?” or “How might this affect your decisions?” Or you ask, “What is the most important part of this for you?” or “Where would you like to go with this?”

Summaries communicate a great deal of understanding. As noted briefly just above, they also provide an easy strategy for directing conversations. This can happen in two ways. First, the listener can be selective about which reflections to include, and what order to use. If the speaker is ambivalent, reflect both sides of the issue. The last part of the summary is the mostly likely aspect to be taken up next in the conversation, so end with what you feel is most important.

Summaries can be used to direct conversations most simply by ending the summary with a question that asks the person to explore a specific aspect of the issue.



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Affirmations

Affirmations can be defined as finding people doing something right. Unfortunately, this feature of communication is also underutilized in everyday conversations. Affirming statements make people feel good, build collaboration, and encourage others.

Affirmations are simple but also challenging. Affirmations must be genuine. They will be more valuable if they are personal and address aspects of the speaker that are important to him or her. For example, complimenting someone on his or her clothing or hair may be nice but, generally, people will feel more validated by positive comments about their thoughts, plans or skills.

It is not as easy to make affirming statements as it seems. One must listen carefully to the other person and get to know him or her a bit, before one can know what would be meaningful to affirm. Reflections and open questions go a long way toward helping us understand a person's perspectives and beliefs, and are often necessary prior to providing affirmation or encouragement.

Imagine someone encouraging you without knowing you. Would that feel genuine? When people are struggling in life, affirmations can be particularly challenging. If they are depressed or unhappy, we often do not feel warmly toward them and are, therefore, unlikely to use an affirmation. Also, people who are suffering often do not provide us with many positive experiences or traits to affirm. A useful strategy in this instance is to consider the individual's intentions and efforts.

Once you pay attention to affirming comments, you will be surprised how infrequently most people use them and you will likely be surprised at just how warmly others receive this kind of communication.

Sharing Information

Listen First acknowledges that, at times, we do indeed have useful information for the person with whom we are speaking. All communication is not listening, although we would argue that the balance should strongly favor listening.

When we have advice and information for others, there are specific strategies that we suggest for maximizing collaboration and supporting autonomy of members. We call this **sharing information**.

Briefly, we want to: 1) broach sensitive topics carefully, 2) ask for permission to give advice and to share ideas that have worked for others, 3) provide a menu of options, and 4) always end on good terms.

It is important to **broach sensitive subjects carefully** when you suspect that an individual might be uncomfortable talking about an issue. Let's suppose that a member is unhappy with a program, teacher or other member. Instead of launching into the topic with a question, a more sensitive approach is to first ask if it is all right to talk about it. Or, note first that discussions about conflicts can be difficult. Or, note your own discomfort by saying that you would rather talk about something else, but understand someone must address this subject.

Asking permission to talk about an issue is always a good strategy as well: "Would it be alright if we talked about this topic?" Additionally, it is always important to use our open questions to ask about the member's perspective. "What are your concerns?" "What ideas do you have?" "What's been working?" "What's not been working so well?" All of these questions acknowledge that the other person has a choice and encourage collaboration.



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If we have information to share during the conversation, it is important to **ask permission** to share. "I have some ideas that might be helpful to you. Would it be alright if I shared those at this point?" "You seem to be stuck and I have some ideas. Would it be alright if we spoke about that for a few minutes?"

A twist on this is to give people the opportunity to disregard your advice: "You know that what you may do with this information is totally up to you." Or sometimes you might say, "You know, I've got ten ideas, eight or nine of them probably aren't going to work, but maybe we can find one in the group." Asking permission to give advice softens your role as an authority figure, and supports a partnership in the decision-making process. Given how common ambivalent feelings are, creating partnerships makes arguments about your advice much less likely.

It is important to **provide a menu of options** when giving advice. Rather than tell someone one thing to do—which they may or may not like—give them a list.

This is even more powerful when you have preceded this advice with the question, "What ideas have you been thinking about?" In fact, when it comes to exercise, diet or parenting, usually our members have thought of most of what we've thought of. Our culture seems to provide an endless supply of advice. What is needed is an opportunity to sort through that advice and make a decision on one's own course of action.

Nevertheless, it is often appropriate to offer several options drawn from your experience or even from the conversation you are having at the moment. For example, "There are a few things that people in your situation sometimes find helpful."

List three or four different things, then follow with a question:

"Which of these things do you think might work for you?" Of course, it's best to use reflections to show that you are listening even if the person is negating all your good ideas! "That doesn't seem like an option that will work very well for you." "That one you've tried before." "That one seems like a particularly good idea."

Asking for elaboration is another helpful strategy when giving advice. "How would that work?" "What might you do to give that the best chance of working?"

One way to remember this particular framework for sharing information is what is called EPE: elicit, provide, elicit (or ask, tell, ask). First elicit the member's view and experience: "What have you thought of ...?" Then, provide clear information and a menu of options. Then, elicit an interpretation or reaction: "What do you think?" "How do you think this might work?"

Always end on good terms. Thank people for talking with you. Try to find something to affirm about their efforts or intentions. Ask for a follow-up.

