



HELPFUL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

The following four communication skills are very helpful for mentors to develop and practice. These skills are particularly useful when your goal is to open up communication with youth. They are also useful skills that you can help your mentee develop:

Active listening is a technique used to understand the content and emotion of what the other person is saying by paying attention to verbal and non-verbal messages. The task is to focus, hear, respect and communicate your desire to understand. This is not the time to be planning a response or conveying how you feel.

Active listening is *not* nagging, cajoling, reminding, threatening, criticizing, questioning, advising, evaluating, probing, judging or ridiculing.

Skills to Use:

- Eye contact
- Body language: open and relaxed posture, forward lean, appropriate facial expressions, positive use of gestures
- Verbal cues such as “um-hmmm,” “sure,” “ah” and “yes”

Results of Active Listening:

- Encourages honesty — helps people free themselves of troublesome feelings by expressing them openly
- Reduces fear — helps people become less afraid of negative feelings
- Builds respect and affection
- Increases acceptance — promotes a feeling of understanding

When you actively listen, you cooperate in solving the problem — and in preventing future problems.

“I” Messages: These messages give the opportunity to keep the focus on you and explain your feelings in response to someone else’s behavior.

- “I” messages don’t accuse, point fingers at the other person or place blame
- Avoid judgments
- I” messages advance the situation to a problem-solving stage

For example: “I was really sad when you didn’t show up for our meeting last week. I look forward to our meetings and was disappointed not to see you. In the future, I would appreciate it if you could call me and let me know if you will not be able to make it.”

Avoid: “You didn’t show up, and I waited for an hour. You could have at least called me and let me know that you wouldn’t be there. You are irresponsible.”

Courtesy of Mass Mentoring Partnership, *Mentoring 101 Training Curriculum*.



Take care that the following actions and behaviors are congruent with an honest, open heart:

- Body language: slouching, turning away, pointing a finger
- Timing: speaking too fast or too slow
- Facial expression: smiling, squirming, raising eyebrows, gritting teeth
- Tone of voice: shouting, whispering, sneering, whining
- Choice of words: biting, accusative, pretentious, emotionally laden

Results:

“I” messages present only one perspective. Allowing the other person to actually have a point of view and hearing it doesn’t mean that he or she is right. “I” messages communicate both information and respect for each position. Again, this skill moves both parties along to the problem-solving stage.

Paraphrasing focuses on listening first and then reflecting the two parts of the speaker’s message — *fact* and *feeling* — back to the speaker.

- “Listening between the lines”
- Interpreting what your mentee said
- Not an opportunity to evaluate, sympathize, give an opinion, offer advice, analyze or question
- Demonstrates to the speaker that you hear, understand and care about his/her thoughts and feelings

Examples for fact:

- “So you’re saying that . . .”
- “You believe that . . .”
- “The problem is . . .”

Examples for feeling:

- “You feel that . . .”
- “Your reaction is . . .”
- “And that made you feel . . .”

Results: Using active listening skills will enable you to gather the information and then be able to simply report back what you heard in the message — the facts and the attitudes/feelings that were expressed.

Open-Ended Questions are intended to collect information by exploring feelings, attitudes and how the other person views a situation.

- Helpful when dealing with youth, because they tend to answer questions with as few words as possible
- Ask questions that cannot be answered with “yes,” “no,” “I don’t know,” etc.

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Examples:

- “How do you see this situation?”
- “What are your reasons for . . . ?”
- “Can you give me an example?”
- “How does this affect you?”
- “How did you decide that?”
- “What would you like to do about it?”
- “What part did you play?”

Note: Using the question “Why did you do that?” may sometimes yield a defensive response rather than a clarifying response.

Results:

Open-ended questions give the speaker a chance to explain their thoughts and feelings, and yield significant information that can subsequently be used to solve problems.

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