

Building School Improvement Teams' Capacity for Skillful Listening

In addition to improving their own listening skills, school improvement consultants have a responsibility to help school teams increase their capacity for skillful listening. This tool is designed to help school improvement consultants focus on improving school teams' capacity to use six listening skills:

1. Give the speaker your conscious attention
2. Listen for ideas
3. Seek clarity
4. Restate or reframe
5. Embrace silence
6. Pay attention to nonverbal communication

We consider these six skills essential for school improvement work, along with the ability to take advantage of the fact that there is a difference between the time it takes to think and the time it takes to talk. This difference means as we listen to someone talk, we have time to think. Good listeners use this time to anticipate what the speaker will say next, identify and summarize what the speaker has said so far, question what the speaker has said (e.g., Are the speaker's facts accurate?), or observe and interpret what the speaker is saying through their tone of voice, facial expressions, gestures, and body movement. Capitalizing on "thought speed," rather than getting distracted by formulating a response or thinking about other events, ideas, or situations, improves the quality of listening and leads to better understanding of the speaker's message.

How to Use This Tool

Being a good listener takes practice over time. This tool helps consultants work with teams to improve their listening skills by providing an explanation of each skill and examples of questions or statements consultants can use to focus school teams' attention on the skills. A companion tool helps school improvement consultants develop their own listening skills.

Instructions

- Select a listening skill and share the explanation with the school team.
- Provide a few minutes for the team to discuss the explanation of the skill and ask clarifying questions and share their experiences with the skill.
- Tell the team that as they are working on the day's task (e.g., making a decision, assessing team functioning, learning new practices, resolving a conflict), you will stop periodically to pose a question or statement related to the listening skill and ask them to respond verbally or reflect individually.
- You can use the examples as written if they fit your situation or adapt them as necessary.

Note: Use your knowledge of the team and other factors (e.g., context, time available) to determine whether to use the question or statement for individual reflection or group response.

1. Give the speaker your full attention

Maintaining eye contact, sitting up straight, and using facial expressions that indicate interest are physical aspects of listening. Mentally paying attention requires overlooking the speaker's delivery and focusing instead on how what the speaker is saying connects with your interests. It also means resisting distractions by changing the environment (e.g., closing a door, asking a speaker to talk louder) or increasing your concentration.

<i>Example 1</i>	<i>Example 2</i>	<i>Example 3</i>
"As you listen to group members discuss the task we need to complete, what connections can you make between the task and the team's short-term goals?"	"Reflect on how your posture and facial expressions indicated your attention and interest to other team members as they spoke."	"What aspects of our meeting room make it difficult to listen? What can we do to address them?"

2. Listen for ideas

Focus on the central ideas the speaker is sharing, rather than facts and examples. Keep an open mind, even if the speaker says something that triggers a strong positive or negative response. Keep listening, without judgment, to give the speaker a chance to finish speaking and to make sure you understand the point the speaker is trying to make.

<i>Example 1</i>	<i>Example 2</i>	<i>Example 3</i>
"What arguments did you hear from team members in support of the decision we are making?"	"Reflect on your reactions as team members gave their ideas about how we should approach this task. What did you do to keep listening so that you had a complete understanding of the speakers' points?"	"When we were discussing issues around which there was disagreement, what patterns did you notice in who spoke? What might these patterns reveal?"

3. Seek clarity

When you aren't sure what a speaker means, it's better to ask what is meant than assume. Clarifying questions can be simple and specific, requiring a yes-or-no answer, or open-ended, requiring a more in-depth response that can help the listener and the speaker gain insight or expand on the topic. .

<i>Example 1</i>	<i>Example 2</i>
"What assumptions did you make about the meaning of ____? What question could you have asked to clarify your understanding of the word?"	"What is a possible open-ended question we could have asked the speaker to gain deeper understanding of the topic?"

4. Restate or reframe

Restating or reframing involves reflecting to the speaker what you think you heard. This reflection assures the speaker that you are engaged in listening and provides the person an opportunity to confirm or correct your statement and understanding. Offering a statement that summarizes the speaker's key message or main theme is one form of restating.

<i>Example 1</i>	<i>Example 2</i>
"What is a statement that summarizes the speaker's message?"	"How might you reframe what you heard when ____ presented their thoughts on how to complete our task?"

5. Embrace silence

Allowing time for silence after someone speaks shows respect for the speaker and provides time for the speaker to finish their thoughts and for you and the speaker to process what they said. Silence can yield better understanding and strengthen the relationship between speaker and listener.

<i>Example 1</i>	<i>Example 2</i>
"What happened when we all waited 30 seconds after the speaker finished before we said anything?"	"Reflect on how you used the period of silence after the speaker finished talking and how that helped you process what was said."

6. Pay attention to nonverbal communication

Noticing a speaker’s energy and emotion communicated through body language, gestures, facial expressions, eye movement, and tone of voice can help you understand more deeply what the speaker means. Commenting on the speaker’s energy and emotion often prompts the speaker to provide more information.

Example 1	Example 2	Example 3
“What did you notice about the team’s energy and emotion as we worked to resolve our disagreement?”	“Reflect on how the speaker’s body language helped you to understand their explanation of the new practice we were learning.”	What comment might we have made about the speaker’s emotion that could have encouraged the speaker to provide more information?”