

Building Your Capacity for Skillful Listening as a School Improvement Consultant

Skillful listening doesn't just happen—it takes time and practice to develop the range of listening skills that are important for working effectively with school teams. This tool features six listening skills that we consider essential for school improvement work:

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

Also essential is 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, involves using the six listening skills to improve the quality of listening and enhance understanding of the speaker's message.

How to Use This Tool

This tool provides an explanation of each of the six listening skills and statements or questions that illustrate how you can reflect on your use of the skills as you work with school teams engaged in various activities (e.g., decision-making, assessing team functioning, resolving conflicts, completing a task, learning new knowledge or skills). This reflection will help you improve your understanding and use of the listening skills. A companion tool provides examples of how consultants can help school improvement teams boost their listening skills.

Instructions

- Select a listening skill as the focus for a meeting or activity with a school improvement team.
- Read the explanation of the skill and reflect on your prior experiences with using the skill.
- Restate the skill in your own words and/or draw a picture to represent its meaning.
- Read the example statements and think about how they relate to the selected skill and how they might apply in the meeting or activity you will engage in with the school team.
- Select one of the statements to reflect on during the meeting or activity. Make adjustments as needed to better fit the content or focus of the meeting or activity.

1. Give the speaker your full attention

To understand what the speaker is saying and respond appropriately, listeners must pay attention mentally and physically. Maintaining eye contact, sitting up straight, and using facial expressions that indicate interest are physical aspects of listening. Mentally paying attention might require 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>
"Group members are very loud as they discuss this issue. How does what the group is saying help me think differently about the issue and understand why they are loud?"	"How can the information that is being shared by the team as they work on this task help me in my work with this team or other teams?"	"It's very warm in here. I'm going to ask if we can open the door to get more air circulating or see if we can adjust the thermostat."

2. Listen for ideas

Focus on the central ideas the speaker is sharing rather than facts and examples. Keep an open mind as you listen, 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>
"I am concerned by what ____ just said and want to add a comment. Do I need to listen a little longer to be sure I understand their point?"	"What arguments are team members sharing to support their claim that the team is high-functioning?"	"That phrase always makes me angry. I need to suspend judgment and keep listening until the speaker finishes. Then, if necessary, I can ask an open-ended question to better understand the team's use of the phrase."

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.

Example 1	Example 2
"I'm not following the team's reasoning behind their decision. I'll ask them how they arrived at their conclusion."	"I wonder what the team means by _____. I'll keep it simple by asking if they mean _____."

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.

Example 1	Example 2
"I'm not sure I understand correctly what the speaker just said. How can I restate what I heard so that I get confirmation or correction?"	"The team has been discussing the process for selecting an improvement strategy. How can I reframe what I heard to assure the team that I understand the points they are making?"

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.

Example 1	Example 2
"I'm going to keep quiet for at least 15 seconds after _____ finishes speaking to see if they add any more thoughts or information."	"I'm going to use the period of silence after _____ finishes speaking to process what I heard and think about the implications for my next moves with the team."

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
“___ seemed hesitant when he made that statement. I’ll mention that and see if his response indicates that I need to provide more details about the task we are going to do.”	“I notice that ___ is avoiding eye contact with the rest of the group when he speaks, and his facial expression looks like he isn’t very happy. I’ll listen to hear if his thoughts differ significantly from those expressed by other team members. Depending on what I hear, I’ll say, ‘You looked unhappy when you were sharing your thoughts.’ That might encourage him to share more about why he is or isn’t unhappy.”