



Making Mental Health Work: Listening for understanding

Listening for understanding is the practice of participating in a conversation for the purpose of gaining understanding of the perspective of the other person. Many of us may already do this naturally. For those who are new to this practice, and for those who would like to improve their ability to listen for understanding, here is information on some of the listening for understanding techniques.

The purpose of gaining an understanding of the perspective of the other person is so we can collaborate with the employee on finding solutions. If we don't understand the other person's perspective, lasting solutions are harder to find.

When we are listening for understanding, we will be speaking a lot less than the other person. One way to monitor how much we are listening for understanding during a conversation is to ask ourselves, "Who is doing most of the talking here?" It should be the employee doing most of the talking. We participate by asking questions, clarifying and summarizing as necessary, then asking further questions.

Showing interest

Throughout the conversation, consider ways of indicating interest in the employee. This can happen through a relaxed and engaged posture, focusing on their eyes, nodding while listening, and offering short verbal responses as the employee is speaking, when appropriate.

We also indicate interest by preparing ourselves to be fully present in the meeting. This means that we have taken care of any distractions, and have committed enough time to have a relaxed and thoughtful conversation.

Demonstrating value for the employee

Finding how we value an employee can sometimes be difficult, especially when problems seem complex or have gone on for a long time. It can be a great asset to have prepared specific examples to share with the employee about why they are of value in the workplace.

Consider some of these phrases to express value for the employee.

- I am glad you are part of the team because ...
- I am glad that I get to work with you because ...
- I enjoy when you ...
- I appreciate when you ...
- I value ... about you.
- When I don't see you doing ..., I really notice because I value it so much.

Asking one question at a time

Sometimes when we are trying to gain information, we may ask several questions in a row without pause. Usually it's because we are trying to clarify our question, but what can happen is that the person trying to answer can become confused, or they pick the easiest question to answer and avoid a difficult question.

Ask one question then stop speaking. This may be difficult to do because there will be a time of silence, which many of us find difficult to tolerate, so we fill it with another question. Instead, remind yourself to ask just one question, then to wait.

Questions: Open ended, closed ended, empowering

Open ended questions encourage more than one-word answers. They open up exploration and are helpful when we are trying to understand the employee's perspective.

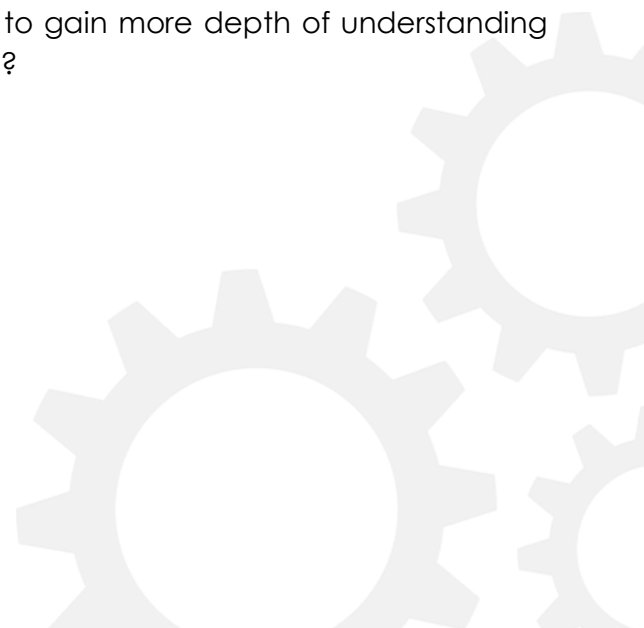
- What's going on for you?
- Could you tell me more about that?
- What's your perspective of the situation?
- And what is the impact of this situation on you?
- What am I missing?
- What is it important for me to know?
- And what else? And what else?

Close-ended questions also can have a place in the conversation, but are used with careful thought as follow up questions, not to open the conversation. Closed ended questions can set up defensiveness in the other person. Examples of closed ended questions that are not helpful when we are listening for understanding:

- Ø Why are you late for work most days?
- Ø Are you going to fix the problem?
- Ø Why am I still seeing problems?
- Ø When will you change your behaviour?

Empowering questions are used to find out deeper agendas, to gain more depth of understanding and to get to the root of a belief or pattern. What do you want?

- What's important about that?
- What are you excited about at work?
- What do you care about in this situation?
- What's the big picture for you here?
- What are you doing now that is working well for you?



Allowing pauses

This gives time to the employee to think about your question, gather their thoughts and find words to answer. It may take some time. This may be difficult because as supervisors and managers, we feel more comfortable in action mode. But silence is part of the action when it allows the employee to contribute to the conversation.

The employee has to consider many things with each answer. How safe is it to share their true thoughts and feelings? What will they expose of themselves as they share? Do they believe that they will be heard? Will their voice show emotions that they are struggling to hide?

The employee may be struggling with emotions during this discussion. Allowing for silence lets the employee know that we feel comfortable with them and their emotional state, and will stay engaged as they work to control their emotions.

While allowing pauses to happen, continue to stay physically engaged. This means that with body language we indicate that we are still present in the conversation, even though no words are being exchanged for the moment. We are still paying attention to the employee, continuing to make eye contact, and in a relaxed and engaged posture, ready to listen when the employee is ready to speak.

Avoid interrupting

As supervisors and managers, we are generally geared to action. Sometimes we have an urge to push a conversation faster to its conclusion and into our area of comfort, which is usually in problem solving. So we may interrupt the other person to meet our need for action. Unfortunately, this doesn't allow us to find out what is going on for the other person, because we have interjected and steered the conversation our way.

Often when people are engaging in an argument instead of a collaborative conversation, they will interrupt each other. Interrupting is a signal that perhaps we are arguing instead of listening for understanding.

Listening for the employee's interests

While we are listening, one way to stay engaged is by listening for the employee's interests. This means that we are listening like detectives, trying to uncover what is important to the employee. From what the employee is saying, what can we figure that the employee values, believes, and wishes for? This technique can be used continually through the conversation, especially if our attention begins to waver or we lose focus.

Seeking clarification

At a certain point in the conversation, we may find that we are beginning to gain an understanding of the employee's perspective. It is important to find out from the employee if we are on the right track. We do this by seeking clarification. We summarize what we've heard and what we believe is going on for the employee.

Seeking clarification should be brief, and the employee then responds to our comments, letting us know if we've got it right. It's okay if we haven't got it completely right – by seeking clarification, we indicate to the employee that we are really listening because we want to understand. Seeking clarification can happen periodically through the conversation. It helps the employee to see that they are being heard and it helps clarify issues by letting them know what we are hearing.

- This is what I understand...
- Let me know if I've got this...
- Is this what you are saying...?
- Am I hearing you right when you say...?