

## Successful Supervisor Part 65

### *When to Use Reflective Listening*

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

When consultants do Quality of Life (QWL) Surveys in organizations of all types, the issue of “communication” invariably comes out as being the number one or number two frustration of people in the organization. It seems that we have a primary problem cornered, right? Wrong! Just because we know communication is a huge problem in most organizations does not make it any easier to solve. Communication issues are still at the root of many frustrations, and the problem exists at all levels.

We could dissect all aspects of communication, but in this article I would like to focus on listening skills. Human beings are good talkers, and we actually read body language pretty well. Most of us can write instructions or emails well enough to be understood, at least most of the time. We are habitually weakest at grasping the full meaning when people are talking to us. We are usually able to grasp some bits of information, but we often miss the full significance of what the other person is conveying.

For supervisors, the ability to listen more carefully is one of the most significant improvement opportunities, but that is easier said than done. In this article I want to discuss Reflective Listening and reveal four skills that will make your listening vastly more powerful, if you use them well. They create the opportunity to use a more interactive and integrative approach to grasp incoming information more completely.

### **Reflective Listening**

The technique of “Reflective Listening” has been documented and taught in management training for decades. The skill involves just four parts:

1. Attend to the person who is talking. Put down your phone or other distraction and pay attention. Make sure you are in a place conducive to a serious conversation, not on a noisy shop floor.
2. Listen with an intensity high enough to be able to paraphrase the main points from time to time.
3. Insert short “reflections” into the conversation that indicate your understanding and that you are following the conversation.
4. Repeat.

The skill of reflective listening is not consistently practiced for one good reason. Most people can talk at a rate of about 150 words a minute (give or take some), while our brain is capable of thinking at 400-600 words per minute or more. With 2-3X idle time between the words, our brain has a lot of spare time while listening. When we think that we are listening, what we are usually doing is using most of our mental processes getting ready to talk, or thinking about what we have to do after the conversation is over.

The reflective listening technique forces us to keep more concentration on the words and body language that are coming in, so we can absorb more of the meaning. There is a catch here that most people miss. It is difficult work to force one's mind to adhere only to the conversation when there is so much spare capacity. This is where well developed skills can make a huge difference for you.

## **Skill 1: Pick your Situation**

Don't use reflective listening on a routine basis. Your brain will quickly blow a fuse, and you will be right back where you started.

Most conversations we have on a daily basis are casual conversations where we can get the gist of meaning while the mind is occupied with our own process. Do not try to use reflective listening for 100% of your conversations and you will do a lot better.

Roughly 10% of conversations will be significant. You will be dealing with an emotionally charged situation or a person in an emotional state. The speaker will be angry, confused, giddy, frustrated, or any number of other highly emotional states. For those few conversations, you can use reflective listening and relax with your old habits for the majority of conversations.

You always need to be alert to cues that tell you it is time to listen with more intensity. In this mode, you are paying full attention to the words as well as the body language to absorb a holistic understanding of the other person's meaning. A conversation can shift from casual to serious suddenly if a person is somehow triggered. At this point, it is time to put on your imaginary listening hat, as I discussed in a [prior article](#). Mine is the kind of two-pointed hat that Napoleon wore. When someone is in a state of high emotion, I silently tell myself, "it's time to put on my listening hat."

For that particular conversation, I kick up the intensity of reflective listening and try to absorb the true meaning of every sentence and gesture. Then I go back to my normal pattern of mental activity for the non-emotional discussions. This technique has worked for me over the years. I am far from perfect using the method, but I am far better than if I only had one mode of listening.

## **Skill 2: Listen with all your senses**

When you intensify your listening, you can use other senses than just your hearing. You can use your sight to notice the body language: the cues that the other person give that show their emotional response to the discussion.

You can also use your sense of touch, to notice how your own body is responding to what the other person is saying. Is it stressing you? Are you tightening anywhere? Are you triggered?

You can also use your sense of touch energetically, to feel the emotions the other person is sending out.

You can use your figurative senses of smell and taste (both ways of discernment) to see if what you are hearing “smells” right, or whether you “smell a rat.”

In being aware of all the subtleties and being discerning in what you receive, your senses can help you truly understand what the other person is trying to convey, which helps you get to the heart of the matter.

### **Skill 3: The Pause that refreshes**

Don't feel you have to start speaking the moment people stop talking. It is okay to take a moment to regroup and consider your response based on everything they have communicated. This pause lets people know you are thinking, and they may even add something else that is helpful. Their response to the pause is additional information.

### **Skill 4: The Question that gets to the heart of the matter**

Learn how to ask insightful questions that help get to the heart of the matter, the meat of the situation. An insightful question lets people know they have been heard and that you are interested, ready to hear more, and are taking them seriously, which builds trust.

If you are a supervisor, put on your “listening hat” at the right time and place, and open your senses see if it improves your ability to absorb and respond to conversations that are critical.

*This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision) or on this blog.*

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