

## Member's Quarterly

Spring 2021 Edition

### Feature

# Communicate and Listen Nonjudgmentally

*Dealing with mental health issues in the workplace*



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**I**n recent years, many high profile individuals have come to the attention of the media as a result of their actions. We are finding mental health issues are more of a concern and the means to address them is more complex. Here are some tools to assist you when speaking with your colleagues or employees.

Communication is not just saying the words — it is creating correct understanding.

Active listening is an essential skill in the communication process. Dr. Marius Pickering from the University of Maine identifies these characteristics of empathetic listening:

- The desire to be “other-directed”, rather than to project one’s feelings and ideas onto the other person.
- The desire to be non-defensive, rather than to protect themselves. When they are being protected, it is difficult to focus on another person.
- The desire to imagine the experience, roles and perspective of the other person, rather than assuming they are the same as one’s own.
- The desire to listen as the receiver, not be critical; and
- The desire to understand the other person rather than to reach either agreement from or change in that person.

Interestingly, the average person speaks at a rate of 100–150 words per minute. An auctioneer, on the other hand, does a rapid-fire 250 to 400 words per minute. Those, however, are exceptions. When you are just having a chat, you will usually speak at a rate of 110 to 130 words per minute. Most listeners understand as many as 600 words per minute, which is why we talk so quickly sometimes. That means everyone is a good listener. Not true! We can lose our focus for many reasons: we do not understand what is being said, we do not agree with the speaker, we are bored or lack interest, or we want to give answers.

The person sharing the information becomes aware they are not being listened to and begins to feel more unheard and rejected. To really listen, we must practice active listening. Yes, it is a skill that may be learned and mastered. When dealing with stressful situations in the workplace, we need to be a supportive listener by showing warmth and caring in the way we listen.

Here are some quick tips on how become a better listener.

**Don’t interrupt.** Silence is a powerful tool. Remain quiet and let the other person think. You cannot listen and talk at the same time.

**Keep an open mind.** Do not judge or jump to conclusions. Think before you respond.

**Make listening a priority.** Stay focused. Stay in the present. Eliminate distractions like emails and cell phones.

**Show respect** for the person and their feelings, even if you disagree.

**Avoid giving advice, even when asked.** Offer options and suggestions. Allow the other person to discover their best answer.

**Master the art of asking good questions** — open-ended (How...? What...? Could...? Would...?). Alternatively, closed-ended (Is? Are? Do? Did?)

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**Listen with empathy.** Try putting yourself in the other person's shoes to try to understand their point of view.

**Use attending behaviours** to let the person know you are listening, such as "mmm," "uh-huh" or "I see".

**Watch non-verbal behaviour.** Clarify to ensure you are reading the non-verbal behaviour correctly. Keep an open body posture, sit down if possible and try to sit beside the person rather than facing them. Maintain eye contact if culturally appropriate, but do not stare.

**Check to make sure that you understood.** Review what you think you heard and ask for clarification to ensure that you've grasped what is being said. Paraphrase in your own words. Summarize to ensure you have received the correct message, focus and understanding.

**Provide feedback.** Give open, honest feedback. You should again check for understanding.

At the end of the conversation, you should discuss what will happen next and who will take action. If after the conversation you feel distressed, find someone to talk to for support and advice while respecting the other person's privacy. If your expectations of the discussion are not met, be aware that your actions may still make a difference — that person who approached you may consult someone else about their problem.

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