

Active Listening to Improve On-Farm Communication

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In many situations, it can be difficult to really hear what someone is saying. Active listening challenges you to focus all your attention on the person who is speaking in order to reach a new level of understanding. Using these approaches may feel awkward at first, so keep this list handy remind yourself how to integrate these new methods. Give yourself the time and space to stop, reformulate your question and listen fully.

Effective Listening Techniques

Active Listening Skills	Tips to Encourage Sharing
<p>Ask Open-Ended Questions — see Tips to Encourage Sharing (at right)</p> <p>Restate — “Let me see if I’m clear about this,” ---” I heard you say, “___” Is that accurate?”</p> <p>Summarize — “So it sounds to me as if...”</p> <p>Minimal Encouragers — Prompts such as “umm-hmm,” “Oh,” “I understand,” “Then?”</p> <p>Reflect — Instead of just repeating, reflect the feelings of the speaker, “This seems really important to you.”</p> <p>Emotion Labeling — “Are you feeling frustrated...worried...anxious...”</p> <p>Validate — Acknowledge the feelings, problems & issues the speaker is facing. “I appreciate your willingness to talk about such a difficult issue.” “I’m sorry that happened to you.”</p> <p>Clarify — “Am I understanding you correctly?” “Could you tell me more about the sequence of events?”</p> <p>Silence — allow for comfortable silences to slow down the exchange or diffuse difficult interactions.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▶ I’d like to hear your thoughts on this topic ▶ It would be helpful to hear your perspective. ▶ “How will (proposed solution) change the current situation?” ▶ What have you been thinking about while waiting for this conversation to take place? ▶ What do you think would happen if you...?” ▶ What do you want to see happening differently? ▶ If you could change anything, what would it be? ▶ Tell me more about.... ▶ You said, “___” Can you say more or explain? ▶ When you use the word “___” what do you mean? ▶ What matters to you most? ▶ Can you say more about your concern with “___” ▶ What is it that concerns you about this? ▶ What leads you to say that? ▶ What information might you need that would help you understand my concerns.

Good feedback relies on great listening. When we work hard to hear what people are really saying, we listen to obtain information, to understand, and to learn. The list below has some suggestions to provide feedback that helps the speaker clarify their thoughts and work toward finding their own solutions.

Effective Listening Techniques

- Stop talking
- Empathize with the other person
- Concentrate on what he/she is saying
- Don't interrupt
- Look at the other person
- Get rid of distractions
- Get the main points
- React to ideas, not the person
- Don't argue mentally
- Note facts and evidence
- Listen for what is not said

Words & Phrases to Avoid

“Why”

Asking “why” something happened or “why” a particular decision was made can be tempting. This approach can trigger a defensive answer which may distract from assessing the situation. Try one of the other Active Listening Skills (see above) instead.

“I know what you mean” or “I’ve heard that before”

- “That happened to me once...” or “In my experience...”
- These phrases are barriers to communication and convey assumptions that the farmer might take as a cue(s) to stop talking.

“But” or “However” or “Should” or “Could” or “Would”

Using words such as but, however, should, could or would can draw attention back to you (the listener). As an active listener, your goal is to have the attention remain with the speaker.

It may be helpful to substitute “and” in places where you normally use a “but.”

Feedback

Feedback can be helpful to the speaker. In active listening, your role is to help the speaker clarify their thoughts and in doing so identify possible solutions. Feedback can redirect the conversation away from the speaker. Before offering feedback, clarify whether your feedback is meant to offer insight or add context to the speaker’s point of view. Use questions such as:

- “What ideas do you have to address this?”
- “Is there a specific way you would like my help?”
- “Have you seen someone else facing this? How did they approach it?”

Use the Difference in Rate

You can listen faster than the speaker can talk. Speech is about 100 to 150 words per minute; thinking is 250-500 words per minute. Use the rate difference to improve how you are listening by:

- ▶ Look at the other person—observe their face, mouth, eyes and hands.
- ▶ Observe the speaker’s facial expressions, movements and gestures.
- ▶ Notice the speaker’s tone—does it convey feelings of confidence, anger, excitement, confusion, sadness or other feelings that add meaning?
- ▶ Notice the speaker’s emotional reaction or attitude.

Ask before you share pertinent information, observations, insights and experiences. “I have some information that might help with that. Would you like to hear it?”

If the answer is yes, then keep these tips in mind. Keep the feedback loop open so there is opportunity for the speaker to correct what you may have misheard.

- **Limit the topics** — Pick two or three points of improvement to discuss. “Let’s start with your concerns or questions about _____ then brainstorm three things to try in the next week.”
- **Prepare your thoughts** — reflect on what has been said, what you have heard. Jot down two or three themes. Link these to specific statements so you can check for accuracy. “Because I heard you say ____, have you thought about _____.”
- **Keep it positive** — start off your feedback with something positive. “I like what you’ve said and I’d like to add_____.”
- **If it’s about improvement** — Instead of offering criticism, what concrete things can the speaker do to change their situation in a positive way? “I suggest that you spend 10 minutes each day writing out your goals. That will help you clarify your short-term and long-term goals.”
- Use “I” Statements— “I’d like to hear what you have to say. Right now I need to _____. When can we schedule additional time to talk?”

Additional Resources

Balancing Farm and Family:

extension.umaine.edu/beginning-farmer-resource-network/find-resources-and-assistance/farm-and-family/

Multiple publications related to communication, decision making, goal setting, and time management:

extension.umaine.edu/beginning-farmer-resource-network/supporting-relationships-for-farm-success/resources/

Good Group Decisions:

extension.umaine.edu/publications/6103e/

Effective Communication:

extension.umaine.edu/publications/6103e/



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