

Is active listening really the best approach to build relationships within my team?

If you want to build relationships within your team, improve your active listening skills. Active listening is one of the most important and most underutilized business skill that promotes understanding—and understanding what the other person is saying is the foundation upon which relationships are built. Active listening is a simple process: eliminating distractions, paraphrasing, inquiry, and empathizing.

Eliminating distractions so that when you are listening to the other person, you are really listening to them. Stop whatever you are doing and give the other person your full attention. Rather than think about what to say or how you will respond, listen carefully and you will know what to say when the other person is finished talking. The proper way to build relationships is to listen generously by giving your undivided attention.

Paraphrasing means to restate the key points you heard as accurately and completely as possible. Effective paraphrasing brings several benefits. First, it helps you keep track of what the other person has said. Second, it gives the other person the opportunity to clarify their message thereby reducing the likelihood for later misunderstandings. Finally, accurate paraphrasing conveys that you are developing a greater and deeper understanding of the other person's point of view.

Inquiry challenges the other person to unveil the reasoning behind their point of view. Active listeners test their understanding of the other person's point of view by asking open-ended questions—questions that require elaboration rather than a simple yes or no. Your questions should come from not only your knowledge and experience but also from the information you get from actively listening. When you pose questions that give you a deeper understanding you open the door for further discussion and more importantly, you demonstrate a willingness to work together to enhance the relationship.

Empathizing requires you to listen for the feelings behind the words that prompt the other person to say what they are saying. Beyond paraphrasing what the other person has said, let them know that you understand not only the content but also the perceived thoughts and feelings involved. Listen carefully for the feelings and use open-ended questions to probe for meaning.

Excellent and successful leaders are outstanding listeners who have developed and sharpened their active listening skills. Active listening is the best approach to building relationships within your team.

Need expert advice on developing a team? Contact Colleen Lily Winston, MA, CHRP at 403.547.4615 or email clilywinston@shaw.ca.