



**Monthly Tips: Active Listening Skills** (Page 1-2 for Mentors & Students, except where noted; Page 3 for Students / Protégés)

## Mentors: The Importance of Listening Actively<sup>1,5</sup>

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If we don't listen to each other closely, we are likely to hear what we want to hear and unintentionally impose our hopes or perspectives on the other person. For example, Robert Kegan, the author of the book *The Evolving Self*, warned that "clients" need protection from their "practitioner's hopes for them." Applied to mentoring, this means that one critical danger is that the **dialogue** between a mentor and protégé becomes a **monologue**, typically with the mentor (but sometimes the student) supplying the content. Listening skills and asking helpful questions invite both participants into a conversation that revolves around the protégés process and development.

## The Roles for Mentors<sup>1,2</sup>

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- Mentor as Ally – Trust is required for both participants to be contributors and for protégés to reveal questions or doubts they may have that make them feel vulnerable.
- Mentor as Catalyst – Catalysts provoke a reaction that might not otherwise occur and typically accelerates changes. Mentors can help protégés to experience new perspectives and begin taking responsibility for their own growth and development.
- Mentor as Strategist – Sometimes it's better to resist the urge to answer all of a protégé's questions and instead, help them enter experiences that will equip them to begin finding answers to their own questions.

**"True mentoring is aimed at the mentee's development—not on solving specific problems...the real mentor is also interested in the larger lessons that can be derived from solving [dilemmas]"<sup>2</sup> –Larry Ambrose**

**Listening actively is the key to finding out what the real underlying issues are and discovering the "larger lessons." Students who listen actively will better understand their mentor's perspective when questioned or given feedback.**

## Mentors & Students: The Different Types of Listening Skills<sup>1,4</sup>

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- **Active Listening** – This involves:
  1. Hearing and understanding the other's verbal messages
  2. Observing and reading the other's nonverbal behavior, posture, facial expressions, tone of voice, movement, physical appearance, etc.
  3. Awareness of the context of the other's background, conditioning, culture, gender, experiences, etc.
- **Empathetic Listening** – This means understanding the other's emotional point of view and communicating that back to them. You may relate to either the *content* of what they said or the *emotion*, or both. Empathetic listening opens up the other to what is really going on and it builds trust that you are truly listening what they're saying or where they're coming from.
  - Example: "I can hear how conflicted you are about this decision—it sounds really important to you."
- **Asking High-Gain Questions** – Resist the temptation to simply provide answer or recommendations by asking the protégé high-gain questions that force them to respond with more than just "yes" or "no." There are three types of high-gain questions:
  - **Investigative Questions** – help you get the facts
  - **Discovery Questions** – stimulate thinking and learning
  - **Empowering Questions** – push for action

## **Mentors & Students: What to Listen For?**<sup>4</sup>

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To keep the focus on the protégé, mentors should ask themselves:

- What are the core messages here?
- What themes are coming through?
- What is \_\_\_\_\_'s point of view?
- What is most important to them?
- What do they want me to understand about them?

## **Mentors & Students: Obstacles to Listening**<sup>1,4</sup>

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- Filtered listening – hearing from your perspective rather than putting yourself in the others' shoes (sometimes leads to hearing what you want to hear)
- Fact-Centered – Being *fact*-centered rather than *person*-centered
- Rehearsing – listening is interrupted when you start mentally formulating your response
- Interrupting – when overly frequent, it can lead to the other feeling diminished or ignored. Ask yourself, "What's keeping me from hearing them out?" to assess why you interrupt regularly.
- Evaluative listening – Listening but interpreting another's perspective as good-bad or right-wrong, rather than understanding that they are hearing a person whose perspective is valid based on their experiences to date. Remember, even if someone's perspective seems flawed now, that perspective will probably change many times throughout their career. You can invite change simply through listening or asking them to question their viewpoint.

## **Mentors: The Value of High-Gain Questions**<sup>2</sup>

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- Create a two-way conversation
- Help the protégé think through issues instead of the mentor doing it all
- Reduces the protégés natural defensiveness toward subsequent suggestions or ideas
- Reveals the protégé's thoughts on issues, which helps clarify what to suggest

### **General High-Gain Examples:**

- Tell me more about \_\_\_\_\_?
- O.k., what was another time when \_\_\_\_\_?
- I'd be interested in knowing your reasons for \_\_\_?
- How'd you get to that conclusion?
- What have you learned about \_\_\_\_\_?

## **Mentors: Strategy for Being Helpful with an Event, Project, or Professional Development Outcome**<sup>1,2</sup>

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Examples: Protégé is preparing a portfolio for a job interview.  
Protégé is completing a senior project and asking for feedback.  
Protégé's pursuit of a specific mentoring goal.

### **Investigative Questions: Get the Facts** (what, when, where)

- Tell me what you have accomplished so far.
- How long have you worked on this?
- Who else has been involved? In what ways?
- What inspired \_\_\_\_\_?

### **Discovery Questions: Push Learning** (stimulate thinking)

- What have you learned from this experience?  
What are you most proud of?
- What worked well? What didn't? What could still be developed?
- How does this connect to your approach / vision / values?
- What's the best thing that could happen; what the worst? What are your alternatives?

### **Empowering Questions: Push for Action** (transfer ownership)

- What outcomes are you after?
- What do you have to do to make it happen?
- What's your first step?
- What resources do you have; what do you need?

## **Students: Strategy for Inviting Customized Insights to the Mentor's Experience<sup>1,2</sup>**

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Examples: Protégé wants mentor to share about career moves that relate to similar interests, questions, etc.  
Protégé wants to shift the conversation from describing their own interests to hearing about the mentor.

(This complements the questions suggested above)

### **Investigative Questions: Get the Facts** (what, when, where)

- Tell me about your career accomplishments.
- What strategies have helped you reach this point?
- What inspired to take this path?
- Who were the pivotal contacts you made through various transitions? How were they instrumental?

### **Discovery Questions: Push Learning** (stimulate thinking)

- What have you learned from your experiences that you think I could benefit from hearing about?
- How does this connect to your approach / vision / values?
- How did you handle the fear of failure? Where did you find your inspiration to continue?
- What are you most proud of?

## **Students: Practical Tips to Develop Active Listening<sup>1,6</sup>**

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- Take Notes – Not only will you improve your recall, but this is a natural way to pace the conversation so you don't get lost or overloaded with information.
- Plan & Present your Meeting Agenda – What goals do *you* want to focus on for this meeting? Planning and presenting areas of focus will help your mentor give you the kind of specific feedback you're looking for.
- Listen for Central Ideas – This will help you makes sense of multiple stories or experiences that a mentor shares; they might know what point they are making, but you might need to clarify what you hear as the central idea.
- Pan for Gold – Make a note to yourself about the one or two most valuable thoughts your mentor has shared. It is good practice to conclude a conversation with this as a parting reflection.
- Ignore "Triggers" – These are words the trigger either a positive or negative reaction and will distract you from the central ideas being shared. You can always explore these words / reactions later.
- Use Thought Speed Over Speech Speed – Thought speed is your pace of thinking and engaging in conversation. The idea here is to monitor how fast you talk when your mind is moving quickly; stay present to the conversation at hand.
- Ask Open-Ended Questions – Each mentoring relationship is different which is why you may need to use a variety of questions in working with your mentor's style of communication. Open-ended questions—who, what, where, when, why questions—foster more information and details in your dialogue.
- Journaling – This can't be emphasized enough. Not only will keeping a record of your conversations and reflections increase your retention, but you will be better prepared to explain how your mentoring experience advanced your learning and competency to a future employer.<sup>3</sup>
- Reflect Back How You Understand Your Mentor's Feedback – As discussed in the MC Monthly November Tips, be an active listener when receiving feedback. In other words, clarify with your mentor what you heard them say. Sometimes feedback is difficult to articulate, even for an experienced mentor, so be sure to summarize and confirm what you heard them say.

Remember, active listening is the protégés' best tool for **managing** how much or what kind of information is being shared by their mentor. This tool will promote you as an adult learner in managing professional conversations throughout your career!<sup>1</sup>

*Listening Skills Tips* was edited by <sup>1</sup>Gregg Schacher and drawn from excerpts out of the following books: <sup>2</sup>*A Mentor's Companion* (1996) by Larry Ambrose (pp. 5-15), <sup>3</sup>*The Mentee's Guide to Mentoring* (1999) by Norman H. Cohen (p. 19), <sup>4</sup>*The Skilled Helper* (1998) by Gerard Egan (pp. 65-79), and <sup>5</sup>*Coaching for Leadership* (2000) by Marshall Goldsmith, Laurence Lyons, & Alyssa Freas (p. 56), <sup>6</sup>*Mentor Program Student Workshop Handout* (2004) edited by Carli Braun (p. 1).