

ELEPHANT EARS: ADVANCED SKILLS FOR LISTENING

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OBJECTIVE

Recognize that as restorative practitioners, we will often hear others describe beliefs or behaviors that we don't relate to or agree with. Furthermore, the speaker may be struggling with shame, humiliation, and other difficult emotions surrounding their actions. In order to support the speaker's own self-determination and agency, it's crucial that we strive to avoid value judgements or evaluations of the speaker's choices in our responses. One way to do this is to listen carefully for the experiences, strengths, needs, and feelings that underly those beliefs, behaviors, and choices.

This activity helps us fine tune our active listening skills by developing understanding and practicing specific types of responses to the speaker. Learners will become familiar with the nuanced differences between reflective statements, affirmations, validations, and reframing.

Note: This is an activity for seasoned restorative practitioners to develop advanced skills. It will work most effectively with a community of learners that has already built relationships and has some degree of shared experiences with restorative work.

MATERIALS

You will need two sets of flashcards. One set should have 3-8 scenarios or specific statements, each one written on a separate flashcard. It will make the most sense if you choose from examples that you have actually heard or encountered in your community while engaging in restorative processes. The second set should include cards that have the following words on them, one word per card: Affirmation, Validation, Reflection, Reframe. You need a copy of both sets for every group of two or three people.

INSTRUCTIONS

First, you will need to familiarize yourself with the definitions of each of these strategies, as well as when and how to use each one:

Affirmation: Emphasizes the implicit strength and/or effort in the speaker's statement. Builds self efficacy and confidence.

Validation: Reinforces that the speaker's experience makes sense. Communicates empathy.

Reflection: Synthesizes and repeats back the main points, feelings, or needs shared by the speaker. Allows listener to "check out" their understanding of what was said.

Reframe: A type of reflection that refocuses or redirects the emphasis of the speaker's statement. Defuses tension and re-contextualizes the topic.

Present an overview of these strategies, with emphasis on the "why" (their purpose/intended goal) and the "how" (their basic formula).

It's important that you become familiar with each of these four strategies before leading this activity. We appreciate the following resources for your reference:

- "[Understanding Concepts of Validation, Affirmation, and Appreciation](#)" from Licensed Clinical Social Worker and Motivational Interviewing trainer Jesse Jonesberg (Berg) via Intrinsic Change, LLC.
- "[Reflective Listening](#)," by Neil Katz & Kevin McNulty (1994), uploaded by Syracuse University's Maxwell School of Citizenship & Public Affairs.
- "[Framing and Reframing](#)" from Boise State's "Making Conflict Suck Less."

Divide your group of learners into groups of two or three. Groups of three can be helpful because the third person can weigh in as a coach giving additional ideas and perspective. Give each group two sets of flashcards- one set should include 3-6 scenarios or statements, the other set should have the 4 strategies. Person A will randomly select (without looking) a scenario card and read it out loud. Person B will select (also without looking) a strategy card. Person B will then attempt to craft a response to the scenario using that strategy.

For example, Person A reads the statement written below in Example 1, then Person B pulls the Validation card. Person B will work on thinking through a validating statement for Example 1. Sample responses for each strategy are

listed below. Person A should listen to Person B's response, and continue in natural conversation. This is an important next step as some learning will occur when the group witnesses what type of response each strategy elicits from Person A. Person C's role is to listen and provide support when asked. Optional: ask Person B to write down their response so that it is recorded and can be shared back during the debrief.

- Example 1) Harmed party: "I think what he (responsible person) really needs is boot camp. When I was his age, I enlisted. We had to run for miles holding our rifles over our heads until we threw up. That will make him think differently about doing anything like this again."
 - **Reflection:** It sounds like you are feeling frustrated and have some ideas about how (responsible person) could learn from this, based on your experience.
 - **Validation:** I can understand that from your experience in the military, physical exertion is one way to create discipline.
 - **Affirmation:** I see that you have grown through physical discipline and perseverance and would like to see others learn the same way.
 - **Reframe:** You already have clear ideas about what might help (responsible person) gain perspective. Let's brainstorm some more options. We're looking for ideas that help (responsible person) use their strengths to repair harmed relationships.

The group can then switch roles. So, Person B might read the scenario, Person C creates the strategic response, and Person A offers coaching.

The activity can be complete after each person in the triad has had the opportunity to listen and provide each of the 4 responses to a scenario. Then, bring the whole group together for the debrief.

For advanced practitioners looking to up-level their skills via more vulnerability and risk-taking, you can invite a next phase of practice. In this phase, instead of utilizing the flashcards, participants will utilize personal experiences or beliefs that feel risky to share. For example, Person A could share a past choice that they are ashamed of, or state a controversial belief that they believe Person B may or may not agree with. Person B will still pull a strategy flashcard and

practice responding to Person A with that particular response. Note: this level of practice should only be introduced to groups of learners who have established trust and group norms for how to engage respectfully in the learning process.

Additional Example Scenarios:

Feel free to use these examples at first, but keep in mind your learners will benefit by utilizing examples that are derived from specific scenarios and statements from your community.

- Example 2) Person taking responsibility for shooting squirrels with a BB gun in his backyard: "I hate those filthy critters. Everyday they're destroying my property, meanwhile the neighbors are feeding them like house pets. I know what I did wasn't right, but what was I supposed to do?"
- Example 3) Person taking responsibility for forging prescription painkillers: "I am a terrible person. I really messed up this time. I don't know how it got this bad. How will I ever be a good mother? This just isn't me."
- Example 4) Parent whose child has committed a crime: "I'm ready to give up on her. She's a lost cause."
- Example 5) Child of parent in example 4: "My mom thinks I'm a lost cause. Sometimes I think she's right."
- Example 6) Youth responsible person about their reparative contract: "I don't think I can manage this. I want to make things right, but I'm a failure. I just dropped out of school. I've never completed anything."
- Example 7) Harmed person about their neighbors: "I'm okay with this process going forward, but I'll never trust them again. They think they can get away with murder and just get a little slap on the hand? I hope they learn something from this, but it seems like punishment is what really makes people think twice."
- Example 8) Harmed person: "You're not expecting me to forgive him, are you? He's a low life and he'll never change. Someone who could do this must be really messed up."

DEBRIEF

- As the listener, was there one strategy that was easier or harder for you to apply when coming up with your response statement? What did you notice about the differences?
- As the speaker, how did the different strategies affect you and your relationship to your own story? How did they affect your connection with the person listening?

LESSON

By becoming more intentional about how we listen for others' feelings, needs, strengths, and experiences, and more deliberate in selecting our responses, we offer a more empathetic connection with a harmed or responsible person and avoid habitual responses colored by our own biases. Developing a nuanced understanding of how to use these responses and their impacts enables us to choose how we listen and engage more responsibly.

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