Asking Questions and Giving Feedback

Inquire: How to Behave in a Group

Overview

Working in a group requires numerous social interactions that can be tricky to navigate. What is the best way to ask questions? When should we give feedback? What is the best way to listen to others in the group? This lesson will cover these questions and provide ways to actively listen, ask questions, provide feedback, and receive feedback. Teams grow as a unit, and the skills taught in this lesson will help to promote that growth for the whole group.

Big Question: How closely do you listen to others when they talk to you?

Watch: A Regular Business Meeting

Imagine you’re in a business meeting at work. During this meeting, you are required to use several skills. First, your boss is reviewing how sales have been in the past month. There is a lot of information coming at you, including statistics and dates. To best prepare for the discussion, you implement active listening. Active listening requires the receiver of a message to pay full attention to the message, respond to the original message, and be able to repeat the message back to the person. You fully focus on what your boss is saying and even jot down brief notes of specific things you want to remember.

Then, your boss mentions something you don’t completely understand. Now it is time to construct a question to clarify your understanding. To do this, you ask your boss specifically about the situation you misunderstood, and you’re sure to be brief. Because your question was clear and concise, your boss is able to clarify the misunderstanding and get back to explaining the matters at hand.

Next in the meeting, a coworker stands up and begins presenting an overview of an event that she hosted last week to increase sales. The event is done yearly, so this presentation is to discuss what went well and what didn’t. While she goes over everything from the event, you write down some suggestions of what she could do better next year. When your colleague is done speaking, she asks if anyone has questions or feedback. You begin with a compliment about how well she planned the event. Then, you give a suggestion about changing the itinerary of the event. And then, you give another compliment about how many people attended the event. This tactic is called a compliment sandwich, and will leave the situation with a positive feeling.

In this hypothetical situation, you used many skills to effectively communicate. How many of these skills do you already use in your daily life? Which skills do you think you could improve upon?
Read: Listening and Providing Feedback

Overview

In a group, you will need to listen to what other people have to say. Or, you will need to ask a question. Or, you will need to give feedback to a team member. Or, possibly, you will need to receive feedback from members of your group. This lesson will provide some ways to make doing all of those things easier when the time comes.

What is Active Listening?

Active listening requires the receiver of a message to pay full attention to the message, respond to the original message, and be able to repeat the message back to the person. This is often characterized by a listener nodding their head and providing small amounts of verbal feedback when appropriate. Active listening is a skill used in several professions, including medicine and counseling. In your everyday life, active listening can be useful when providing support or advice to a friend or coworker when they have a tough situation ahead of them. Active listening skills show your commitment of support to the person you are listening to. It also helps you to remember and understand the messages you hear in a day. Practicing active listening in your daily life will make you a better team player and friend.

What is in a Good Question?

Asking questions can be daunting. Often, we don’t know what to ask or how to phrase a question. We fear that a question might come off as rude or demeaning. There are a few easy things to keep in mind when crafting a question to avoid those issues. First, you need to be direct. Don’t take five minutes explaining your way around what you want to ask. Be direct with the question and let the speaker answer it so that everyone can get on the same page sooner. Ask the question and avoid lengthy explanations. This is the best way to address any misunderstandings or issues quickly.

Second, be concise. In a situation where someone is answering questions, there will inevitably be multiple people with questions. Keep your question as brief as possible to help ensure that you get a satisfying answer without it taking too long.

Finally, keep your questions constructive. To avoid making them sound hurtful, phrase them in a way that isn’t rude. The best way to do this is to frame them around your understanding of the issue. Make it clear that your question is to clarify a misunderstanding and that you want to give the speaker an opportunity to better explain something confusing. Rather than saying, “You weren’t clear when you explained this thing. What did you mean?” try saying, “I didn’t quite understand what you meant. Can you explain it differently?” Focusing issues around you and your understanding avoids the perception of the blame game. You aren’t attacking the speaker, you just don’t understand something. Focusing it away from the speaker and more toward yourself will keep things constructive and helpful.

How to Give Constructive Feedback

In a group setting, you will often have to provide feedback to group members. It is important to understand the purpose of feedback. Feedback is the process of providing suggestions about what a member of a team needs to do to perform better at a certain task. It isn’t to tear someone down or make them feel bad for what they did. Feedback is meant to help someone learn and grow. There are a few ways you can keep it centered on helping the recipient learn.
First, try a compliment sandwich. You mention something a person did well that they should keep doing. Then, you tell them something they need to improve — not something they were bad at — followed by another thing they did well. Keeping it positive will help everyone feel good walking away from the situation.

Second, know what your recipient wants in their feedback. Some people in a team will only want direct statements about what they didn’t do as well. Some people want it sugar coated. Knowing how people like to hear feedback will help you give feedback from which they are able to grow.

Third, don’t be negative. Again, it is about growth, not blame. Avoid statements such as, “you did this very poorly,” or “you were pretty bad,” and instead focus on language that encourages them to do better. “You should try to improve at this.” “I know you can do better at that.” Keeping your statements positively focused helps everyone come away from the experience better.

Finally, don’t list problems; offer solutions. Feedback should be constructive, so offer ways that a person can fix the problems you noticed. It is very defeating to hear a list of things you did poorly. If instead you provide a list of things that can fix a problem, someone is much more likely to improve and do better in the future.

How to Receive Feedback Constructively

Sometimes, you will be the one receiving feedback. It can be hard if you don’t know how to receive feedback constructively. This section will provide some tips on how to do that.

First, don’t take it personally. Feedback isn’t a personal attack; it’s an opportunity to grow. Don’t be mad when someone explains how you could do better. Take it as an opportunity to learn.

Second, ask questions to clarify. If you don’t understand what they mean with a suggestion, or you thought you did something the proper way, ask them to explain how you didn’t. If you don’t understand how you messed up, you can’t fix it.

Finally, follow through on it. You won’t get feedback just for the fun of it. Listen to what they have to tell you and try to implement some of the things they point out to you. Feedback is meant to help you improve, but you never will if you don’t follow through on the given advice.

Reflect Poll: How Do You Want Feedback?

What kind of feedback do you prefer to receive?

- direct statements of what you need to improve
- all nice things
- only recommendations about what to fix
Expand: Listening Versus Hearing

Overview
Many people assume that listening and hearing are either the same thing or close enough for the difference not to matter. There’s a big difference between the two though, and this lesson will show you that difference, as well as explain why listening is usually the better thing to do.

Listening
Listening is when you give your attention to the sounds that you are hearing. Listening is what allows you to understand the words someone says to you, rather than simply acknowledging that noise is happening. You should listen during conversations and presentations. The primary use of listening is to understand what is being said. Too often, people listen simply to respond, trying to figure out enough of what is being said to formulate the perfect response to that person. Instead, you should listen to understand so you can carry on a successful conversation with the other person. This is where active listening comes in. Active listening is a step beyond normal listening and will allow you to have more useful conversations.

Hearing
When your ears register sound, you are hearing. You may not know what you are hearing, but you are able to hear a sound of some sort. In a social setting, don’t rely on your hearing, it’s too passive. You need to be focused on listening. Knowing that someone is speaking is not good enough. You need to pay attention to what they are specifically saying. In a conversation, your listening can be interrupted by hearing noises other than the person you are listening to. When this happens, it is important to focus even more attention on what you are listening to instead of being distracted by the new noise you are hearing. For instance, if someone turns on a large fan that prevents you from listening to a speaker, you should try to ignore the fan or find a way to turn it off so that you can go back to listening to what is being said.

Lesson Toolbox

Additional Resources and Readings
A short video providing ways to improve your listening skills
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWPkHHlchlE

A short video providing tips on how to ask good questions
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XeJ03dDGICk

A short video providing tips on effective listening
- Link to resource: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lwWj_SlDpzg

Lesson Glossary
active listening: requires the receiver of a message to pay full attention to the message, respond to the original message, and be able to repeat the message back to the person
**feedback**: the process of providing suggestions about what a member of a team needs to do to better perform a certain task

**listening**: when you give your attention to the sounds you hear

**hearing**: when your ears register that they are receiving sound

### Check Your Knowledge

1. Hearing and listening are the same thing.  
   a. True  
   b. False
2. Feedback should be productive and give advice about what to fix.  
   a. True  
   b. False
3. Questions should be kept concise and direct.  
   a. True  
   b. False

### Answer Key:

1. B  
2. A  
3. A

### Citations

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