

Listening to Resolve Conflict

Last update: 4/20/26

Description

Listening is a core skill in resolving any conflict. Without listening, parties don't truly understand each other's story, including the values, interests and emotions involved in the conflict. Without a deeper understanding, solutions that truly meet the needs of those in conflict will remain elusive.

Listening is often taken for granted as something we do every day. However, listening deeply in a way that builds understanding and trust is much harder than it looks. And good listening is too often forgotten when we are busy, stressed, or dealing with a difficult issue. It takes intentional practice to unlock the power of listening.

Studies show that listening well has many hidden benefits. When you listen deeply you strengthen neural connections associated with focus and memory. Feeling deeply heard lowers stress levels and creates chemical changes in our brains. We feel more connected and better able to regulate emotions. All these hidden changes are helpful to resolving conflicts more effectively.

Definition

- **Listening:** Listening is personally attentive and responsive communication that leads to awareness, understanding, and empathy (Listen First Coalition, 2022)

Three-step model of listening

OCDR recommends reflecting on this three-step model to improve your listening skills, especially when dealing with conflict.

1. Create space	2. Listen for Deeper Understanding	3. Respond to build trust
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open space for attentive listening • Focus on the conversation • Use appropriate listening body language • Be aware of eye contact/facial expressions • Don't multitask 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Suspend judgement • Suspend the desire to rebut & argue • Get curious! Ask questions! • Identify underlying interests • Pay attention to values and feelings at play 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reframe to clarify meaning • Acknowledge feelings and challenges • Express areas of agreement and disagreement • Show appreciation for the exchange • [Maybe - identify next steps]

Things to avoid when listening well

The following behaviors are generally not helpful when listening to deeply understand someone else. These behaviors may have a time and place or be part of a different phase of the conversation, but not when you are in listening mode:

- Fixing the person
- Superficial or passive listening
- Escalating
- Attacking or going on the offensive
- Defending
- Deflecting – “This isn’t my fault!”
- Diminishing – “This happens all the time, it’s not a big deal.”
- Foregrounding your own issues – “This feels just like when I...”
- Shutting down

Reflection questions

1. The last time you had a difficult conversation, what made it hard to listen well in the moment?
2. Which aspect of this model would you like to practice the next time you have a difficult conversation at work, in your personal life, or in the community?
3. What would you add to this listening model?
4. When was the last time you felt deeply listened to? What was that experience like?
5. Do you find it harder to listen well in certain situations or with certain people? What makes it hard?

Additional resources

- [The Power and Impact of Good Listening](#)
- [The Effects of Listening on Speaker and Listener while Talking about Character Strengths](#)
- [The Neuroscience of Being Heard](#)

Also see OCDR handouts, “Questions for Resolving Conflict” and “Things to Do and to Avoid in Conflict”