



## Five deep listening skills to help navigate workplace conflict

By Anna Shields, Consensio, 21 March 2022

**Listening skills are paramount to the communications process, but are often overlooked and misunderstood. Anna Shields provides five tips that will take your listening skills to the next level.**

Listening is the building block of all communication; it is essential for collaborative, engaged, and productive workforces. When staff are in conflict and emotions are running high, listening can be a challenge. Yet listening well and deeply can pave a path to resolution.

During communication skills training courses, we are reminded of the importance of 'listening' skills, such as being attentive, not interrupting, and asking open questions.

However, what is often missing from this training is understanding what to listen for.

Here are five things we can listen for when we are in conflict, which will take listening skills to the next level.

### 1. Emotions

Our emotions and mood influence our interactions. When people in conflict feel under attack, anger is a common reaction. But often, there's more to it than just anger, and it's important to identify what is lying beneath the anger.

By picking up on something that's been said, and asking someone how they feel, we can demonstrate that we're listening. This helps people feel 'heard' and acknowledges that their feelings matter.

Hearing how another person feels helps us see past the words or actions in a dispute, and paves the way to empathy. Once one person shows empathy, others often follow suit, helping to defuse anger and find a more constructive way forward.

### 2. Repetition

In any discussion, especially a heated exchange, when someone repeatedly reiterates the same points, it is easy to switch off and stop listening. However, this repetition can be a useful signal that underlying issues need to be explored.

If someone repeats the same point, digging further can reveal new insights. For example, a teammate may continuously remark that there's no point in offering an opinion, as it won't change anything.

Listening carefully, reflecting this back, and asking them to expand on what they mean, could reveal that an upsetting experience has stayed with them, or that there may be a personal issue at play that is affecting their mood and resilience.

### **3. Needs**

We all have different needs in our personal and professional lives. At work, our needs range from job security and stability, to respect and recognition. When parties are entrenched in conflict, they often feel their professional needs are not being met.

Listening for these needs, and allowing others to express them, can help build understanding.

For example, a team member working in a hybrid workplace could be consumed by the idea that their manager avoids them by coming in on the days they're not in the office. Exploring this further could help reveal that the person feels disrespected or undervalued by their manager.

### **4. Assumptions, perceptions & expectations**

Another addition to deeper listening is listening for assumptions, perceptions, and expectations. When in conflict, we often make assumptions about a situation, which may create a distorted narrative.

Perceptions are personal and subjective. Whereas one person might perceive a question in a team meeting as a personal attack, another can interpret it as curiosity.

Our perceptions are influenced by our expectations. If we expect someone to dismiss our views, then we're more likely to perceive that they are doing so. By listening out for these three elements, we can help people in conflict differentiate between what was intended by one side, and how this was experienced by the other.

### **5. Judgement**

Finally, a key listening skill is the ability to listen to oneself. The questions we ask and the language we use might be perpetuating the conflict. If, whilst someone is speaking, we push our own opinions or try to fix their issues, we are not allowing people to figure out their course of action.

To be an effective listener, we have to resist the urge to problem-solve or give advice. When we listen in a non-judgemental way, we give others the space to reflect on their situation more objectively and decide for themselves how to move on.

Using these five tips for listening can unlock a deeper understanding of ourselves and others, and encourage more human experiences and interactions at work and beyond.