

# Reflective Listening

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## Introduction

Listening is following the thoughts and feelings of another and understanding what the other is saying from his or her perspective. Reflective listening is a special type of listening that involves paying respectful attention to the content and feeling expressed in another person's communication. Reflective listening is hearing and understanding, and then letting the other know that he or she is being heard and understood. It requires responding actively to another while keeping your attention focused completely on the speaker. In reflective listening, you do not offer your perspective by carefully keep the focus on the other's need or problem. Thus reflective listening consists of a step beyond what is normally thought of as listening:

1. Hearing and understanding what the other person is communicating through words and "body language" to the best of your ability.
2. Responding to the other person by reflecting the thoughts and feelings you heard in his or her words, tone of voice, body posture, and gestures.

Reflective listening is a kind of "checking out" process to determine that both you and the speaker understand what he or she is trying to say. The reflection allows the other to verify that you are hearing accurately. In order for this process to be effective, you must be able to perceive accurately what the other is experiencing and communicating. Understand the communication at both the content and feeling level; and, if there is a problem, commit to be present to the other while he or she works through that problem and arrives at a solution. When you can answer the question, "What is going on with this person right now?" and have your answer verified, then you are listening with precision.

Reflective listening has more than one purpose. You can use reflective listening to help you understand what the speaker is saying. It also allows the speaker to feel heard. Reflective listening can help the speaker achieve his or her outcomes. Listening can help the speaker clarify his or her thoughts on some matter, decide on a course of action, or explore his or her feelings to some new depth. It is the useful for both speaker and listener.

Reflective listening is useful in a variety of situations. You can use listening to help when another person is experiencing a difficulty or problem. Also, the communication skills of problem solving, assertion, conflict management, and negotiation all require the extensive listening. In social situation listening can create a climate of warmth between people. Listening is also important for handling resistance or anger in others. It is needed to settle disputes. Leading group discussions/conversations require effective listening as well. Directions can be clarified by listening. In general, reflective listening is useful in conducting any difficult conversations with another.

The reflective listening process offers a number of benefits:

1. It lets the speaker know that she or he has been heard, understood, cared for, and supported.
2. It gives the other feedback on what he or she said and how it came across.
3. It allows you to check your own accuracy in hearing what the other has said.
4. It avoids the illusion of understanding.
5. It helps prevent the “mental vacation” in which you are inattentive during the conversation.
6. It helps the other focus on self, vent, sort out issues, express feeling, and deal more effectively with emotions.
7. It allows the other to move to deeper levels of expression at his or her own pace.
8. It helps the other to think and articulate more clearly.
9. It helps the other arrive at a solution to his or her own problem.
10. It helps you clarify what you are expected to do.
11. It helps you deal effectively with the issue, problem and/or needs the other raised.

Reflective listening can be grouped into two skill clusters:

- Attending skills- the skills of non-verbally communicating that you are empathetic with the other. This skill area involves all the elements of your physiology: eyes, posture, etc. You try to communicate that there is rapport between you and the other. These skills are used throughout the reflective listening process, as appropriate.
- Reflective skills- the skills of reflecting or expressing to the other the essence of the content and feelings you hear as well as summarizing larger segments of what is said. These responses are used throughout the exchange whenever a significant segment of the communication is heard.

## **Attending Skills**

Attending is giving your physical and psychological attention to another person in a communication situation. Effective attending conveys non-verbally that you are interested and are paying careful attention to the other.

In our culture effective physical attending takes place when you adopt a posture of involvement that includes facing the person speaking to you, establishing good eye contact, avoiding distractions, maintaining an interested silence, and arranging to have an appropriate environment for the conversation.

The following are several components of attending:

- Contact: Eye contact is one way of indicating interest in the other person, because the eyes are one of the key modes of communication. This does not mean that eye contact must be a fixed stare. If you are honestly interested and at ease, you will look naturally at the other person throughout the communication. Another element of contact is the distance between yourself and the other person. It is important to base this on the

comfort level of the other person. Some experimentation is usually necessary before two people discover the most comfortable distance between themselves.

- **Gestures:** A great deal is communicate by body movements. If you become fidgety, drum your fingers, cross your arms, or sneak glances at your watch while listening, you may be conveying an unintended message to the other person. The key is to only use gestures consistent with what is being communicated.
- **Environment:** The environment, or setting, should support the communication. A Space which promotes privacy for undisturbed conversations is essential. Consider removing barriers between yourself and the person you are listening to (such as a large table that comes between you, a car door you might be leaning on, or a crowd that happens to surround you at the moment). If that is not possible, choose an alternate space or a more appropriate time to communicate.
- **Interested Silence:** A period of active, attentive silence serves as a gentle nudge to the other to move deeper into the conversation. It allows the other time to think and reflect and then comfortably proceed at his or her own pace. The speaker may pause and you, the listener, can attend without having to say anything. Giving the speaker time to experience and explore the feelings that churn up from within often enables him or her to explore their feelings at a deeper level. Silence is particularly useful in situations of loss or grief, such as the death of a loved one or a significant personal loss. Appropriate silence is useful in helping the other talk about a difficult problem.

The primary message in attending is that both your physical presence and what you say matter. Always adjust the intensity of your attending to the other's level of comfort. Keep focus on the other in attending and responding.

Keep in mind that these generalizations about attending are only true in our culture. If what you do when you are attending doesn't seem to be comfortable for the other, then vary your behavior until it achieves the response you desire. In general, take your cues from the speaker. If he or she seems to want to be face-to-face with full eye contact, do your best to maintain it. If sitting side-by-side is more comfortable for the other, arrange to do that instead. The easiest route to good attending is to be as empathetic as you are able and then attend and maintain rapport with them. The message, "I am attending" will be communicated.

## **Reflecting Skills**

Reflecting skills are the "checking out" process. In responding to the other you are expressing the essence of both the content and the feeling the other has communicated to you. As the listener, your response is short, succinct, and stated in your own words. It is important to check out and verify your accurate perception of small segments of another person's communication. Each small segment captures a thought, feeling, or meaning, or several of these that fit together with a theme or are connected in some specific way. In reflective listening you will listen to a

“Bite size piece” of the other’s communication and state the essence of it to the other in your own words. “Checking” another’s communication allows you to digest a workable amount of content and feelings. Breaking the conversations down in this way allows both parties to focus their cognitive abilities in manageable segments of a whole communication.

Reflecting skills are broken down into five categories:

**ACKNOWLEDGMENT RESPONSES:**

Brief, one to three-word statement or nonverbal gestures. These response demonstrate to the speaker that you are following the conversations. Such response help the other know he or she is being listened to. Examples are:

Um-humm.	How about that!
Uh-huh.	Go on.
Oh.	Yeah.
Sure.	You did, eh?
You betcha!	Yes.
No fooling!	Sounds good.
Right.	Right on!

**REFLECTING CONTENT:**

Listening accurately to another person and reflecting the essence of the content to the other in your own words.

**REFLECTING FEELINGS:**

Listening accurately to another person and reflecting the feeling component of the communication to the other in your own words.

**REFLECTING MEANINGS:** (combining feelings and content)

Listening accurately to another person and reflecting the essence of both the content and the feelings the other has expressed.

**SUMMARIZING**

Listening accurately to another person and reflecting the main points of the other’s communication. Summarizing condenses all of what a person has said into two or three sentences.

The process of reflecting requires that the speaker be heard in manageable segments. Following each significant segment of the communication allows you as a listener to express your perception of the essence of that segment and check the accuracy of your listening.

Your statement to the other provides a check to insure that you are hearing accurately and understanding what he or she is communicating. Your reflection (statement or expression of this essence of a specific chunk of communication) to the other is heard by the other at the unconscious level. If it fits with the speaker’s model of the world at that moment, he or she will continue the conversation without a break. If the reflection is “off target,” the speaker will become conscious of the mismatch at the conscious level and make the necessary correction. For

example, the speaker may say, “No, that’s not quite right. I think it’s more like irritation.” If the reflection is completely “off-target,” it diverts the conversation and takes the focus off the other.

When using reflective listening skills you will often “break in” to the other’s communication. Some people speak so quickly it’s difficult to get a word in at all. The risk is that if you don’t step in and reflect the other person will begin to repeat themselves or will become frustrated because they do not feel that you understand. When your “interruption” is an accurate reflection, the interruption becomes a facilitation response.

The reflecting process involves four steps:

**1. Taking in Cues:** As another communicates, you listen for and record cues in three areas:

<i>Content</i>	The words actually stated and meaning of those words.
<i>Feelings</i>	The feelings stated or implied in the communication.
<i>Context</i>	The material you know or are aware of that related to the communication but isn’t communicated: where it is being said, other information he or she has related to you in the past, etc.

**2. Sorting:** Sifting through the cues to arrive at a judgement about the essence of a particular “chunk” of the communication.

**3. Drawing a conclusion:** Determining what the essence of the communication is. Formulating a sentence to yourself about what you think the speaker is trying to say.

**4. Expressing the essence:** Stating the essence of a “chunk” of the communication to the other in your own words in order to “check out” whether or not you are understanding the other.

You can reflect behavior as well as words. To reflect behavior you reflect what you see. This is especially important when you know someone is feeling something but isn’t saying anything.

A “door opener” is one example of a situation where there are usually no words to reflect, only behavior. A “door opener” is a non-coercive invitation extended to another to talk, an invitation to get started. It is a statement that expresses your perception of what the other is thinking or feeling. A door opener is usually a reflection of only the behavior you see because often no words are expressed. Door openers involve four steps:

1. Say (reflect) what you see in the other’s behavior.
2. Invite to talk, either stating or implying that you are able and willing to take time to listen.
3. Wait in silence to see if the other person wants to talk.
4. Listen reflectively, as appropriate.

Some examples of door openers are:

- You seem troubled.
- You sure look excited.
- You're really annoyed.
- You appear upset about something.
- It seems like things really went well.

Responding skills can generally be applied appropriately in the following situations:

1. When the person you are listening to has a strong need to be heard. (The intensity of the speaker's emotions indicated whether or not there is a strong need).
2. When you are confused about what another person is trying to say to you.
3. When you are listening to another person and you agree to do something. In such cases, it is often helpful for you to reflect back to the other what it is you think you agreed to, just to confirm your understanding of what will be involved. Even though two or more parties may think they mutually agree on doing something, unless an effective listener among them takes the opportunity to reflect the specifics of the agreement back to the other(s), it frequently ends up with the parties involved walking away from the exchange with differing interpretations.

## Reflecting Content

Reflecting content is listening accurately to another person and reflecting the essence of the content of the communication to the other in your own words. In reflecting content, you focus on the content of what a speaker is saying to you, including thoughts, ideas, beliefs, facts, data, etc. In content reflection the focus is the thoughts and ideas of the other, the subject of a particular communication.

### *Reflecting content can be useful in:*

- Enabling you to check your understanding of the content of what is being communicated to you. This includes clarifying understandings, plans, and agreements in both interpersonal and group settings.
- Reducing repetition on the part of the other person, because you are able to confirm to him or her your understanding of what was said to you.
- Letting you give the other feedback on how he or she is coming across, which often allows the other to gain new insights as a result of the reflective listening process.
- Helping the other person gain direction and work toward a solution to a concern or problem.

### *Significant application for reflecting content include:*

- Fielding questions raised in a group setting so that you may be certain you are answering the correct questions.
- Clarifying directions so that you can proceed to take the appropriate action.
- Grasping quickly the essence of the content of the conversation before moving into an intense listening situation.
- Conducting content-centered discussions to ensure understanding of various points made.

- Facilitating a problem solving process with another.
- Managing conflicts to clarify the other's position, interests, and values in the dispute.

Often when someone is either communicating rapidly to you or conveying a lot of information you can “tune-out” of the conversation and check back in occasionally with an “uh-huh.” The skill of reflecting content helps you take this sort of “mental vacation” when listening to another.

## Reflecting Feelings

Reflecting feeling is listening accurately to another and naming the emotional state of the other in your own words. It involves stating a feeling word that captures the emotion of the other. It involves expressing in your own words the essential feelings stated or strongly implied by the other.

The purpose of reflecting feeling is to bring vaguely expressed feelings into clearer awareness. So often, others talk about their feelings as “it” or “them,” as if feelings were not part of themselves. Reflecting feelings assists the other to “own” his or her feelings. Feelings are often more central than the content in another person's communication.

There is great value in hearing both negative and positive feelings. People need to express themselves when they have strong positive emotions and reflective listening can allow the listener to repeat and participate in this process. Listening is not just for problems or bad moments.

In using feeling reflections, begin your response as follows:

“You feel...”

“You sound...”

“You look...”

“You're feeling...”

“You're sounding...”

“You're looking...”

This helps the other to get in touch with an own the feeling and represent his or her experience accurately. In reflecting feelings, it is important to keep a tentative flavor and always allow time for the other to correct your reflection if it is inaccurate.

The skillful use of reflecting feelings depends on the listener's ability to identify feelings. Some feelings are more subtle than others. Feelings of love, hate, disgust, fear, or anger are examples of strong feelings that the other is usually in touch with pretty well. More subtle feelings, such as affection, pleasure, hostility, guilt, or anxiety are often disguised behind non-feeling words. As a listener, look for the hidden feelings and bring them out in the open for the other to recognize more clearly, using the following formula:

1. Look at the other's physical signs (energy, body, facial expression).
2. Pay attention to verbal signs (tone, rate, volume, inflection, feeling words, content).
3. Say “You feel \_\_\_\_” or “You're feeling \_\_\_\_.”

In feeling reflection, the focus is the emotion of the other. The process involved in reflecting feelings is using the responding process with emphasis on the feeling component of the conversation.

Our feeling vocabularies are often limited. We often describe feelings inaccurately, settling for a mild adjective like upset, for instance, when we really mean furious. A list of feeling words is included in Appendix A to help you increase your feelings vocabulary. Take time to look through this list and think of time when you have had these feelings. Begin with some negatives and finish with some positives. Make use of these words to listen to others' feelings effectively.

## Reflecting Meaning

Reflecting meanings is listening accurately to another and reflecting both the content and feeling of the other in a single response. The content and feelings can be tied together using such words as "because" or "when." The skill involves understanding and reflecting both the feeling and the related content of the other's communication in the listener's own words. The following formulas can be used:

- "You feel (feeling word) because (content)."
- "You feel \_\_\_ about \_\_\_."
- "You feel \_\_\_ when \_\_\_."
- "You feel \_\_\_ that \_\_\_."

This is the way in which you put it all together. Listening well involves reflecting meanings and if you can use all of the skills described above you should be able to reflect the essence of the other's communication in this way.

## Summarizing

Summarizing is listening accurately to another person and reflecting the main points of the other's communication in one to three sentences. The idea is to capture the essence of the other's thoughts and feelings about a particular value or perspective. For example, someone says to you:

"I think the arms race is one of the most stupid behaviors I've ever witnessed! We build 100 new missiles, so the Soviet Union builds 120; then we have to build another 50 to regain our advantage. This goes on and on, and the superpowers never seem to stop and see what they're doing. Both sides already have enough weapons to destroy each other's cities and production sites and to kill every person in the United States and the Soviet Union many times over. And we authorize expenditures for weapons that are often obsolete before they're ready for use. Besides that, we're wasting so much money on these idiotic weapons that we don't have enough to take care of human needs. I can't believe how the leader of our government and other governments can be so senseless!"

A summary of the other's statements might be:

“You’re upset and confused as to why government leaders would continue to escalate the arms race beyond security needs. The expenditures are often wasteful and take money away from important human needs.”

Keep in mind that summarizing, while a useful tool, is different from reflective listening. Reflective listening involves breaking into the monologue of the other to capture bite-sized pieces of the communication. Summarizing occurs after the speaker has finished a larger piece. Summarizing is useful at the end of a piece of communication, to capture the overall essence of the communication and to come to closure on it.

## Preambles

Preambles are a left over from early days of active and reflective listening training. Have you ever heard someone saying “I feel you are really upset about...” These responses only tend to anger or frustrate people. They feel they are being psychoanalyzed rather than understood. In general it is useful to avoid preambles altogether when constructing reflective responses. Phrases like “so what I hear you saying is...”, “What I’m hearing is...”, and “You’re saying that...” distract from the reflections offered.

Some preambles, used sparingly, can help you, the listener, to test the accuracy of your understanding or to express confusion about what the speaker is saying. Preambles of this kind can be grouped into two categories:

1. Where perceptions appear accurate. These are phrases that are useful when you trust that your perceptions of what the other person is trying to say are accurate, and the other is receptive to your listening:
  - “From your point of view...”
  - “It seems to you...”
  - “In your experience...”
  - “As you see it...”
  - “You think...”
  - “You believe...”
  - “You figure...”
2. Where perceptions appear clouded. These are phrases that are useful when you are having some difficulty perceiving clearly what that other person is trying to say, or it seems that the other might not be receptive to your listening:
  - “It seems like...”
  - “What I guess I’m hearing is that you or you’re...”
  - “It appears that you...”
  - “It might be that you...”

## When To Use Reflective Listening

The reflective listening process is facilitated when the following conditions are present:

- The other person has the stronger need to be heard and the greater emotional energy.
- You have, and choose to take, the time to listen.
- You can remain reasonably separate and objective and not become so personally involved in what the other is saying that you get triggered with a defensive response.
- You trust the resourcefulness of the other person to be responsible for his or her own life.

## High Risk Responses

A “high-risk” responses in listening is a statement which is likely to take the focus off the other and generate negative feelings. Because a key element of listening is keeping the focus on the other’s thoughts and feelings, a high-risk response is not an effective listening reflection. People often use high-risk responses when they think they are listening. The communication process is often frustrated and blocked when the listener uses “high-risk responses.” These responses are experienced by the other as interfering responses and are therefore particularly inappropriate when the other has a strong need, a problem, or strong feelings. High-risk responses general fall into the following three categories:

1. Evaluating and judging is changing the focus of the conversation by shifting it from the other’s concern to your own diagnosis, interpretation, judgement, or praise of the other person or agreement of disagreement with him or her. The subtle message sent in this category is “There’s something the matter with you.”
2. Solving is sidetracking the other person’s communication by moving right away to a solution offered by you. Your questions, advice, ordering, threatening, moralizing, or problem solving often interfere with the other person’s exploring those thoughts and feelings that can lead to solutions which address the heart of the situation. Using response in this category communicate the subtle message that “You’re too dumb to figure this out so I will tell you.” All of these responses except threatening and moralizing are appropriate when the speaker has finished struggling with the issue and needs help or when the speaker has finished whatever he or she wanted to say.
3. Withdrawing is distracting the other person from his or her agenda, often by reassuring the other that everything will be all right or diverting to another agenda. The subtle message conveyed in this category is “I’m really uncomfortable hearing these feelings.”

By taking the focus off the other, high risk response are very likely to:

- Derail the conversation.
- Block the other person from finding the solution to his or her problem.
- Lower the other person’s self-esteem.
- Distance you from the other.
- Diminish the other person’s motivation and initiative.

High-risk responses have the effect of decreasing contact with the other and blocking the other from saying more because they:

- Imply a desire to change or modify the other person.

- Take responsibility away from the other.
- Cause resentment or defensiveness.
- Carry hidden message or implications.
- Are negative and therefore evoke a negative/aggressive response.

High-risk responses tend to take the focus off the other. The following are some specific examples of typical high-risk responses:

## Evaluating/Judging

1. Agreeing or Disagreeing. Making negative evaluations of the other person by agreeing or disagreeing with the other, or criticizing or blaming.

- I agree.
- Yes.
- I completely agree with you.
- You're absolutely right.
- You're all wrong on that point.
- I agree.

2. Criticizing/Blaming. Making the other person feel stupid, outcast, or foolish. (Stereotyping or categorizing).

- You're out of line.
- You didn't do it right.
- That's a stupid thing to say!
- You're a sloppy worker.
- You are a fuzzy thinker.
- You're talking like an engineer.
- You really goofed on this one.
- That was a dumb thing to do.
- It's your fault.

3. Diagnosing. Telling the other person what his or her motives are or analyzing the "why" behind what he or she is doing or saying. (Communicating that you have figured out, or diagnosed, the other).

- You're saying this because you are angry.
- You are jealous.
- What you really need is...
- You have problems with authority.
- You want to look good.
- You're being a bit paranoid.

4. Praising. Offering a positive evaluation or judgement (often condescending, sometime sarcastic).

- You usually have such good judgement.
- You're an intelligent person.
- You have so much potential.
- You've made quite a bit of progress.
- You've always made it in the past.

## Solving

1. Ordering. Telling the other person to do something.
  - You must do this by Friday.
  - You can't do it that way.
  - I expect you to do this.
  - Stop it.
  - Go apologize to her.
2. Threatening. Telling the other person what negative consequences will occur if he or she does something; alluding to the use of force.
  - You had better do this, or else!
  - If you don't do it, then...
  - You'd better not try that.
  - I warn you, if you do that...
3. Moralizing. Telling the other person why he or she ought to do whatever.
  - You really should do this by Friday.
  - You ought to try.
  - It's your responsibility to do this.
  - It's your duty.
  - I wish you would do this.
  - This is something I really urge you to do.
4. Advising. Telling the other person how to solve his or her problem.
  - What I think you should do is...
  - Let me suggest...
  - It would be best for you if...
  - Why not take a different approach?
  - If I were you I'd...
  - The best solution is ...
5. Questioning. Trying to find reasons, facts, motive, causes, information, etc., that will help you solve the other person's problem (close ended questions).
  - Why did you do that?
  - What have you done to solve it?
  - Have you consulted anyone?

- Who has influenced you?
6. Problem Solving. Engaging the other in a problem solving process prematurely.
- Let's problem solve now...
  - We have to be rational about this...
  - Maybe if we brainstorm some alternatives now...
  - Let's set aside these feelings and address the real issues...

## Withdrawing

1. Logical Arguing. Trying to influence the other person with facts, arguments, logic, information, or expert opinions that happen to agree with your own.
  - Do you realize that ...?
  - The facts are in favor of...
  - Let me give you the facts.
  - Here is the right way.
  - Experience tells us that...
2. Reassuring. Trying to make the other person feel better; trying either to talk the other out of his or her feelings (making the feelings go away) or deny the strength of the feelings.
  - You'll feel different tomorrow.
  - Things will get better.
  - It's always darkest before the dawn.
  - Every cloud has a silver lining.
  - It's not that bad.
  - Don't worry so much about it.
3. Diverting. Trying to get the other person away from the problem or getting away from it yourself. Trying to change the focus by kidding, offering other things to do, pushing the problem away.
  - Think about the positive side.
  - Try not to worry about it until you've tried it.
  - Let's have lunch and forget about it.
  - That reminds me of the time when...
  - You think you've got problems!
4. Understanding. Trying to prove to the person that you understand by telling him or her directly, rather than by listening.
  - I understand.
  - I totally grasp what you are saying.
  - I know just how you're feeling.

All the high-risk responses have costs: they take the focus off the other person's agenda and send subtle messages about the other person. They say "you are not OK as you are." High-risk responses need to be recognized and avoided. Listen to others instead.

## Conclusion

High-risk responses subtly tell others that they aren't capable of doing for themselves, that there is something wrong with them, or that what they are saying is uncomfortable for you to hear. People use these response all the time without realizing it and send these subtle messages. Doing so reduces the quality of the interaction and hurts people's feelings.

Reflective listening is very different from these response. Instead of derailing the conversation, it keeps the parties attention on the speaker. It allows for better understanding and allows the speaker to get where he or she wants to go.

Reflective listening involves attending to others. This conveys the level of rapport needed to allow the speaker to comfortably communicate. Reflective listening also involves responding to others to check out the listeners understanding of the communication. The listener seeks cues about what is important to the other, sorts these cues to conclude which are the most important, and expresses the essence of the communication back to the speaker. In other words, the listener checks out his or her understanding of what the other person is trying to say. Good listening attends to both the thoughts and feelings expressed by the other. Instead of using inappropriate responses use reflective listening to enhance the quality of interpersonal communication.