

# What is active listening?

## THE BENEFITS OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Active listening is a technique that allows the listener to glean as much useful information as possible from a conversation, while ensuring that the person who is talking feels worthy, appreciated and respected.

In the return to work context, active listening may help:

- Establish rapport;
- Demonstrate care;
- Develop a deeper mutual understanding;
- Place the listener in a position where they have more control over the direction of the conversation;
- Increase motivation;
- Prevent misunderstandings; and
- Increase the employee's sense of ownership over the solutions to RTW problems.

By really paying attention to what a person is saying, you encourage them to continue talking, as well as ensuring communication remains open and positive.

Active listening will help you become a better communicator, improve your workplace productivity, improve your return to work outcomes and develop better relationships.

## BARRIERS TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING

There are many reasons why busy supervisors find it difficult to really listen to injured employees. These include:

- Their personal beliefs and feelings about the employee and the injury or health problem;
- Production demands and time pressures;
- A lack of support from their own managers; and
- Resentment that their time is being monopolised by one employee.

Employees can also struggle to communicate well, because of such things as their:

- Beliefs and feelings about their supervisor;
- Beliefs and feelings about their injury / illness;
- Fears about job loss;
- Cultural background;
- Concerns about confidentiality;
- Expectation that they will be disbelieved / viewed with suspicion;
- Sense that it is improper to share personal / medical information with the "boss";
- Concerns over sharing information with someone of the opposite gender; and
- Experience of pain, which can be stressful and distracting.

The following is a breakdown of the Five Steps to effective Active Listening. While at a glance they may appear common sense, effective listening is a skill that for most of us must be learned and worked at.

# Five steps to becoming an active listener

## STEP ONE: PREPARE – POSITIVE AND ENGAGED ATTITUDE

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### (a) Recall what you know about the worker

- Organize any thoughts and materials you have with the intention to build upon them.

### (b) Keep an open mind

- Try not to form an opinion about what the worker is saying before they have finished.

### (c) Don't let your inner voice distract you

- Focus your attention on what the worker is saying and not what you are going to say next.

### (d) Eliminate distractions

- Give the worker your full attention. Turn off radios, televisions and put down anything you might be reading (even pen and paper unless necessary).

## STEP TWO: ENGAGE – SHOW THAT YOU ARE LISTENING

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### (a) Utilise Egan's SOLER body language framework

**S:** face the worker **SQUARELY**: adopt a position that indicates involvement (most people are most comfortable with slightly angled positioning rather than face to face);

**O:** adopt an **OPEN POSTURE**: utilise a non defensive posture. Crossed arms and legs can be seen as conveying a lack of interest and involvement;

**L:** **LEAN** towards the worker at times. This indicates your interest in the worker's story;

**E:** maintain good **EYE CONTACT**; and

**R:** attempt to be relatively **RELAXED** and natural in these behaviours.

### (b) Demonstrate that you are listening

- Use verbal responses ("hmmm", "uh huh", "really?") and non-verbal responses (head nods) to convey understanding;
- Use open-ended questions ("then what happened?") to engage yourself in the conversation; and
- Make sure to seek clarification if you do not understand something.

### (c) Concentrate on what the worker is saying

- Avoid thinking about what you are going to say next in response;
- Do not focus solely on the words, but also the feeling the speaker is conveying; and
- Focus less on the person and more on the message.

## STEP THREE: ENCOURAGE – PROVIDE FEEDBACK

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### Ask Questions that demonstrate engagement

- When the worker has finished speaking, respond in such a way that shows you have listened and understood the message. Try:
  - **Paraphrasing** the message and asking the worker whether you have given a fair summation of what they have said (“So you’re saying...”);
  - **Reflecting** the message by describing what the worker seems to be feeling, and let them know you support them (“You sound pretty upset about that”); and
  - **Probing** the worker to encourage them to further describe their situation (“Tell me more about how your rehab is going”).

## STEP FOUR: ASSESS – DEFER JUDGEMENT

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### Try not to interrupt

- Where possible, allow the person to say their piece and unless asked, refrain from giving advice about how you would have handled the situation; and
- Though our natural response might be to get defensive, try to understand, within reason, where the worker is coming from and if you have reason, calmly explain why you disagree. Making the worker feel like they have not been heard will only escalate the problem.

## STEP FIVE: RESPOND – COMMUNICATE YOUR UNDERSTANDING

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### Demonstrate respect and understanding

- Be candid, but open and honest in your response;
- Assert your opinions respectfully; and
- Treat the worker as he or she would want to be treated.