EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION TIPS

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An effective communicator is an effective listener. Sharing our own ideas, opinions, or judgments is counterproductive to effective communication. In order to effectively listen, we need to be self-aware about our *intention*. When we effectively communicate our only goal is to understand the other person.

1 LISTEN CAREFULLY

The desire to jump into a conversation and share our perspective often gets in the way of effective communication. Talking is not always helpful. People need to feel heard and understood. When we listen to understand the perspective of another person, they will feel affirmed, significant, and valued. Being self-aware about how much we are talking vs. listening in a conversation is a great first step.

2 PAY ATTENTION TO BODY LANGUAGE

Your body communicates a lot: your eyes, the position of your arms, how you move around in your chair, whether you lean in or pull back. All these reactions communicate, intentionally or unintentionally, your level of interest in what the person is saying. Think of your body as your greatest tool for communicating that you are listening.

3 BE REFLECTIVE

Reflective listening is a gentle technique that lets the speaker know you are following along. Like a mirror reflecting your image back to you, reflective listening is repeating back what you see and hear in sentence fragments. For example, as the speaker is sharing, don't interrupt or ask a question. Instead, speak *with* them:

Speaker: When I went to the doctor she said all this stress is affecting my health. Blood pressure is up. Cholesterol is a mess. My weight is too pitiful to mention.

Listener: You're stressed.

4 SUMMARIZE THEMES

Summarizing what you heard allows the speaker to hear back what they've said. They may correct you or hear their words in a new way, but they will certainly know you were following along.

Speaker: When I went to the doctor she said all this stress is affecting my health. Blood pressure is up. Cholesterol is a mess. My weight is too pitiful to mention.

Listener: You've got a laundry list of health concerns the doctor is bringing to your attention.

Gg GOOD GRIEF™

5 AFFIRM THE FEELING

Listening is not about testing the facts or making sure a story adds up or even makes sense. It's about seeing the world through someone else's eyes. For example, if the speaker says they are angry at their insurance company, you could say, "Oh my goodness, that sounds infuriating." It doesn't matter whether the insurance company is in the right or wrong. What matters is the process of working through the feelings and making sense of the situation. Affirmation is simply an acknowledgement of the feeling; it's not parsing truth or extent of reality.

6 WATCH YOUR TONE

How we say what we say matters. "You look lovely today." Say those words aloud in a chipper voice and with a smile. Now, say those same words with condescension followed by an eye roll. You don't need the eye roll to emphasize the condescending tone. Tone can be misperceived (and often is). Be aware of your tone. Be aware of past history with the person. How have they perceived you in the past?

7 HONOR SILENCE

Words are not always our friend. Silence makes some of us uncomfortable, but it is an incredible tool that creates space for more sharing. Silence gives us time to process. It acknowledges that words can't make it better, and it honors the intensity of a moment or story.

8 LEAVE IT ALONE

You don't have to be right. Your opinion, perspective, or side of the story doesn't always matter when you're listening. Remember your intention. You're trying to understand not win, change, or fix it.

9 CREATE SAFETY

Trust changes in new situations. Being vulnerable, sharing openly, losing a sense of control, and feeling exposed depends on feeling safe. Creating a safe space starts with all of the above: body language, ability to listen without interruption, not making it about you, and not judging are all critical to establishing trust. If your intention is to understand then safety is critical. If you damage trust, you can earn it back. Creating safety requires humility.

10 BE ORGANIC

Roll with it. Go where the conversation goes. Don't interrupt the process. Be open to the unexpected and random.

11 DON'T GET LOST

If you don't have an agenda or a direction you want to take the conversation then you can't get lost in trusting the process. Don't listen to reply; rather, listen to understand. No agenda required.

12 ASK PROVOKING QUESTIONS

Provoking questions are not the same as probing questions. The difference again is about intention. A provoking question helps the speaker further explore what they are sharing. A probing question is about you, your desire to know more details, your inquisitiveness, and meeting your needs. A provoking question is about the speaker.

> *Speaker*: The funeral service was so intense.
> *Provoking question:* What parts were the hardest for you?
> *Probing question*: What did the funeral cost you?

13 ASK OPEN ENDED QUESTIONS

An open-ended question doesn't have a yes/no response. Think about a teenager: "Did you have a good day at school today?" And the teenager says, "no." An open-ended question frames the question in a way that is open to interpretation: "What was the hardest part of your day?" Open-ended questions are the most effective way to open up the opportunity for sharing.

14 FOLLOW THEIR LEAD

The person sharing is in the driver's seat. Let them take you where they need to go. If you are utilizing all of the above tips then the person speaking will arrive at their intended destination (whether they know it or not). When people share and express themselves they are often working out aloud the need they are trying to get met.

15 INVITE MORE SHARING

You need to earn credibility as someone who is trustworthy, interested in understanding, and someone who cares. All of the above tips create an invitation to the speaker to share more. Inviting more sharing says you care, you're genuinely interested, you have no agenda, you will not judge, and you will keep expressing your desire to understand by continuing to show up and listen.