
Listening and Perception Exercises

Witness Statement

Read out a witness statement from a realistic but fictitious crime, in the role of witness rather than police officer.

At the end, ask the group who tuned into the facts (i.e remembered the details), who picked up on the feelings (e.g distress, anger, anxiety etc) and who focused on intent (what was unsaid, motives etc).

The exercise shows that many of us have a preferred “frequency” that we listen on.

You can also get the group into pairs to discuss what they would say to or ask the witness if they were interviewing them after the crime. Then point out whether this is a fact, feeling or intent comment/question.

The aim is to demonstrate that listening is not just about active listening and recall, but about getting the whole message.

For skills practice, groups of three can work together, rotating the roles of speaker, listener and observer. The speaker talks about a dilemma they have faced in the past. The listener has to listen actively and the observer looks for indicators that the listener is on the same frequency as the speaker, providing feedback at the end.

The power of active listening

This is a quick and easy exercise which shows the power of active listening.

Split the group into pairs, A and B. Take the B group out of the room and ask them to wait outside. Inform the A group that their partner will speak to them for three minutes but that they are not allowed to interact with them. They can, however, put up their hand for five seconds every time their partner says something that makes them want to ask a question, for example.

You can also ask them not just to raise their hand, but to lose focus by staring out of the window or looking at a detail on their partner’s jacket, for instance.

Next, inform the B group that they are to speak to their partner about something of interest to them, for instance their last holiday or anything positive that has happened to them within the last six months.

At the end of the three minutes ask the B group how they felt while talking to their partner. Usually answers include “didn’t feel listened to”, “didn’t understand why they were putting their hand up”, “lost my train of thought because they obviously weren’t listening.”

You can then run the exercise again, this time allowing the A group partner to interact, by asking questions and becoming involved in the conversation. Then compare the two versions to see which was found to be the most satisfying experience.

Stop listening

Take half of the group outside the room and ask those in the room to think of a topic they are passionate about or interested in, whether family, films, or a football team.

Those outside come back in and pair up to listen to what those in the room have to say. However, they will have been briefed to stop listening after 30 seconds. Usually the speakers become frustrated and annoyed, leading to a useful de-briefing discussion on the impact of listening/not listening.

Good listeners

Ask all members of the group to write down the names of three people they consider to be good listeners. Then ask the group if anyone has written down the name of a person they don't like. They very rarely do.

Next, ask if they either like, love or respect the three people they have named. The answer is usually yes.

Follow this by asking them what they think they have to do, to be liked, loved or respected by others. They see the point that they need to be good listeners.

My ideal holiday

Divide the group into pairs: a listener and a talker. The talker has to describe what they want from a holiday but without mentioning a destination. The listener has to practise active listening skills, by listening attentively to what is being said, what is not being said and by demonstrating their listening to the talker, through their behaviour.

After three-four minutes, the listener should summarise the three or four main issues or criteria that they have heard the talker express and suggest a suitable destination.

Take a minute to review how closely the listener's suggestion matched what the talker had said and needed. Also take a minute to review how well the listener demonstrated active listening behaviours. Swap roles and repeat.

Round robin

Give the group a topic to discuss. At various points the trainer says "stop", at which point the next delegate in line must continue the previous delegate's sentence, starting with their last few words.

Once the group gets the hang of this, instead of following the pattern of delegate one to two to three to four etc, the trainer names who has to continue the next part of the statement. This forces all delegates to listen closely to what everyone is saying instead of just the person before them.