

## LISTENING SKILLS EXERCISE

**Understanding is the ultimate goal of a good listener** . . . and of a good husband, father, friend, boss, or coworker. And in our fast-paced culture, it's rare when someone listens to you well enough to understand what you're saying and how you really feel. Practice this Listening Skills Exercise with a partner. And then begin to incorporate the skills into your everyday listening.

The first part is easy. Face your partner and put your body in a posture to listen. That's level one listening, also called **attending**. Attending simply means your body is squared up attentively to the speaker. Your hands are quiet, fingers are still, and your legs are comfortable, not crossed or bouncing off the floor. Your eye contact is consistent; gently focused on the person speaking, but not staring. Look them in the eye for five or six seconds before glancing away to break the natural tension.

Then move to level two, which is **content responding**. This level is *instructional only* . . . you'd never practice this in actual conversations for reasons you'll see shortly.

The first speaker looks at the listener and speaks one clear sentence. The listener, while maintaining his level one attending posture, listens to what's said, pauses, then responds, "You said \_\_\_\_\_," repeating exactly, word-for-word what the speaker said. No paraphrasing. Word-for-word repetition.

Now reverse the roles, having the listener speak a sentence as the first speaker tries his hand at content responding.

This step demonstrates how hard it is to listen accurately. To not finish people's sentences for them. To stay with them to the end of their sentence even when you're not particularly interested in what they're saying.

Level three, called **feeling response**, is the key to better listening. It's the hardest but the most impactful. The first speaker will tell a one-paragraph story of something that happened to them recently. No more than three or four sentences. The listener will attend, listen to the content, *and* attempt to sense what the speaker is feeling *right now*. After the story concludes, the listener pauses and responds, "You feel \_\_\_\_\_."

Remember, feelings happen in real-time, so you're reading how the person is feeling as they're telling the story, not how they felt as it unfolded. For example, if you come home and your wife is explaining how your child just stuck in the dryer, you might say said, "You feel terrified." But if she's telling how your child got stuck in the dryer this morning, and she has a smile on her face, you're probably going to read something like "relieved" or "embarrassed."

As the listener reveals his feeling response, watch the reaction of the speaker. If he nailed it, the speaker won't be able to hide his emotions. And if the word doesn't resonate, try another feeling word, again, watching to see if the reaction of the speaker reflects agreement. Everyone loves to be *heard* and *understood*, so when the listener correctly recognizes a specific feeling word, emotions rise and connection happens.

After the first speaker finishes, reverse the roles and have the listener tell a story. The first speaker now attends, listens to the content of the story, and attempts to coin a feeling word that connects with the second speaker.

It will be apparent that our vocabulary of feeling words is thin. "You feel frustrated." "You feel concerned." All those innocuous words do little to resonate with people's feelings. But when you accurately identify a specific feeling, you'll see an immediate reaction.

Another thing to observe is when the feeling word is close but not entirely accurate. Typically, the speaker will correct the listener, which is good because it stimulates people to talk about how they're feeling. But if he's way *off*, the opposite will happen, and the speaker may shut down or get frustrated because the implication is that the listener wasn't paying attention and/or didn't care about the feelings the speaker expressed.

Everyone we care about and interact with . . . our wives, kids, friends, coworkers want to be heard. "Don't fix me, feel me" is the current-day slogan. Active listening skills, reading feelings, and using good feeling words is a way to improve.