

Self-Assessment. "Am I a passive or active listener?" Mentors who are effective listeners will make their students better communicators and in turn build a stronger relationship with them. One of the most powerful needs of our students is to have an adult listen to and understand them. The first step to becoming an effective listener is self-assessment: How do you normally listen to other people? (Try taking the "Listening Awareness Inventory" to evaluate your listening style.) The first principle of effective listening is active listening. Listening is not a passive reception of information, but a specific set of behavioral skills that can be developed and improved through practice. (For a list of these behaviors, see above.)

Understanding The Other Person: Empathic Listening. Empathic listening is a concept used by many famous authors (Stephen Covey, Carl Rogers) to indicate that understanding another person's messages is not merely a cognitive act. The second principle of effective listening: listen with your heart as well as your head. Empathic listening requires a special commitment to interpret the message of another as an expression of feeling. The why of a message is often much more important than the what. In other words, students may often say things for underlying emotional reasons. These reasons must gradually be brought to light via empathic listening. (For examples of empathic listening, see above.)

Feedback As Positive Reinforcement. Mentors' feedback, both verbal and non-verbal, will play a very significant role in the development of their relationship with their students. Inappropriate, insensitive feedback will cut off the possibility of future disclosures and cause misunderstanding. Feedback should demonstrate empathic listening by acknowledging and respecting a student's opinions and feelings (even if one does not agree with them). The third principle of effective listening: listen to empower. Empathic listening is realized by means of empowering the speaker through feedback. (Empowering a speaker does not necessarily mean agreeing with him/her. Learn how to use feedback to empower by using the sheet listed above.)

Paraphrasing: Getting Students To Listen To Themselves. As a mentor you listen to your student's message and come to the conclusion that there is some inner conflict at work or you simply feel his or her opinions and feelings are incorrect, unjustified, or potentially harmful. The natural tendency is to want to express your own opinion, but will the other person listen? One of the best ways to draw another person out and get him or her to reconsider a message is by paraphrasing it in a strategic manner. The fourth principle of effective listening is paraphrasing: By means of paraphrasing, a mentor can help a student not only to clarify, but also to evaluate his/her own message by considering its potential consequences, ramifications, and possibilities. (Read about paraphrasing in the tools listed above.)

Knowing When To Speak. Learning when to speak and when to let the student speak is very important: Possession of this ability signifies a close relationship with the other person. How often do we try to force a conversation when the other person is not ready to listen? Worst of all, how many times have we interrupted a person at a crucial point and thereby alienated that person? It has often been said that knowing the right thing to say is the key to effective communication, but this is merely half the story. The fifth and most important principle of effective listening is the ability to recognize when speaking is necessary and when it is not. If you are able to practice empathic listening, you will eventually acquire this ability to discern the opportune moments when your message will have the maximum effect.

Conclusion. The most important skill a mentor can possess is that of empathic listening, for it allows him/her to recognize when a message will be most effective.

Summary:

- The first step in becoming an effective listener is to determine if you are a passive or active listener.
- The second step is to practice empathic listening methods in order to interpret another's message in terms of his/her underlying feelings.
- How a mentor responds (verbally and non-verbally) to a student has a great impact upon the development of the relationship. Feedback must be positive and empowering to a student, even if a mentor disagrees with the message.
- The best way to get a student to understand and evaluate an inappropriate feeling or opinion is by paraphrasing it in a strategic manner: putting it in terms that allow him/her to visualize the possible consequences of that feeling or opinion. This new perspective will often provoke a student to question and reconsider his/her position.
- The key to effective listening is recognizing when to speak. This skill involves all the others mentioned as well as a close relationship with another person. If a mentor understands when and how to speak to a student, then in all likelihood he/she will know the right thing to say.