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Strengthening Organizations, Strengthening Communities

THE ART OF ACTIVE LISTENING

Most humans, unless impaired in some way, can hear fairly well. Fewer, however, really know how to listen. Listening describes a more active phase of hearing. Good communication and understanding are made possible by active listening. Active listening is both an art and a skill. It is something to be appreciated, but it doesn't come without some practice.

Active Listening Techniques

There are a few but effective techniques used in being an active listener. These include verbal and non-verbal techniques. Non-verbals include: 1) good eye contact, 2) facial expressions, 3) body language, 4) silence, 5) touching. Verbal techniques include: 1) "I'm listening" cues, 2) disclosures, 3) validating statements, 4) statements of support, 5) reflection/mirroring statements.

These techniques show others that you are paying attention to them and are interested in what they are saying.

Importance of Using "I" Messages

It is very important to use "I" messages in a support group to convey one's feelings to the entire group. If feelings aren't expressed, they are often disguised behind the group. "I" messages also provide a preventative focus in that they keep undesirable behaviors in check or they can insure that some things don't happen or get carried away. The use of "I" messages may also provide a soft mechanism for confrontation and correction in that "I" is perceived as being softer than "you". This produces less defensiveness except when the "I" message is misused- "I think you're stupid."

Situations Conducive to the Use of "I" Messages

"I" messages may be used in various situations, such as when dealing with things that detract from the group process. For example, something to say to a person who interrupts is, "I know you have a lot to say but I need to let Bill finish..." A second situation in which an "I" message may be effective would be when stopping or slowing the advice addict. When this person says, "You should, must or ought," reply with "it sounds like you have certainly had some experience in this area but I think we need to let Mary decide for herself what she needs to do." Finally, a third situation in which an "I" message may be conducive is when confronting an error and disagreeing. Examples are, "Joe, I'm wondering if you could tell us how much you have thought that out?" or "I'm having real trouble with Joe's last statement. How do others feel?"

Advantages to be Gained with the Use of "I" Messages

Once using "I" messages, the advantages will be clearly seen. First, "I" messages foster honest communication which is modeled by the facilitator for others to follow. An "I" message also helps to soften emotions, tension, and conflict that is bound to arise. It also reduces defensiveness and better prepares the recipient for criticism or feedback. A third important advantage is that "I" messages allow the facilitator or group leader to maintain control or impose direction, which is the facilitator's responsibility.