

The Right Words to Get the Conversation Started and Keep it Going

* V. Michelle Parry

To communicate well is an important skill set you can develop with a little effort. This effort includes learning how to be an active listener as well as a thoughtful speaker.

The ability to listen well can do more to improve the quality of your communications than anything else. When you become an active listener, you will gain a better understanding of the speaker and active listening builds trust. We typically trust - have more confidence in - and find more persuasive, people who listen to us when we speak.

Active listening requires that you face the other person directly, relax your posture, place your weight on the balls of your feet or lean slightly forward if sitting, make eye contact, nod and smile occasionally and pay attention to the words while attempting to understand their meaning.

A common barrier to effective communication occurs at the listening stage, when people allow their thoughts to shift to the substance of what they want to say in response while the speaker is still talking - often interrupting the speaker with words or with body language. A better approach is to train yourself to pause for two seconds after the speaker stops talking and then to ask a question designed to elicit more information while directing the conversation toward an area of your interest. Having a few phrases and questions ready ahead of time for different situations will help you practice this skill.

For example:

“Let me see if I’ve got this right, you are saying . . . ?”

“My dilemma is that if we move forward with the solution as you've currently outlined, _____ remains in issue, which is very important to my client. On the other hand, if your client does not want to continue the conversation on that topic, are there any other options that you can think of that may allow us to keep talking?”

“It would help me if I could understand your concerns/needs a bit better, could you tell me about that?”

“I am trying to see things from your perspective. Help me understand what you think about . . .”

”How do you mean?”

“This may be more my problem than yours, but are you suggesting my client should agree to _____ . I am not sure how I could recommend that. Am I misunderstanding what you intended? Tell me more.”

“You may be right, but I’d like to understand more. What leads you to believe. . . ?”

“I am committed to having this conversation. It might be that we can come up with a solution that works for both of us. How do we start?”

“I have been reflecting on our previous discussion, and I think I was not prepared to listen at that time, and I would like to try again, if you are agreeable.”

“I’m unclear how that connects to what we’ve been saying. Can you say how you see it?”

“When you said _____, I had the impression you were thinking that _____ and _____ might have occurred. If so, I’d like to understand your reasoning better. Is that something you can share with me?”

“It seems that you have come to the conclusion that _____ Help me understand what that conclusion is based on?”

“What I have observed is _____. Therefore I believe _____. If that is incorrect, please tell me?”

“When you say such-and-such, I worry that it means you may have placed more meaning on my statement to you of _____” I was not conceding _____, but wanted you to know that I heard you. I apologize for being unclear on that.

“Here is what I think we agree on, and here are the areas that I think we still need to work through. Did I miss anything?”

V. Michelle Parry is the owner of Wise Resolution, LLC. She has been licensed to practice law in Alabama since 2000 where she was also a law professor and a mediator. Her Arizona bar admission is currently pending. She is available to mediate or arbitrate cases in either Birmingham or Mesa.