



UPEN Mentoring Programme:

Guidance note 2 – Active listening

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What is active listening?

Listening is a key skill in mentoring, and one that needs practice. As mentors it is always tempting to intervene, offer solutions, and describe your own experience. Sitting back and actively listening can be difficult to do, particularly if you are used to making interventions in meetings.

It is important not to go into 'solution mode', but to listen to the others in the session. Crucially, this will help the other person/s feel heard, valued and understood.

Listening is not the act of hearing the words spoken; it is the art of understanding the meaning behind those words.

The Art of Listening by Simon Sinek

Active listening is the ability to listen and, importantly, internalise and understand what is being said by the mentee. Being active in the session means using your whole self to convey the message of an active listener who is involved in the discussion, showing interest, and gaining trust and respect.

Understanding the power relationship

Mentoring relationships are inherently **hierarchical** in nature and are therefore also shaped by **power dynamics**. In the UPEN mentoring programme active listening is a key skill for mentors to master to allow a more equal partnership between mentor and mentee to evolve. Mentors are likely to have much more experience of the policy engagement field and will be in a privileged position.

By becoming **aware of their power and privileges**, the mentor can allow space for the mentee to **share decision-making** about the content and the journey of the mentee's development.

This can create a **positive space** where **knowledge and development** are **co-created** with both mentor and mentee **learning and developing**.¹

Allowing space to listen to different perspectives reduces the power dynamic that exists between experienced and senior staff and junior or early career staff. There may be an additional power relationship between particular university institutions or regions and those elsewhere, plus power relationships between external policy experts and university

¹ Intercultural mentoring, University of Edinburgh Transitions and Mentoring Toolkit



knowledge brokers. Each relationship can come with inbuilt power hierarchies and assumptions.

Active listening can be achieved by using verbal and non-verbal communication.



Obstacles to active listening

Things that stop us listening effectively are:

- **Comparing** what is being said to our own experience, such as intervening with comments such as ‘when that happened to me...’ or ‘I dealt with that this way...’
- **Rehearsing** what we are going to say when the speaker stops.
- **Solving** the speaker’s problem for them such as ‘what you should do is...’ or ‘have you tried this yet? It worked for me...’
- **Thinking** about something else entirely, for instance what your next meeting is about or issues in your own workload.

How to be an active listener

Things that help us listen effectively are:

- **Turning yourself off completely** and concentrating on the other person and what they are saying. When you notice yourself not listening well, bring your attention back to the speaker, and, gradually, you’ll find it becomes easier to concentrate on what they’re saying.
- **Tuning in to the unspoken messages** underneath the words. These can become easier to hear when you turn your awareness to them.



- **Being aware of body language** – both your own and the other person's. Non-verbal cues can convey disinterest but also eye contact can demonstrate engagement (see below on body language).
- **Using sounds** like 'mm' and 'ah' to show the other person you are hearing them adding verbal cues. This can help to avoid long periods with only one person speaking.
- **Keeping your mind open** and suspending judgement. Concentrate on the content of what is being said and try not to jump to assumed conclusions.
- **Reflecting on a time when someone listened to you** with all their attention and showed you that they understood you and your issue. Try to recall the behaviour and skills used to do this. Can you do the same?

Samaritans listening model²

1. **Open questions** – Signal curiosity not judgement. How? What? Where? Who?
2. **Summarise** – A summary helps to show the individual that you have listened to and understand their circumstances and importantly their feelings.
3. **Reflect** – Repeating back a word or phrase encourages the individual to expand or continue.
4. **Clarify** – An individual may gloss over an important point. Asking for clarification can help the individual to expand or work through an issue or feeling.
5. **Use short words of encouragement** – This can help an individual continue with a difficult issue in a supportive environment such as 'go, on'... 'and'... 'how did you feel about that...'
6. **React** – Demonstrating that you have understood the situation by reacting appropriately. To do this you can use validating phrases such as 'that sounds difficult', or 'must have been tricky to deal with...'

Tools for reflection

Reflection is an important aspect of active listening and helps to keep focus during discussions. Reflection can involve offering your thoughts or ideas back to the mentees using their, or your own, words.

Check your responses: explore, clarify, understand and reflect what you think you heard. You could use the phrase, 'I think I heard you say X, Y, Z. Is that right?' Or, 'When you said X, I remembered you also said Y. I wonder if there's a connection?' Such reflections can act as clarifiers and prompts build a positive and supportive environment.

² Katie Colombus 'How to Listen: Tools for opening up conversations when it matters most', The Samaritans 2021, Octopus p186



Active listening in group sessions

It is potentially a bit trickier to be an active listener in a group setting. The role of the mentor becomes more of a facilitator. However, it is as equally important to be engaged with the mentees, listening to members of the group, and demonstrating understanding and positive interaction. Building a group rapport can take a little longer than in one-to-one sessions. Try to encourage the other mentee/s to be active listeners too. Group sessions conducted online provide an additional layer or obstacle to active listening in a group setting.

The challenge of active listening in online settings

The nature of the UPEN mentoring programme means that most, if not all, mentoring sessions will be virtual. Conducting online sessions presents another challenge to facilitating a positive listening environment during sessions.

Common barriers to effective online mentoring sessions:

- Technical problems such as failure to join the call, calls dropping out, cameras or microphones not working.
- Background noise such as open plan settings or interruptions.
- Distractions including email or phone notifications, open documents and so on.
- Hard to read body language.

There are no easy answers. No matter how used to working on Teams and other platforms we are now, there are always challenges. In person sessions are preferable in mentoring programmes, although the value of the UPEN programme is that it brings together staff involved in policy engagement activities from across the membership. Online mentoring enables support and networks to flourish across the breadth of our network, potentially from Exeter to Strathclyde.

The UPEN programme does encourage in person sessions if these are possible to organise.

- Remember the **sessions are confidential**. Can you lock the session on Teams to prevent interruptions? Try to avoid public spaces or open plan areas with interference. Encourage mentees to use or book a private room on campus. Try to use waiting rooms so that all mentees enter at once.
- Keep your camera at a suitable distance and at eye level to ensure both the mentee and mentor **feel comfortable** during the session.
- **Remove distractions** such as email notifications. Keep focused throughout in active listening mode. Check if breaks are required away from the screen.
- **Consider the environment** in which you set up your virtual mentoring. Pay attention to what the other person will be able to see, dress appropriately, and minimise audible distractions.



A word on body language

Whilst body language is an important aspect of active listening, it can be challenging to understand cues when online. Be wary of misinterpreting mentee body language. Individuals can often struggle to look into the camera or relax in online sessions.

Equally be aware of your own appearance online, such as your distance from the camera. You could use Teams response tools to show that you actively listening. Use pauses for reflection – this may feel awkward at first as people usually want to fill silent gaps in online sessions, but some space for reflection can help.

Do be aware that some people may be very comfortable in online settings and others may not. Bear in mind neurodiversity in the mentoring setting – there's a great link to help with this in the resource section at the end of this guidance note.

Remember, **active listening** is the ability to listen, internalise, and understand what is being said by the mentee. It is a key skill in mentoring, and one that requires practice.



Further resources

- ArcaHub on [neurodiversity in entrepreneurship coaching and mentoring](#) from Professor Harveen Chugh, Professor of Entrepreneurship at UCL School of Management. See also [this UCL guide on neurodiversity](#)
- [Being a good listener by School of Life \[Video\]](#)
- [The art of listening by Simon Sinek \[video\]](#)
- Katie Colombus 'How to Listen: Tools for opening up conversations when it matters most', The Samaritans 2021, Octopus
- The Mentoring School has a helpful piece on [the power of imperfection](#)
- Interesting material from the University of Edinburgh on power dynamics and [intercultural mentoring](#)
- [Short Financial Times video](#) on challenges of mentoring from Olympic mentors with some helpful tips [video]
- [The UCL mentoring handbook](#) has good sections on listening and questioning plus a helpful template for a consensual contract

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