



Listening effectively

A vital working communication skill

How to make the most of the Leaders Lab document 'Listening effectively':

People often fail to realise that *listening* is a skill like any other.

You may or may not be naturally good at it, but here, in a chapter from Kate Mercer's book, *A Buzz in the Building*, is a detailed look at what it is, how it works when practised effectively and why it's such a vital working communication skill.

You can purchase a copy of the book [here](#), contact us on 01865 881056 or email info@leaderslab.co.uk

Listening effectively

"Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply."

Stephen R. Covey



How well do you listen? Have you in fact ever thought about whether there is any way to listen other than the one that comes naturally to you? I didn't – until I encountered the idea of active listening and realised just how little I actually engaged with the people I was talking to and what they were saying.

This is how most people listen:

You: "What did you do at the weekend?"

Them: "I went hang-gliding."

You: "Wow, that's interesting. I went ballooning."

Them: "Yes, I loved the feeling of being out in the open air and up high, so you can see everything."

You: "Oh, so did I. Ballooning's great for that – you can see for miles."

Them: "Well, hang-gliding's great for that too – and you can control where you're going..."

Can you see what's happening? You asked *them* what they did at the weekend, and every time they try to tell you, you talk about what you did.

Listen to people talking around you and you'll quickly realise it's almost as if they are having parallel monologues – talking about broadly similar topics. Even if they are arguing, they aren't listening to the other's point of view, they're just waiting for them to take a breath, so they can share their own opinion. They're on the same track, but on separate rails – fairly close, but never together, stretching into the distance but never meeting.



So what is active listening?

Well, like every other skill in this book, it begins with a mindset shift. The prevailing mindset goes something like, “I'm in this conversation to get my ideas and thoughts across. I'll wait for the minimum respectable amount of time (not everybody even does this, by the way) and then say my bit.”

A more productive mindset is, “For at least half of this conversation, I'm going to make it my business to really listen to what the other person is saying, and try my hardest to set aside my own opinions and needs.”

Don't worry about this feeling unnatural and something of an effort – it is for most of us. The feeling is one of *choosing*: choosing to get off your rail for a specific period of time and go and sit with them on theirs. Listen to the conversation now:

You: “What did you do at the weekend?”

Them: “I went hang-gliding.”

You: “Wow, that's interesting. What was that like?”

Them: “Oh, I loved the feeling of being out in the open air and up high, so you can see everything.”

You: “How did it feel?”

Them: “Well, a bit scary at first, but I quickly got so fascinated by what I could see that I forgot to be frightened.”

You: “Tell me more about what it was like...”

Can you see that listening this way is far more likely to help them to open up and tell you more about how they felt? You might even learn something you didn't know, if you concentrate on listening to what they are saying rather than to yourself preparing your response.

So you need to *choose* to listen, and discipline your thoughts when they threaten to draw you off the other person's rail onto your own again. At first, you will probably find you can only do this for very short periods of time – two or three sentences, if you're lucky. But the

principle is what's important – you are listening to them, with the aim of giving them your full attention for as long as you possibly can.

The extreme example of really listening to another is in counselling, therapy or pure coaching, where the therapist or coach is trained never to intrude their own opinions or thoughts at all. However, this is not practicable for most people, nor really appropriate for a business setting, so how can you train yourself to listen more actively for at least some of the time, perhaps when you are coaching or interviewing, or just want to build a better relationship with somebody at work?

Active listening

A big surprise for most people is to realise that asking questions doesn't necessarily make you a good listener. Actually, if you think about it, asking questions, however good you are, is actually coming from your own rail – you are thinking about what you need to know and what information you'd like to find out. So how can you listen actively, and stay with them on their rail?

Well, you reflect back to them what they have said. Ask a question to get them going, then as they begin to speak, each time they pause for breath, confirm what they have said by repeating it back to them, as closely as possible in their own words. It may feel a little odd to you, but I promise you, most people are so delighted to know you really got what they said that they'll just rush on with the next thing they wanted to say. You'll know you got it right, if after each time you repeat back their words to them, they say, "yes, and..." and they're off again.

If they never seem to take a breath, and you get worried that you won't be able to remember it all accurately when the time comes for you to reflect back what they've said, this is the one time in communication that you *can* interrupt. Usually, we interrupt to drag someone off their

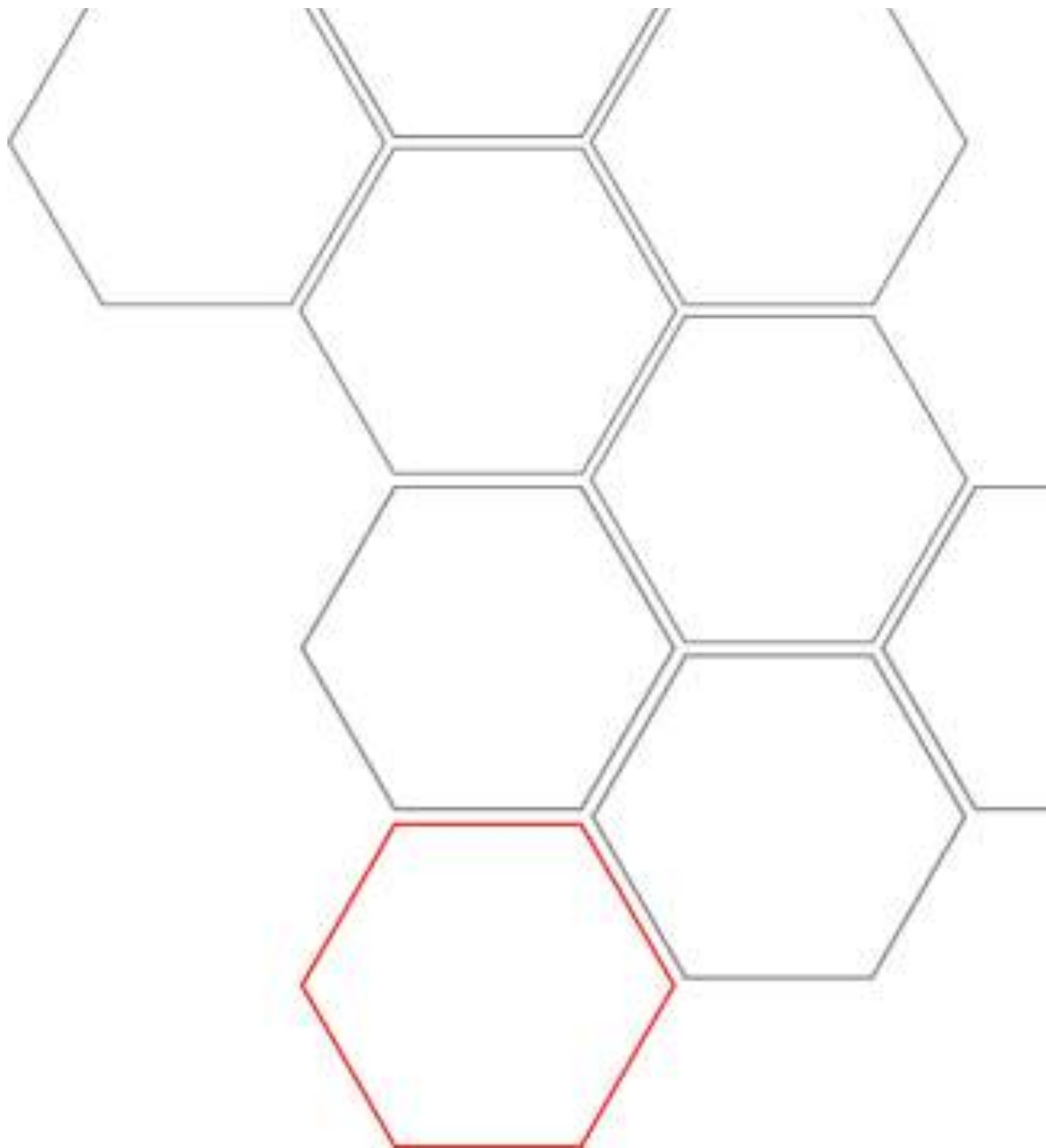
rail onto ours, and this is perceived as irritating and rude. If, however, you interrupt to help someone clarify their thoughts or expand on something they've said, not only will they not think you're being rude, they'll find it actually flattering and helpful. Use phrases like, "hold on, say that again", or "let me just say back to you what I think you're trying to say", and they'll happily repeat what they've said for your benefit. You're staying on their rail, you see. Again, you'll know you've got it right if they say, "Yes, and..." and rush onwards again.

Be careful not to use this technique to twist what they say to make it match what you want to hear – this is a not-so-subtle attempt to get them onto your rail, and feels manipulative to the speaker. You are trying to build trust and relationship, and can only do this if you genuinely want to understand what they are really trying to say.

A good tip, if you find this difficult at first is to use phrases like, "So if I understand you right, what you are saying is...", or, "Let me see if I've got exactly what you're saying. You said..." You can also say, "Tell me more...", or, "Go on..." You'll find that nobody will mind being interrupted for you to feed back their own words to them. They'll know you are really trying to understand and will find it flattering and empowering. Very few of us have the experience of being listened to properly by others, and it's refreshing when we do.

Some hints:

- Having made the choice to listen to someone, use appropriate body language: lean towards them, make eye contact, put away anything you are looking at or holding and encourage them by nodding and smiling from time to time.
- Make noises, especially if listening on the phone. It's very disconcerting talking into a vacuum – we are so used to being interrupted that you do need to make it clear that you are still listening even though you are not chipping in.
- Hold off questioning for as long as possible in the conversation – appropriate use of body language, encouraging noises and reflecting will keep a person going longer than you would think possible – and you are more likely to find out something you don't already know if you avoid questions.
- If you do use questions, keep them as open as possible. Questions beginning with 'how', 'why' and 'what' tend to lead to more open responses than 'yes/no' questions and ones beginning with 'who', 'when' and 'where'. See Working Communication Skill No 7, p..., for more on questioning.
- A really good test of your listening and a chance to practise, though very difficult, is to *really* listen to someone whose views you disagree with. Don't disagree *or* agree with them, just try to get absolutely clear on what they believe and why they believe it, and reflect it back to them without twisting their words – or sounding incredulous.



LeadersLab



T: 01865 881056
E: info@leaderslab.co.uk
W: www.leaderslab.co.uk
@BeABetterLeader

A Buzz in the Building: How to create and lead a brilliant organisation
By Kate Mercer | Published by SRA Books **OUT NOW**