

Body language

We use our bodies to reinforce the message we send out. We interpret messages from the signals that others send. We listen to the message behind the words that we hear. Picking up signals and using our intuition to understand what others are saying needs practice. We may 'know' about body language, and sometimes think about what is being conveyed. But are we using these skills to make the most of our listening and questioning skills?

Much of the advice on body language looks at how to show someone that you are in agreement, this in itself is not such a bad thing. You need to be aware of your own body language, especially in situations where you could unconsciously give out a different message. Be aware that there may be times when you will need to mask your own feelings to allow the people to express themselves.

Exercise

Describe various actions or facial expressions that could show someone that:

- You do not believe them.
- You do not like them.
- You think they are behaving stupidly.
- You distrust them.



- You are bored.

Discuss your answers with your colleagues. Record your answers.

Think about your learner, what sort of signals would they be giving you if:

- They were unsure how you were taking what they were saying.
- Prevaricating.
- Not wanting to be there.
- Mistrustful of you.
- Sorry for themselves.

Discuss your answers with your colleagues. Record both answers.

De-coding messages

A good listener does not just listen to what is being said they are adept at reading signals sent out from the spoken word the sound or the body language. These signals are interpreted and help the listener decide on how to frame their questions, and what areas are important and what is not so important. Interpreting what your learner is saying will help to create and maintain a supporting and understanding emotional climate.

Case Study

Learner: Watches the mentor carefully, leans forwards hugs books to chest,



Mentor: We are supposed to be discussing your progress. How do you feel about your progress so far?’

Learner: Well, I’m still in the process of finding out things’. (Learner looks around does not make eye contact).

Mentor: What sort of things?’

Learner: I don’t know really. Where I stand. What can I do? (Learner looks resentful).

Mentor: What do you want to do?’

Learner: I’m not sure. I always wanted to be a doctor - but I never got the grades at school!’

Exercise

What sort of questions would you ask this person?

The learner is giving out signals as well as being evasive it may mean that they do not know what to do. But, obviously they are trying to keep you away from the core of their problems.



You will need to think up some key questions to find out more from the learner. You could say;

*You appear to be very unclear about why you are attending the college?
Can you tell me what made you decide to accept the post you are in now?"*

The learner could be acting defensively because they feel insecure they feel a failure. They may feel that you will not support them or consider them to have ideas beyond their capabilities.

When discussing things with Learners that they may find difficult to talk about you need to accept their feelings, and do not try to move them on too soon. Help and support your learner come to terms with their feelings, to own them. By being alert to the Learners need to move on you will be ready to support them when they are formulating plans. These all help to build self-esteem in Learners. It sometimes important to challenge your Learners beliefs in order to move forward, to bring in a different perspective, to clarify what helps and what hinders their development.

Exercise

What is your opening lines when;

- Clarifying key points?
- Summarising key points?



Shaping our perceptions

What shapes our perceptions? Perceptions are evaluated according to our previous experience, beliefs, values and knowledge. Understanding how your learner perceptions affect the way they behave will go a long way to improving rapport.

Exercise

List some beliefs or values that are important in your life. How would they effect you working with different people?

What would you do if your values or beliefs were at odds with that of a learner?

How would you put your beliefs onto one side?

In allowing others to hold their own beliefs and values you are not necessarily compromising your own values or beliefs.



Setting the parameters

The starting point of any mentoring process is difficult. It is important to state what the parameters or the process is going to be so that your learner knows what they can expect from you and what you expect from them. This needs to be agreed between the two of you. The parameters should include an action plan, times and length of meetings. You need to ensure that the learner knows that you are expecting equal responsibility to the programme. You will need to set guidelines about; the time allowed, the structure of your discussions, the nature of your discussions, their expectations and commitment, your commitment and the boundaries of your involvement. This should also include how you intend to maintain confidentiality.

Stating your role

A good working relationship needs to be built with care, establishing a rapport with a new client needs time. To build alliances you need to be able to recognise personal as well as potential constraints. You need to understand the social political barriers that could impede the building of a good relationship.

Being a mentor means being familiar with a wide range of issues both within organisations you work for, external resources, and other issues relating to education and development.



Which means that you need to be able to recognise your own strengths and look for ways forward with an open mind.

In helping a learner identify and work on opportunities you will be screening, establishing priorities, clarifying issues, discussing and planning ways which will lead to the learner taking action.

By concentrating on the behaviour rather than the person, their actions rather than their qualities, using observation skills and not using your own interpretations you will be listening to what is being said rather than assuming what has been said.

Opening lines

In order to be a good mentor you will need to develop your skills of observation, analysing and visualising to understand fully your learner. You need to think about how you evaluate other peoples' values or statements, in relation to your own values. You need to be able to communicate at the learner's level and not be egocentric. Trust others, acknowledge them as individuals show you value them, your own interests should become secondary.

Exercise

Imagine you are going to mentor to a person who is employed in the same position now, as you were when you first started work. Write down any



preparations you would make. Thoughts you would have. Information you would take to your first session. Think about any development that have occurred and changes made to the industry since you were in the same position, reflect on how they affect the learner's options.

Review your answer and consider how objective you have been.

Active listening

To listen well is a hard process. Our own thoughts, diversions, distractions all impede in the listening process. People do not talk in a well-constructed way, especially if they are in conversation. In order to listen properly, you need to:

suspend judgement

hold back do not think about yourself

keep quiet but be attentive

The skills needed for active listening are:

- attention
- listening
- paraphrasing
- reflecting
- summarising
- giving feedback.



Exercise

How well do you listen? Everyone wants to be listened to, heard, understood, accepted, responded to. Think back to the last conversation you had; write down how much you remember of the conversation. What do you remember of the distractions?

Exercise

This is for three people. A makes a statement to B. B paraphrases it back to A. Do this for three statements. An observer makes notes of the differing statements. Discuss what was said.

Listening is something that most people find difficult, there are all sorts of things that get in the way of listening. Many people have difficulty in getting to the point. How many times have you listened to someone and said either to yourself or to the other person, 'get to the point!' Sometimes we disguise what we want to say. We do this for many reasons we may feel that we have to set the scene before 'coming out with it!' We may skirt around the subject because we have difficulty bringing it up, for example it causes anxiety, it is embarrassing or we want to know the other persons' feelings about the subject before we admit to whatever it is ourselves. On other occasions we may need help in defining the problem, this could be because our subconscious is not letting us bring it to the fore.

Exercise



Think about presenting a serious problem to a stranger and reflect how you would go about it. Write down a few of the things that you would like to sort out before you said anything.

Non-stop listening

Listening fully to what someone is saying is almost as difficult as trying to identify any hidden agendas or trying to find out what people are really saying. We all turn off now and again, it is a natural thing to do our concentration is broken we become distracted by conversations held elsewhere, movement or sounds which make your thoughts stray. Even what people say can set off a train of thought and then we are no longer listening.

Effective questioning

The type of questioning techniques you will need to develop as a mentor requires finding out why people have made the decisions they have and what they want to do in the future. This may mean finding out the subtle and often subconscious needs and motivation of the learner. It is a process of nudging, prodding, awakening and galvanising your learner. Finding out what has motivated their choices so far or lack of choice. Are their reactions a result of influences from parents, peers or sheer expediency? 'I have no choice. I have to go out to work to live'.



To be able to ask effective questions, you need to be able to understand what is being said. What is the underlying message? You need to be able to ask the right questions to uncover any meaning or make connections.

Questions you need to ask yourself when with your learner are; what is important to discuss? Are there any other factors that need to be taken into account? In what way are the things the learner is talking about important to them? What else needs to be discussed? You are helping your learner explore, understand their needs and expectations before they take action, and you are helping them decide on how to proceed. You will need to accept the learner on the learner's terms, be open-minded not forming any preconceived ideas, and not categorise people.

You will need to use your questioning and listening skills to encourage, caution, support, restrain, help the learner to step back, pace themselves, prioritise, help the learner be realistic, be ready for challenge and change. You will need to take into account the language that is appropriate to the needs of the learner, and decide when you need to be directive or supportive.

Questions - making connections

Helping the learner develop new perspectives about themselves and about how they want to develop their career, means that you have to help the learner, 'tell their story'. For this you need, good listening skills, a good questioning technique and the ability to identify and challenge any blind spots.



By doing this you should be helping the learner to identify self-defeating patterns of thinking and behaving. Help them to unfetter their imaginations and find creative ways to use opportunities that are available to them. Your learner needs to have the opportunity to talk about the difficulties and possibilities in their lives. Their successes and their achievements as well as problem situations and missed opportunities so that together you can explore their personal resources. This can be done by carefully thought out questioning, active listening, reflecting back, showing empathy and having a non-judgmental attitude.

Key points

Encourage the learner to identify and elaborate upon skills and abilities.

Ask appropriate questions.

Reflect and summarise important points.

Offer information about options for Learners to assess themselves.

Understand and interpret the inferences of the Learners statements.

Types of questions

The types of questions you use should encourage the learner to identify, elaborate and explore their needs in relation to their career development and to the various options which might meet their needs. Encouraging the learner to identify attributes and skills which will enable you to understand where they are coming from; where they are going to, their hopes, desires and expectations.



Open questions

Open questions are questions that help develop a better understanding of what is being said - open questions begin with "Tell me about ...?" "How did that ...?" "What did you enjoy?" Open questions ask for an explanation. Some forms of questioning can put the learner on the defensive. Look at the next two questions; put a different emphasis on each.

"Why did you do that?"

"What made you decide on that course of action?"

Questions which obtain answers:

What did you like best at school?

What did you not like about it?

What would have made it better?

In what way do you think you learn best?

Questions sometimes contain hidden meanings or messages and can put the person on the defensive. These usually have a subjective emphasis implying disapproval.

Closed questions

Closed questions stop any other information being imparted. Too many closed questions can seem like an interrogation - or that you are only interested in confirming your viewpoint. Closed questions are useful in the summing up



stage. It is very important to make sure that you are not indicating that you do not want to hear what the other person thinks.

Closed questions can also be connected to leading questions - "I think you'll agree that we have covered all we need now?" These are not very helpful.

Mirror or reflecting questions

These are very useful types of questions. They enable you to clarify what is being said. When you use mirroring or reflecting questions, it is helping you understand more clearly what the other person has said. Sometimes you may do this as an interim summary, but at the same time you could be investigating other clues or inferences you have picked up, by exploring what is being said. It is not a case of representing the words - but sometimes the inflection or tone of what is being said.

Probing questions

Probing questions enable you to investigate further what is being said. If you come to a stage where you feel that the person could give more information, try silence and see what happens.

Other types of questioning techniques that you need to be aware of using are qualified questions, where you amplify on the question. Multiple questions where you ask several questions in one go these are not often helpful - it



shows that you have not thought enough about what you want to say and can be confusing.

Making sense of what is said

We usually use our own experiences to identify or relate to another person's difficulties. When you are mentoring someone this can get in the way. There is nothing more off putting than someone who tries to understand your problem than the other person stating that they had a similar problem and this is how they dealt with it. The key to good mentoring is not to supply an answer but to help the other person develop an answer. So you need to suspend your own experiences and ask questions which will enable the learner to clarify their thoughts.

We need to weigh up what is being said by taking into account, what is heard, how the person said it, and what body language was used.

Intervention skills

Change is the raw material of mentoring. The Mentors task is to help the learner use their own resources to move on. Help them to develop a strategy to self-actualisation. As a mentor your task is to explore with the learner the origin of their problems by careful questioning to identify what it is that is holding them back. In these situations' people often prevaricate they go round and round in circles without coming to the point sometimes because they do not want to take responsibility for actions. Being able to challenge what they are saying without them losing their trust in you requires a great deal of skill.



Two important concepts in creating an atmosphere of trust and reliability are Holding and Leverage. Holding refers to the quality of the relationship in some respects it is consistent with the idea of a good parent, each person is valued unconditionally. Leverage refers to how much force you may need to apply to focus on certain things that:

- cause difficulties
- are being ignored
- are neglected
- or the learner finds difficult to discuss.

However divergent your views are from your Learners' you need to ensure that they feel accepted. You do not have to pretend to agree with them but you need to be able to suspend judgement.

