

Information sheet

Reflective listening

The purpose of reflective listening

Listening to your learners is a fundamental part of motivational dialogue. They are the experts on themselves. They will tell you what has or has not worked for them, what has helped them move forward and what has triggered a relapse.

In order for a learner to feel comfortable about opening up to you they need to know that you are listening. One of the most powerful ways you can demonstrate this is to reflect back what you have heard. You can do this in several different ways.

Repeat just one or two key words

Tutor: Tell me what you liked about the placement.

Jules: Being in the kitchen and coming up with my own ideas.

Tutor: (reflecting back) Your own ideas.

This is the simplest form of reflective listening. It communicates that you have heard what has been said and that you do not intend to enter into an argument about it.

Checking the meaning

Check the meaning of what you have heard by taking what the learner has said and putting it into your own words or rephrasing.

Tutor: Tell me what you liked about the placement.

Jules: Being in the kitchen and... you know... doing things... Well... like, the way the food is put on the plate. I changed it.

Tutor: You liked the chance to be creative.

This form of reflection is particularly useful if the learner is struggling to express themselves. It does not matter if your rephrasing is not quite accurate because the learner will most probably correct you – and in doing so, will give you additional information.

Clarifying learners' feelings and put them into words

Tutor: Tell me what you liked about the placement.

Jules: (*Sitting up more alertly*) Being in the kitchen and coming up with my own ideas.

Tutor: You've felt good, being able to show that you can be creative.

Sometimes a learner might convey one message in words, and a different message in their body language. For example:

Tutor: Tell me what's been happening on your placement since we last talked.

Jules: (*Looking downcast, and slumping into her chair*) It's OK.

Tutor: From the tone of your voice and the way you're sitting, I'm picking up that things aren't going the way you want. Is that accurate?

Draw attention to particular aspect of what the learner has said.

Tutor: Tell me about what's been happening on your placement.

Jules: Well, the chef had it in for me just because I was late one morning – and I apologised and that – but I like being in the kitchen and coming up with my own ideas.

Tutor: You liked being in the kitchen and coming up with your own ideas.

In this case, the tutor chose first to focus on the positive aspect of Jules' placement and to direct her attention to this.

Now imagine that Jules' response reminds the tutor that Jules continues to have a problem with turning up on time – and that this is something that the tutor wants to focus on.

Tutor: Tell me about what's been happening on your placement.

Jules: Well, the chef had it in for me just because I was late one morning – and I apologised and that – but I like being in the kitchen and coming up with my own ideas.

Tutor: You were late one morning.

Watch out for ...

This kind of dialogue has an element of directiveness in it. So, although reflective listening is valuable in enabling you to:

- convey to the learner that you are listening;
- check the meaning of what a learner has said;
- clarify what a learner has said;
- demonstrate that you've heard what has been said;

you could end up following your learners wherever they choose to take you.

Reflections should be delivered with a downward inflection in your voice. Don't use an upward questioning tone. Instead, follow the reflection with a question. If you sense that a conversation is losing focus, bring in a summary to:

- draw out the significant points from what has been talked about;
- re-establish the direction in which you want to take the conversation.

Reflective listening is a very powerful way of conveying empathy to another person. Whereas questioning is a bit like someone from the outside trying to find out what's going on inside you, reflection gives a sense of connection. It helps a person sense that there is someone joined with them, going with them through their thinking process as they describe what's happening.

Paul Lalgee

*Ted Daszkiewicz and Paul Lalgee supported the development of the 'motivational dialogue' resources for the Standards Unit E2E resources. The resources are based on:

Miller W.R. and Rollnick S., *Motivational interviewing: preparing people for change*, 2nd edition, New York, Guilford Publications, Inc.

Further information can also be found at: www.motivationalinterview.org