



Active Listening

Description

Speaking for myself, I can say that the engineering side of me makes empathy during a technical discussion a real challenge. I instinctively try to beeline to the correct answer, without consideration for others emotions.

Whether we like it or not, emotions are part of each of us, and inevitably make their way into conversations, technical or otherwise. When we dismiss those emotions as unnecessary, we can unintentionally foster an environment that discourages open and productive discussion. Those with excellent ideas may feel deterred from sharing them. Those with great minds may feel trapped by a flawed stance.

To illustrate what I mean, let's say I'm in a conversation with my team about a technical problem. Someone offers a solution that I don't think will work. I know my reasons, but in the interest of efficiency or the pursuit of a fast answer, I say, "no, but what if..."

I heard the proposal, quickly processed, and then dismissed it. The person who just offered that solution has no way of knowing if my conclusion was justified, I don't know if there are other arguments behind the idea I hadn't considered, and they have no way of knowing whether I even took their suggestion seriously.

Interestingly enough, common reactions to being dismissed are polar opposites of each other. Someone not feeling heard will often simply not speak up anymore. "Why try suggesting solutions when they're ignored anyway?" This is admittedly how I often react when I'm regularly on the receiving end of being dismissed.

On the flip side, some may feel even more adamant that their solution is correct, investing emotional energy into the idea, and having been given no reason to change their mind. This emotional investment makes it more difficult to accept flaws in the proposal, even if they are clearly presented. This tension impedes an individual's ability to objectively evaluate information, and therefore slows down or completely derails the entire process. I have experience reacting like this as well, and it's embarrassing and uncomfortable.

Now consider what the reactions would be if instead of jumping to my next idea, I took time to confirm I understood the proposal. Restating the proposal back to the proposer is a simple and easy way to demonstrate that you were listening. You work with reasonable people, and there are certainly reasons why that person suggested the idea. Voice those reasons, either yourself, or by giving the proposer an opportunity to explain themselves. Even just repeating the last few words triggers a deeper exploration of the idea.

Proposal

"We should put all our CSS in a single file."

Bad Response

"No, that won't work. We need to have different CSS files for different components."

Good Responses

"Having a single CSS file would be really nice, since everything is in one place, but will we run into problems when that file gets really big?"

"Because having all the CSS in one place means we don't have to go hunting through a bunch of files to find the styles we want to adjust, right? I thought the same thing, but I actually tried it, but a problem I've run into with that approach is that that file can get huge, and cluttered, making it very difficult to maintain..."

"CSS in a single file..."

The key factor of each of those responses is that you demonstrated that you heard them. They know their idea has been considered, and that they are valued members of the conversation. Yes, it takes more time to be an active listener than it does to dismiss and move, but those few extra seconds can mean this and future conversations will have valuable contributions from your team members, and may even save you from heading off in a bad direction, which would cost *far* more time to correct.

I have, on more than one occasion, caught myself at the last second, right before I was about to dismiss an idea, and implemented active listening, only to discover that there were things I hadn't considered, and would have missed out on had I not actively heard them out.

In extreme and urgent circumstances, it may be necessary to forego active listening in favour of a more dictatorial approach, however this should be an absolute last resort, and once the pressure is reduced, you should be willing to re-examine your conclusions with the help of your colleagues. If you find yourself frequently needing to skip active listening, it's time to step back and examine why, because something bigger is wrong.

Whether talking with those you lead, peers, or those who lead you, active listening is a near-magical skill that will not only ensures *you* are heard, but your teammates will enjoy collaborating with you, and

you are not shutting yourself off from learning from others.

Category

1. Leadership Principles

Date Created

December 31, 2022

Author

steveday

default watermark