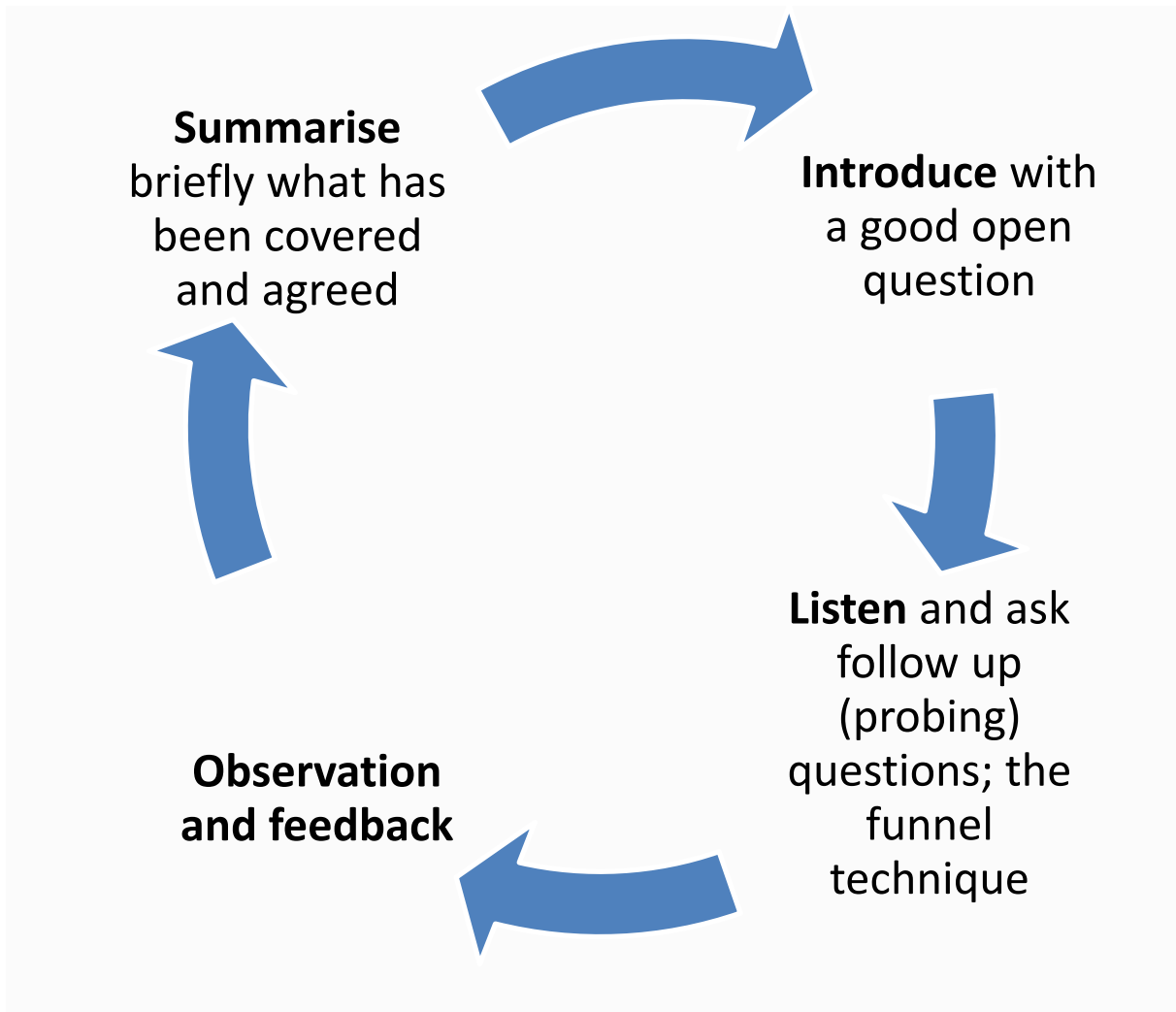


Having a mentoring conversation

A mentoring conversation should be structured, taking each element of discussion (self-reflection; setting and agreeing of goals; agreeing actions and timeframes) to completion in a separate communication cycle.



If the mentee wanders off topic, you can bring the discussion back on track by acknowledging the point, while saying something like 'let's come back to that when we look at XYZ later'.

How well you listen has a major impact on your job effectiveness, and on the quality of your relationships with others. By becoming a better listener, you will improve your productivity, as well as your ability to influence, persuade and negotiate. What's more, you'll avoid conflict and misunderstandings. Active listening is a core skill for being an effective mentor.

About Active Listening

The way to improve your listening skills is to practice active listening. This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, try to understand the complete message being sent. In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully.

You cannot allow yourself to become distracted by whatever else may be going on around you, or by forming counter arguments that you'll make when the other person stops speaking. Nor can you allow yourself to get bored, and lose focus on what the other person is saying. All of these contribute to a lack of listening and understanding. If you're finding it particularly difficult to concentrate on what someone is saying, try repeating their words mentally as they say them – this will reinforce their message and help you stay focused.

To enhance your listening skills, you need to let the other person know that you are listening to what he or she is saying. To understand the importance of this, ask yourself if you've ever been engaged in a conversation when you wondered if the other person was listening to what you were saying. You wonder if your message is getting across, or if it's even worthwhile continuing to speak. It feels like talking to a brick wall and it's something you want to avoid.

It can be challenging to stay focused and listen. You may be thinking ahead to what your next question is going to be, waiting to speak instead of listening. Active listening is responding through eye contact, nodding, small facial expressions and the occasional echoing of words. The acronym LISTEN summarises the features of active listening:

L = listen to what is being said and how it is being said

I = interpret non-verbal messages

S = show you are being attentive

T = try to understand, not just hear

E = evaluate and summarise the message

N = neutralise your feelings

You should also try to respond to the speaker in a way that will both encourage him or her to continue speaking, so that you can get the information if you need. While nodding says you're interested, an occasional question or comment to recap what has been said communicates that you understand the message as well.

There are five key active listening techniques. They all help you ensure that you hear the other person, and that the other person knows you are hearing what they say.

1. Pay Attention

Give the speaker your undivided attention, and acknowledge the message. Recognise that non-verbal communication also "speaks" loudly.

- look at the speaker directly
- put aside distracting thoughts
- don't mentally prepare a contradiction
- avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations
- look out for the speaker's [body language](#)

2. Show That You're Listening

Use your own body language and gestures to convey your attention.

- nod occasionally
- smile and use other facial expressions
- note your posture and make sure it is open and inviting
- encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments

3. Provide Feedback

Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect what is being said and ask questions.

- reflect what has been said by paraphrasing. "What I'm hearing is," and "sounds like you are saying," are great ways to reflect back
- ask questions to clarify certain points. "What do you mean when you say...?"
- summarise the speaker's comments periodically

4. Defer Judgment

Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.

- allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions
- don't interrupt with counter arguments

5. Respond Appropriately

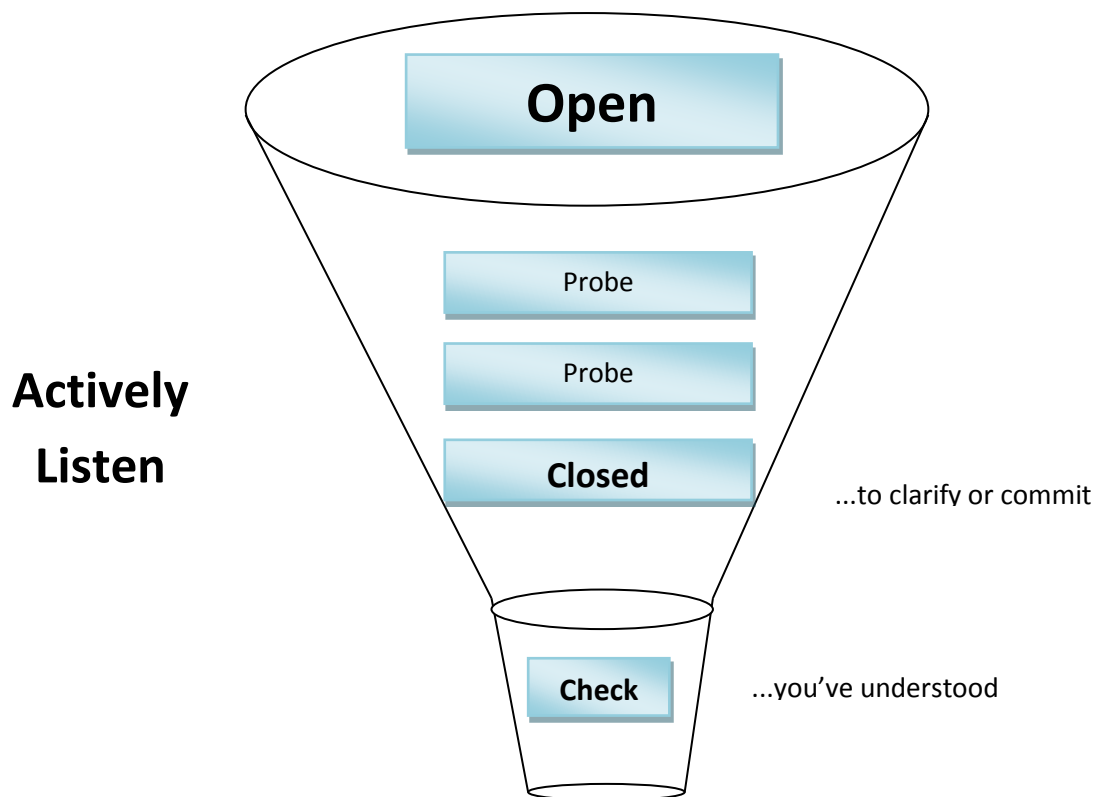
Active listening is a model for respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective.

- be candid, open, and honest in your response
- assert your opinions respectfully
- treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated

Remember throughout to ask questions, reflect, and paraphrase to ensure you understand the message.

Open, closed and probing questions

The funnel is a useful visual reference for questioning skills.



An **open** question cannot be answered with a yes or no answer but requires a developed answer. They are framed to encourage an expansive response. It gives the mentee an open space to respond.

A **probing** question helps to get under the surface of an initial answer. They are used to bring out more detail. It helps the mentee explore an issue in depth.

A **closed** question is framed to elicit a yes or no answer. They are used to clarify or to commit to something.

Reflective and **comparative** questions are also helpful. A reflective question repeats something the mentee has said or implied. It helps them feel the impact of what they have just said and provides new insights. A comparative question is the form of a closed question and helps the mentee to reflect. It can provide the mentee with options with the most suitable way forward for them.

Begin with an open question giving the mentee wide scope in which to respond. You may need to repeat or rephrase this question to allow more thinking time. Probing questions draw out further specific information to complete the picture. Closed questions are used to check or confirm specific pieces of information, or to get the mentee to commit to a point more precisely. A short paraphrased summary clarifies and checks understanding of the main points.

A question sequence might be:

- tell me how you went about...? **open**
- how did you prepare? **open (secondary)**
- what was your starting point? **probe**
- so, what happened next? **probe**
- who else was involved? **probe**
- and how did they respond? **probe**
- what were your thoughts at that stage? **probe**
- what were the main outcomes? **probe**
- so, that took a total of 6 weeks? **closed - clarifying**
- was it your idea or someone else's? **closed – clarifying**
- and the project finished on time? **closed – clarifying**
- so, let me see if I've followed you... **checking – summary**