

# Reducing Conflict 74 Reflective Listening

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Some of the conflict we experience in our lives can be cured by practicing reflective listening. When we experience conflict with another person, we compromise our ability to communicate accurately. That's because when we believe we are listening, we direct most of our energy on preparing to speak. For critical issues, it is best to make sure you understand before ensuring you are understood.

### Reflective Listening takes us to higher understanding

When we practice reflective listening techniques, we have the ability to absorb more of what the other person is telling us. The method is fairly easy to master, but you need to remember to use it. You must also use it with skill. That is the trick.

### Reflective listening consists of four parts

First, you must **attend** to the other person. That means getting rid of all distractions and paying attention to the person. That may sound easy, but for many people attending is the hardest part.

I once had a boss who had a nasty habit whenever the conversation took on a serious tone. He would reach into his pocket and pull out a small pocket knife. He would open the blade and begin to clean his fingernails right in front of me. That is **not** attending.

For many people, the cell phone is a major distraction that prevents full attending. You cannot listen with full attention when you are texting another person. Put the phone down and stop thinking about it.

Use “following” skills to show you are attending. These skills are body language cues that indicate you are paying attention. These include some hand gestures, eye contact, blinking rate, head tilting, head nodding, and other ways to show attention.

The second part is to **listen with high intensity**. The skill here is to focus on what the other person is saying. Avoid occupying your mind trying to figure out when you can break into the conversation. Try to not make up your rebuttal when you are listening to the other person.

To help me remember this part, I use a mental image of wearing my “listening hat.” That is a three-cornered imaginary hat that I put on to concentrate on what I am hearing.

The third part requires skill and discipline. It is the **reflection phase** of the conversation. In this phase, you **artfully** insert reflections of what you are hearing the other person say. The reflection may come out as a question. It might sound like this, “was that frustrating for you?” It could just be an affirmation like, “that sounds depressing.” It might be a compliment, “congratulations on rising above the pain.” It could take the form of an expression like, “no way.”

The tricky part about the reflection phase is to do it artfully. Artfully means do not overdo the reflections. Let them come out naturally and avoid parroting back the exact words you are hearing. If you administer the reflection phase with a heavy hand, you will annoy the other person.

The final phase of reflective listening is to **repeat the process**. When the point is taken and it is time to move on to a different part of the conflict, that is no time to quit. Mentally pat yourself on the shoulder and start focusing on the next part of the story.

### **When to use reflective listening**

A key point here is that reflective listening takes much more energy than casual listening. You cannot possibly use the technique for all conversations.

If you are chatting about the weather with a friend or deciding where to have lunch, use normal listening. Save your intense listening skills for conversations that have high impact. A good indicator of when to use reflective listening is when the topic is highly emotional.

When either you or the other person is experiencing a peak emotional period, it is time to put on your listening hat. Use reflective listening to capture the true meaning in the conversation.

### **What to do with a motor mouth**

Some people will ramble on as long as you let them. It can be frustrating to never get the chance to break into the conversation. In those cases, you might say something like this. “I have been listening to you carefully. I think you make some good points that I was not considering. I would love to share an alternate point of view that amplifies your points if you are interested.” If the other person just pontificates and then walks away, you have to let them go.

### **More than two people**

If more than two people are discussing and you are moderating the conversation, you need to direct traffic. Allow each person time to share his or her thoughts. Go for

fairness in this case, and suggest approximately equal air time. Often a creative solution will emerge out of considering multiple viewpoints.

## **Conclusion**

You can benefit from the ideas in this article because they can reduce the level of conflict in your life. Try them out, especially in uncomfortable conversations, and enhance the quality of your relationships.

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