

RECIPROCAL REFLECTIVE LISTENING: A structured communication exercise (aka “reflective listening”)

There are two roles in the exercise: the SPEAKER and the REFLECTOR. The participants take turns in occupying each role and switch roles at a designated point which is pre-determined (see below). The starting role of SPEAKER is taken by the person who proposes trying the exercise on any particular occasion. If the second person agrees to participate in the experiment, he/she then automatically begins in the role of REFLECTOR. If the second person is not willing to participate at a particular moment, it is best to abandon the effort for the time being because the exercise requires co-operation.

The exercise entails a series of ‘couplets of opening and closing utterances’ which constitute the ‘bookends’ for clarifying statements about deeply personal experiences. These opening and closing utterances provide a scaffolding structure to enhance safety during what could be a vulnerable conversation. They are crucial to the exercise and are repeated again and again throughout the process. When the participants adopt this structure, less effort is required to regulate the conversation because the scaffolding provides the regulation.

The first opening statement by the SPEAKER is “***What I would appreciate you understanding about me is ...***”. What is important about this opening statement is that it extends appreciation in advance which enables a more positive emotional context. The opening statement is then followed by a succinct description by the SPEAKER of whatever he/she would like the reflector to understand about the SPEAKER’s personal experience. The SPEAKER’s description of his/her experience is then closed with the bookend statement “***And that’s how I experience myself at this time***” implying that the SPEAKER may feel differently in the future, which allows for some hope that change might be possible.

The focus then shifts to the REFLECTOR who begins with the opening statement “***What I hear you saying is that you feel ...***” indicating that the listener is trying to remain tentative by not claiming to know exactly what the speaker is experiencing but is sharing how he/she is making sense of what they heard. This opening statement is followed by an intuitive restatement of the speaker’s experience in the REFLECTOR’s own words. The closing bookend for the reflection is always the question “***Is that correct?***” This conveys the REFLECTOR’s humility in acknowledging that he/she doesn’t know for certain that he/she has fully understood. It is important for the speaker to wait for the REFLECTOR to actually ask the closing question because it helps the REFLECTOR remain open to feedback for possible corrections in his/her understanding. The stance of uncertainty and humility in the REFLECTOR adds safety for the speaker to risk becoming more open and honest in disclosing their inner experience.

The focus then shifts back to the SPEAKER who evaluates the accuracy of the reflector’s understanding according to 3 options: Yes, No, or Partly. If the answer is “***No***” or “***Partly***” the SPEAKER returns to the same opening statement “***What I would really appreciate you understanding about me is ...***” followed by a revised description by the SPEAKER of what he/she would like the reflector to understand about his/her personal experience. The SPEAKER’s new speech is closed with the same bookend statement “***And that is how I experience myself at this time.***”

The focus then moves back to the REFLECTOR who starts again with the opening statement “***What I hear you saying now is that you feel ...***” followed by another intuitive restatement of the speaker’s experience in the REFLECTOR’s own words. The coupled ending of the REFLECTOR’s new reflection is the same closing question “***Is that correct?***”

The conversation goes back and forth (like the ball in a game of tennis) until eventually the SPEAKER can honestly answer the question with **“Yes, that is correct”**. At this point in the exercise the REFLECTOR asks a second question **“Is there anything else?”** This question opens space for the SPEAKER to go into more depth on the issue (and keep his/her initial speech relatively short so the reflector can remember what has been said). If the answer to the second question is **“Yes”** the SPEAKER returns to the same opening statement **“What I would also appreciate you understanding about me is ...”** followed by a further elaboration by the SPEAKER of what he/she would like the reflector to understand about his/her experience. The SPEAKER’s additional disclosure is again closed with the bookend statement **“And that’s how I experience myself at this time.”** The REFLECTOR then responds in the same way as above.

A major reversal in the exercise occurs when the speaker’s answer to the REFLECTOR’s second question **“Is there anything else?”** is **“No”** or **“Not now.”** This is when the participants **switch roles** and the original REFLECTOR becomes the new SPEAKER. The new SPEAKER then embarks upon the same opening and closing ‘bookend’ statements. The content issue on which the new SPEAKER would appreciate some understanding could revolve around the same topic or it could be about a different issue. This depends entirely on the preference of the new SPEAKER. However, the opening and closing statements remain exactly the same to keep the protective scaffolding structure in place. In the event that the SPEAKER holds the floor for a long time, or the REFLECTOR has repeated difficulty understanding accurately, either party could call for an ad hoc switch in roles to enable reciprocity and some balance in the two-way conversation.

Engaging in this exercise usually requires intense concentration and focussed attention which tends to be quite tiring. Either party could ask for a rest break or end the exercise at any time. When ending the process, is useful for the participants to acknowledge whatever new understandings did emerge. It is also helpful for the original SPEAKER to thank the original REFLECTOR for being willing to engage in the experiment in the first place.

If both participants are willing to persevere a little longer, they could switch roles several times in a single sitting. Doing so often results in a deeper and richer conversation because the reactivity (that typically accompanies conflictual conversation) is restrained by the scaffolding structure. Once both parties fully embody the structure of the exercise, they can sometimes abandon the explicit bookend statements and engage in an ordinary clarifying conversation that feels safe and is productive. However, should communication difficulties re-emerge, e.g. escalating reactivity, either party could request a return to the safety of the explicit scaffolding structure. Neither party should be pressured to enter into or continue in the exercise when they do not feel sufficiently safe to do so. It is better to abandon the experiment and ‘walk away from escalation’ to protect the relationship from further injury, rather than to persist and risk creating more injury.

While agreement sometimes arises as a side effect of using this exercise, the purpose is to produce mutual understanding, not mutual agreement. Indeed, a common outcome is to come to understand one’s differences more clearly. Perhaps one of the most significant effects of the exercise is to shift the emphasis from trying to get one’s point across, to ‘listen to the listening of the other’ and to hear what they are actually hearing.

Tomm, K., & Acton, J. (2011). Reflective listening and negative enquiry: Two exercises to enhance couple communication. *Human Systems: The Journal of Therapy, Consultation and Training*, 22(3), 732-745.