MODULE 4.9 – HANDOUT 4

## DRAFT Guidance Document: Important Skills for Effective Listening[[1]](#footnote-1)

*March 27 2022 version[[2]](#footnote-2)*

**What is this document?**

This tool helps you and your teams to develop your skills about how to best listen to communities, which will improve your ability to collect open, unstructured feedback from communities.

**How should I use this document?**

This tool can be used as part of training of data collectors, as well as a reference document for anyone working with communities and receiving community feedback. It can be used for data collectors who listen to community feedback during activities or over hotlines, as well as for anyone actively seeking feedback through focus group discussions, interviews, or other kinds of interactions.

## What is listening?

With listening we are referring to the process of openly hearing and processing what another person is sharing with us. Intentional and active listening is a way to show respect and to create an open space for dialogue. It requires the listener to be humble, have an open mind, to suspend their judgments and preconceptions, and to be open to hear not just words, but also the feelings and meanings behind the words. It is important to listen to thoughts, to feelings, and to intentions.

Listening helps us:

* **Recognize and respect local knowledge** – Every person has different backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, ideas, and preferences. It is thus important to engage a broad range of people in conversations.
* **Think beyond projects and sectors** – Think of each conversation as a way to learn from others. People affected by crises are rarely asked to reflect and comment on both tangible (infrastructure, food security, services, etc.) and intangible (empowerment, trust, accountability, etc.) impacts and the long-term effects of humanitarian action. In order to learn from people’s experiences, conversations need to explore this broader context.
* **Engage people in analysis**. Conversations differ from structured, rigid interviews or surveys in that they provide an opportunity for people to share their insights and analysis using their experiences and observations as evidence.
* **Hear about recommendations**. Real and respectful listening also allows us to engage people in critical thinking about what can and should be done differently (and by whom) to better address the concerns they have raised.

## Dealing with our own biases

Prior to engaging in a conversation, think about your personal biases such as your background, education, skills, beliefs, experiences, ethnicity, nationality, culture, languages, etc. Acknowledging your biases will enable you to find ways to minimize their influences so that you can truly be open to hearing what the other person is saying and the meaning they are trying to convey. Here are a few approaches to reduce the influence of your own biases:

* **Keep an open mind**. Encourage people to speak their minds, do their own analysis, and talk about the issues that are important to them. Be careful not to assume answers will “fit” a predetermined expectation or hypothesis.
* **Ask “why?”** Ask people to explain why they think or believe as they do without expressing doubt or accusing them of being wrong or biased. Try to understand why their opinion may differ from others you have spoken with or from what you might have expected them to say, without judging what they tell you.
* **Be evidence-based.** Ask people to be specific when they speak about their own experiences. Ask for examples or evidence to support their views. Ask how their lives or those of family members have been affected--and listen carefully to the details and their analysis without judgment.
* **Do not try to problem-solve**. The goal is to understand, not to try to find a solution or consensus in each conversation. You can learn as much from differences of opinions and judgments as from common opinions.
* **Pay attention to what people actually say**. Record (and ensure translation of) the actual words people use as carefully as possible. This helps you to avoid using jargon or becoming committed to one point of view (which can happen if we translate ideas into our own words).

## Introducing yourself

It is important to consider if community members understand who you are, if they want to talk to you and how they want to be listened to. Clarify up front what they can expect after sharing their stories, perspectives, and ideas. You should clarify that what you hear will not be attributed to the person sharing the information if they don’t want to and establish a safe environment in which people can openly share their views. Only document any information upon receipt of information consent, meaning that they are clear about the process and who the information might be shared with and consent to continuing with the conversation. Make sure to manage expectations and be clear that you might not be able to fix any issues shared, but that you are going to share the feedback with those best placed to act on it. If people would rather not talk to you, it is important to respect that and end the conversation.

## Establishing rapport

Establishing good rapport is important to getting conversations off on the right foot. Some actions can help to build rapport even with complete strangers—for instance beginning a conversation with appropriate small talk and inquiries, being culturally appropriate, and minimizing power or status differences. For example, in many Asian countries, people do not wear shoes in their homes. When listeners are invited into the home, it is likely they will be told to not take their shoes off. Taking them off anyway communicates respect. Acting and dressing to minimize differences between yourself and those you will be listening to can also help to create more of a sense of trust or sense of “commonness.” For instance, fancier clothes or briefcases used in offices and cities could communicate to villagers that you have a higher position in the social hierarchy, which may make people feel intimidated about speaking openly and voicing opinions next to the official and important-looking “experts.” Having a cup of tea/coffee when offered shows you appreciate hospitality and value the time of the people you want to engage in conversation. Build time into your schedule to ensure that you have time to do what is culturally appropriate to build rapport when engaging new people or communities.

## Listening skills

Listening is a critical skill and ability that may come more easily to some than others. Following are some point of what to do, and not to do, when facilitating conversations:

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| **Do:** | **Don’t:** |
| Sit straight on the same level of the speaker, facing them | Don’t turn your back to the person or sit removed |
| Show that you are concentrating and paying attention, for example though maintaining eye contact if culturally appropriate | Don’t show signs of impatience and distraction., for example eyes searching, looking or moving away |
| Record the information shared by the community member the way it was shared. | Don’t ask leading questions and let the community members share what is important to them. |
| Have another person take the notes so that you can focus on listening and speaking. | Don’t take notes and focus on note taking during the conversation |
| Responding with appropriate verbal and nonverbal reactions (i.e. nodding, saying “yes”, moving closer when appropriate, etc.). | Don’t appear emotionless |
| Listen carefully and let the person speak. | Avoid interrupting the person providing feedback. |
| Be comfortable with moments of silence. | Do not rush the conversation. |
| Listen to the whole story. | Do not only listen for the key words you are anticipating. |
| Paraphrase and repeat statements to ensure you understood correctly. | Don’t jump to conclusions and note what you think was said. |
| Show you empathise with the person. | Don’t show negative emotions or act in a cold way without showing any empathy. |
| Be comfortable with provocative or negative comments. | Don’t act in a defensive way. |

## Non-verbal communication

There are a variety of non-verbal gestures that can communicate your level of attention, presence, interest, disagreement, or other reactions. These vary across cultures and it is important to be aware of your facial expressions and body language and what they may be communicating. ***Remember: all of these are dependent upon what is considered appropriate for the culture and context.***

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| **Listener’s facial expression and what it communicates to the speaker** | |
| Concentration/eye contact | “I am listening” |
| Puzzlement | “I need clarification” |
| Ponder | “I am reflecting on what you said” |
| Excitement/ Happiness | “I like what you are saying” / Encouragement |
| Dislike / scowl | “I don’t like what you are saying” / Disagreement |
| Opening eyes wide | “I am surprised” |
| Eyes searching around  *When in a larger group:* | “I am distracted” measuring reactions of others /  identifying next speaker |
| Moving closer / approaching | “I am interested in what you are saying” Engagement/Attempt to insert a comment or ask another question/could be threatening |
| Moving away / distancing | Giving the speaker space to express him/herself Could also communicate disinterest/loss of focus |
| Silence | Reflection, emphasis, can also increase tension |

1. Much of this tool has been adapted from: Brown, Dayna, and Imogen Wall. (2015) *Guidance on Engaging People in Crisis-Affected Communities to #ReshapeAid*. Developed for The World Humanitarian Summit 2016. For more see: <https://www.cdacollaborative.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Guidance-on-Engaging-People-in-Crisis-Affected-Communities-to-ReshapeAid.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Draft document provided courtesy of the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)