The Most Powerful Tool for Effective Risk Communication - Active Listening

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Perhaps our greatest challenge when talking with people about radiation risks is when the dialogue gets emotional. We may find ourselves not knowing what to do when our best technical data and logical analyses are not accepted by those who are afraid of radiation. What can we do when confronted with hypothetical questions which do not seem to have clear rational answers? How can we respond when our best answers seem to be causing the other person to become more and more upset? Suppose we do not have the data from which to give a good technical answer? Is there any hope?

The effectiveness of any communication is not about the message that we send, but the response of the other person. Thus, the best opportunity for communication is to start with what the other person is saying. This may be difficult for specialists in radiation safety when the information provided by the other person does not make any technical sense. Typically we want to hear good data for which we can apply our well developed analytical logic to resolve the problem and give an answer accordingly. When the other person appears to be speaking emotional nonsense, what options do we have? The answer is active listening. This may be the single most powerful tool for effective risk communications. Active listening does not take ownership of the problem. In other words, we do not have to give a problem-solving answer. Active listening is also non-defensive and avoids a dozen roadblocks to effective communications. Active listening is based on the insight that every communication has two parts, a feeling or emotional part and a content part. By training and experience, we are usually very good at hearing the content part of a message. Identifying the feelings is more difficult. For technical types, it may help to suggest that all feelings can be captured by synonyms of four words, mad, sad, glad, and afraid. An active listening response paraphrases the content and identifies the underlying feeling. For example, a person says, “Radiation, I do not want anything to do with that!” An active listening response could be, “You are worried that radiation may be harmful for you.” By hearing the feelings first, we may find that the feelings are defused (when you really hear the feeling, the other person does not have to keep trying to express that feeling). Hearing feelings also opens the door for further dialogue and helps identify the real issues. In this session we will describe the process of active listening and provide opportunities for practice.

Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this presentation, the audience should be able to:

1. recognize emotional situations where radiation risk communication tools will be helpful
2. hear and identify the feelings involved in these situations
3. reflect the message content and the feelings by Active Listening
4. respond to feelings non-defensively
5. begin practicing Active Listening skills to deal with emotional situations
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Approach for Today
- Think of a scenario where you would like to have better communication skills
- Greatest challenge – dealing with feelings
- Start with the other person's message
- The most powerful tool – Active Listening
- Roadblocks to effective communication
- Applications of Active Listening
- Practice
- Summary, Questions, Evaluations

Communication Scenarios
- Please describe one or more scenarios for application of Active Listening
  - Real or hypothetical
  - Communication with
    - The media
    - Emergency responders
    - State or local government staff
    - Co-workers
    - Members of the public
    - Friends or Family

Scenarios

What is Best for Your Scenario?
- Will a better understanding of radiation, risks, etc. be most helpful?
- Will understanding of feelings, fears, and risk perceptions be most helpful?
- What have you tried or thought of trying?
- Are there magic words that will make a difference?
- Is there “An answer?”

Challenges for HPs
- Which may be the greatest challenge for HPs day-to-day
  - Issues about technology
  - Issues involving people
- Most of us have extensive training to deal with technical issues
- How much of our career has been devoted to dealing with people issues?
  - Such as understanding how people feel?
  - Developing risk communication skills?

Radiation Safety Academy
Our Greatest Challenge
- When the dialogue gets emotional
- What can we do when our best information is not accepted?
- How do we answer hypothetical questions?
- What if our answers cause more upset?
- What if we do not have any data?
- Is there any hope?

Questions about Feelings
- Would our jobs be easier if people left their feelings at home?
- Are feelings difficult to comprehend?
- Does logical analysis of feelings help?
- Are feelings a foreign language?
- In our best efforts, do our own feelings get hooked?
- Would we like to run away?
- If we open the door to feelings, will we be overwhelmed?

Two Primary Attributes for Risk Communication
1. Master of your subject
   - How much time do you spend on mastering your material?
2. Showing you care
   - How much time do you spend on showing that you care?
- Which is more important?
  - Knowledge – Technical information
  - Caring – Hearing and responding to feelings

Focus for Today
- NOT on technology of radiation safety issues
  - You are radiation experts
- Focus on “How” to communicate what you know
  - Caring for your audience
  - “You audience does not care how much you know, until they know how much you care”

Your Comfort Zone
- Familiar
- Language
- Feelings
- Views
- Secure
- Employment
- Family
- Friends
- Home

Outside Your Comfort Zone
- Unfamiliar
- Threats and Risks
- Credibility
- Fears and feelings
- Views and Beliefs
- Cultural factors
- Education factors
- Life styles
- Economic factors
- Languages
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**Building Bridges**

- What's in it for me?
- Communication Tools
  - Active Listening
- Canyon of Differences

**Listener's Stance**

- Goal is for Adult Response - Ability
  - $R_t + R_p + C_a$ to $TCOL$
- Be aware of feelings
  - Anxiety, defensiveness
- How to identify defensiveness and stay non-defensive

**Active Listening**

- Hearing and responding to feelings
- A skill that can be easily learned
  - Through practice
- Most powerful tool for risk communication
- Process of Active Listening
  1. Paraphrase the content
  2. Respond with a synonym that describes the feeling
  3. Let the other person correct you as needed

**Listening**

- Communication is not the message you send, but the response that you get!
- Response is in two forms:
  - Verbal and visual
- Listening is more than hearing data for understanding
- Risk messages also involve feelings

**What to Do With Response You Get**

- Communication is a two way process
  - observe verbal and visual cues
- Hear feelings - How?
- Use Active Listening to develop rapport
  - restate content and feeling of message
  - keep ownership of problem with other person
- Be aware of roadblocks that may prevent open communications

**Active Listening**

- Hearing the message and the feelings
- Why bother?
  - To establish rapport as basis for presenting your risk message
  - To get down to the real issue of concerns for radiation risks
- Active listening is not easy for technical experts and managers
Hearing and Reflecting Feelings

1. **Best answer for upset person**
2. **Describe feeling we perceive**
   1. Do not analyze or evaluate
   2. Paraphrase content and reflect feelings
   3. Let other person correct your understanding
3. **Temptation for technical people**
   1. Go directly to technical answers
   2. Without addressing or connecting with feelings

Why Not Troubleshoot Right Away?

- **By giving answers first**
  - You miss an opportunity to connect with feelings and real reasons for concern
- **Hearing feelings establishes basis for rapport and credibility**
  - They may then “hear” your answers
- **When you go directly to answers you may discover you are answering the wrong question**
- **Fearful people may not want specific answers, but rather to know that someone hears their feelings**

Why Hear Feelings Rather than Give Answers?

1. **Hearing feelings establishes rapport and credibility**
2. **Otherwise they may not hear your answers**
3. **You may discover your answers are about the wrong question or concern**
4. **Fearful person may not expect answers, just want someone to hear their fears**
5. **People may not care how much you know, until they know how much you care**

Asking Questions vs Giving Answers

- People can discount your answers
- Position yourself as a resource to help people find their own answers
  - Behavior guided more by their own answers derived from observations
- Provide options for experience or observation
- Encourage skepticism

Natural to Give Answers

- **Not a matter of right or wrong responses**
- **Two precautions when giving answers:**
  - Are you answering the right question?
  - Who owns the problem?
- **The giver of answers assumes the responsibility**
- **Giving answers sets up opportunities for adversity**

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**Roadblocks That May Close Communications**

1. Ordering, directing, commanding
2. Warning, threatening, promising
3. Moralizing, preaching, shoulds, oughts
4. Advising, giving solutions, suggestions
5. Teaching, lecturing, logical arguments
6. Judging, criticizing, disagreeing
7. Praising, agreeing
8. Name calling, labeling, stereotyping
9. Interpreting, analyzing, diagnosing
10. Reassuring, sympathizing, consoling
11. Probing, questioning, interrogating
12. Withdrawing, distracting, humoring, sarcasm, diverting, indirection

**Roadblock 11 - Asking Questions**

- How can asking questions become a roadblock?
- Typically when technical people ask questions – it is to gather data for giving answers
- A better use of questions could be to lead the other person to resolve their own problems

**Review & Questions**

- Greatest challenge for HPs
  - Dialogues that involve emotion (feelings)
  - Answer is to hear feelings
    - By Active Listening
    - Paraphrase content and feelings
  - Requires moving outside our comfort zone
  - As trained “givers of answers” we want to quickly get into troubleshooting

**How Not to Respond**

- Avoid giving an evaluation, opinion, advice, analysis, or questions
- Such responses come from your own stuff, so you can take control of the communication
- Hard to leave initiative with other person
- Especially when you think they are wrong or misconstruing the facts
- Try to avoid getting defensive

**Defensiveness**

- We get defensive when our own feelings are hooked
- Emotional elements of communication do affect our feelings
- When we feel frustrated, annoyed, perplexed, or the butt of criticism
  - Our critical judgment takes charge and we feel a need to defend ourselves
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Defensiveness – Natural Response
- Natural for coping
- Fight or flight
- Resistance is a fight response
- Fear of consequences
- Anxiety fuels fear
- Images fuel anxiety
- Images are automatic

Knowing Your Defensiveness
- Tune in to your own defensiveness
  - Churning in stomach
- Need to justify yourself
  - Arguing your point
- Raising advice to demands
- Raising your voice

When We Hook Defensiveness
- We hook images and fears
- Established for survival
- Best to reduce defensiveness
- Do not give anything to push against

How to Be Non - Defensive
- Turn on feeling switch
- Hear feelings
- Reflect feelings
- Find agreement on concerns
- Establish rapport

Communicating to Hear Feelings
1. Develop Active Listening skills
2. Talk in terms of -
   1. personal values... caring...
      harmony... appreciation...
      compassion... what is good
      for the people involved.
3. Use criticism gently - look for harmony first
4. Be personal - avoid complex analyses

Name Some Feelings
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
________________________________________________________
Active Listening Approach
- Respond to your perception of speaker’s message and feelings
- There are four feelings:
  - Mad, Sad, Glad, Afraid
- Opens doors to “real issues”
- Does not take away from:
  - Other person’s right, responsibility, and capacity to solve their own problems

Hearing and Reflecting Feelings
- Fears are best handled by hearing and reflecting feelings
- Do not say, “I know how you feel.”
  - You can never know another’s feelings
- Describe the feeling in your own words
  - Let the other person correct you
  - Four feelings - Mad, Sad, Glad, and Afraid
- Dialogue process
  - Paraphrase and reflect
  - Do not interpret or rationalize

Examples of Active Listening
- “I don’t want to go near radiation”
  - “Radiation makes you nervous”
- “Yes, I might still like to have children”
  - “You are afraid that radiation may affect whether you can have children”
- “Yes, I do not want children with 3 eyes”
  - “So your real concern is whether radiation will affect future children”
- “Yes”
  - “Ok, here is what I have learned”

Examples of Active Listening
- “Radiation, I don’t want anything to do with it !”
  - “Radiation is scary isn’t it ?”
- “I don’t believe a word you are saying!”
  - “You are concerned that I may not be telling you the truth ?”
- “I know what happens when you are exposed to radiation ?”
  - “If you are exposed to radiation, you feel that something bad will happen?”

Listening is the Key
- People’s concerns are about images of losses or consequences of radiation
- Identifying the basis for fears requires listening and asking lots of questions
  - Rather than giving answers
- Active listening is difficult for technical people whose lives are about giving answers
- Giving answers also takes ownership of the problem

Axioms on Listening
- Feelings are more important than:
  - What is said
- Listening is more important than:
  - Solving problems
Hearing Feelings

- Have you noticed when people are repeating their story?
- People will keep on repeating until you hear the feelings
  - When you hear the feelings they do not need to tell you their story again
- When you really hear the feelings, the feelings will go away

Practice of Active Listening

- Review one of your scenarios
- Pick a partner, decide who goes first
- Speaker - Briefly describe the situation
  - 10 to 15 seconds at most
- Listener – Respond with content and feeling
- Switch roles, share scenario and respond
  - Note: This is NOT troubleshooting

How Was Your Experience of Active Listening?

- Did it work?
- Was it difficult?
- Were you able to stay with the model of Active Listening?
- Were you tempted to troubleshoot?
- Did you find yourself giving answers?

Review

- Greatest challenge for HPs
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- Answer is to hear feelings
  - By Active Listening
  - Paraphrase content and feelings
- Requires moving outside your comfort zone
- As trained “givers of answers” we want to quickly get into troubleshooting

Learnings from this Session

- Troubleshooting takes ownership and may solve wrong problem
- Listener’s Stance
  - \( R_L + R_E + C_a \rightarrow TCOL \)
- Avoid defensiveness
  - Active listening is NON-defensive
- Four feelings – Mad, Sad, Glad, Afraid
- Axioms on listening
  - When you hear the feelings, they go away
Questions & Evaluation
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- American Board of Health Physics Certification (1983–present)
- Past President and Fellow of the Health Physics Society (2000)
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Experience
2010 – pres. Director, Radiation Safety Counseling Institute, workshops, training, and counseling for individuals, companies, universities, or government agencies with concerns or questions about radiation safety.
1984 - 2007 Director, Radiation Safety Academy. Providing x-ray and radiation safety training, audits, and consulting to industry (nuclear gauges and x-ray), universities, research facilities, and professional organizations. Specialist in helping people understand radiation, risk communication, worker counseling, psychology of radiation safety, and dealing with fears of radiation and nuclear terrorism for homeland security.
1988 - 2006 Manager and Contractor to National Institutes of Health (NIH) for radiation safety audits of 3,500 research laboratories and 2,500 instrument calibrations a year, along with environmental monitoring, hot lab and analytic lab operations, and accelerators and x-ray inspections.
1990 - 2005 President of Key Technology, Inc. a manufacturer and primary laboratory for radon analysis with over 1,500,000 measurements since 1985. Primary instructor at Rutgers University 1990-1998 for radon, radon measurements, radiation risks, radiation instruments, and radon risk communication courses.
1986 - 1988 Laboratory Director, RSO, Inc. Directed analytical programs and Quality Assurance for samples from NIH, Aberdeen Proving Ground, radiopharmaceutical companies, and the nuclear industry.

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