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Elaine Biech, EDITOR

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING ACTIVITIES

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TRAINING

He Who Holds the Pen: Practicing Active Listening

Activity Summary

Participants learn and practice active listening skills.

Goal

- To demonstrate and practice the key elements of active listening.

Group Size

Groups of 5 to 6 people from an intact work team.

Time Required

50 to 60 minutes.

Materials

- Marking pen.
- Flip chart and markers.

Physical Setting

A space large enough for each small group to sit in a circle.

Facilitating Risk Rating

Moderate to high—depending on the situation being debated and its relevance to the group.

Process

1. Introduce this activity as a way to practice "active listening." It is especially appropriate for groups that are actively engaged in debating a "hot" topic already.
2. First, select a "hot topic"—one that is current and on which some people will have strong opinions (for example, gun control, abortion, casual dress policies, or Internet use in the workplace).
3. Pick up a marker and state, "He or she who has the pen has the floor. That person will tell teammates his or her opinion about the topic we have chosen. No one is to interrupt the speaker until he or she has finished speaking."
4. Have the speaker begin, reminding people that no interruptions are allowed, simply listening. When the speaker stops, do not allow anyone else to speak until one of the listeners has paraphrased what the speaker said. Ask the speaker whether the listener accurately captured his or her intent *and* the feelings involved.
(3 minutes.)
5. If the answer is yes, then the speaker hands the marker to the person who accurately paraphrased him or her. If the answer is no, then give another person a chance to paraphrase what the speaker said.
(2 minutes.)
6. Continue this process until all have had a chance to speak on the topic (or another topic if people would be repeating the same opinions).
(5 minutes per speaker.)
7. After all have had a chance to speak, debrief the activity with the following questions:
 - What did you think about this activity? Was it easy or difficult to listen actively to what someone else had to say? What made it difficult?
 - When you were the speaker, what audience behavior did you note? Did you feel that others were listening while you spoke? Did you feel that others were able to paraphrase what you had said?
 - When you were listening to what others had to say, what techniques did you use to become a better listener?

- What did you learn from this activity? How might we apply those learnings to our team's work?

(10 minutes.)

8. Wrap up the session by summarizing the key elements of active listening on a flip chart:

- *Prepare to listen.* Shift your focus and attention to the person speaking. Send a nonverbal signal (such as turning your head toward the speaker) that you are giving that person your undivided attention.
- *Actively listen.* Listen with the intent to understand the speaker's words, putting aside your own agenda and the need for an immediate response.
- *Listen for meaning.* Use all your senses to take in information. Listen not only with your ears, but also with your eyes and heart. Take in the nonverbals, the tone, the pace and feel what the other person is saying.
- *Interpret the message.* As you take in all this information, focus on understanding what the speaker intends. Put yourself in the person's position. Be aware of your own values and beliefs that act as filters between the speaker's message and your interpretation. Resist the temptation to advise, criticize, or judge when listening and asking questions. Make a conscious effort to understand other points of view.
- *Check for understanding.* Paraphrase or rephrase what was said and check for agreement.
- *Reflect the feeling.* This is the key to empathetic listening, where you seek to understand the speaker's feelings as well as the words.
- *Draw the speaker out.* Ask open-ended questions to obtain more information.
- *Clarify as necessary.* Ask questions to gain a clearer understanding of what has been said, especially when you think there are differences in the way a word is used or defined.
- *Test the unsaid.* Sometimes, the real issue has not been spoken. If you sense there is something that has not been said, test out your theory by asking questions.

(10 minutes.)

Submitted by Kristin J. Arnold.

Kristin J. Arnold, M.B.A. C.P.C.M., specializes in coaching executives and their leadership, management, and employee teams, particularly in the areas of strategic and business planning, process improvement, decision making, and collaborative problem solving. An accomplished author and editor of several professional articles and books, as well as a featured columnist in The Daily Press, a Tribune publishing newspaper, Arnold is regarded as an expert in team development and process improvement techniques. With building extraordinary teams as her signature service, she has provided process facilitation, training, and coaching support to both public- and private-sector initiatives.