

**VOV ACTIVITIES**  
**Understanding the Value of Dialogue**  
**Grades 7-12**

**Active Listening**

**Purpose:** To practice active listening skills, specifically summarizing.

**Time:** 20 minutes.

**Materials:** Just people.

**Directions:** Begin by asking the group what they think the term “active listening” means. If it doesn’t come up in the discussion, bring out the point that active listening means more than just looking interested in the speaker’s story. It means listening to what is said and listening for what is not said. It means listening for the emotion as well as the facts.

Introduce the idea of summarizing what the speaker has said. Explain that one of the ways to be sure that you are listening accurately is to summarize what the speaker has said and to reflect it back to them. The listener should not simply repeat back all of the information they have heard, but should instead try to find the most important points, as well as identify the underlying emotion.

Demonstrate the process of listening, summarizing the main points and naming the emotions. Ask for a volunteer to speak for 1-2 minutes about the conflict they are having or have had. Remind them to choose a conflict that they don’t mind the whole group hearing. Summarize their main points and reflect back to them the emotion you hear. Ask if your impression is accurate. One way to phrase this is, “It sounds like you are feeling \_\_\_\_\_. Is that right?”

Have the group divide into pairs. Ask them to each speak for one to two minutes about a conflict they are in or have dealt with recently. The speakers should include as many details as they wish. The listeners should listen carefully and then summarize what they have heard. They should then name the emotion they sense, and ask the speaker if they are right.

Bring the group back together. Debrief by asking how it felt to be both the speaker and the listener. Ask how the process of summarizing can be useful. If the following points don’t come out in the discussion, add that summarizing can help (1) to make sure that you’ve heard the speaker accurately, (2) to show the speaker that you have understood them, (3) to help the speaker hear themselves, and (4) to bring out into the open the emotions underlying the conflict. Taking the time in the middle of a conflict to make sure that you really understand what the other person is saying and showing them that you understand, can change the tone and de-escalate the

conflict. Be sure to talk about when this skill is not advisable, such as when you are being immediately threatened with violence.

### **Changes 1-2-3-4**

**Purpose:** To practice careful observation and examine the role of observation in conflict.

**Time:** 10-15 minutes.

**Materials:** Just people.

**Directions:** Ask the participants to line up in two rows, Lines A and B, with each person facing a partner. Ask the people in Line A to carefully examine the appearance of their partner for a few seconds. Then ask Line A to turn and face the opposite direction. Ask Line B to change 4 observable things about their appearance. Ask them to not make the changes too subtle. For example, they can roll up their sleeves, take off their watch, or button up their shirt, but they shouldn't switch identical earrings.

Ask Line A to turn around and look for the changes their partners have made. After Line A guesses, ask Line B to reveal their changes. Repeat the process with Line B observing and Line A making changes. Repeat the process with new partners, if time permits and there is still interest.

Debrief the activity by asking what made it easy or hard, whether it got easier with practice, and whether it has any relevance to conflict and real life. Ask participants what they need to be aware of on the street, to stay safe. Bring up the following points, if they don't emerge naturally from the conversation: Paying attention to your surroundings is an important part of avoiding violence. You should pay attention to the signals you are giving (Example: showing money in public, walking in a confident determined way vs. strolling in a casual way); the signals others are giving you (a car passing you repeatedly, body language showing that someone is losing control), and the limitations or assets of your environment (a street without street lamps, ways you could quickly get to safety if needed).

**Variations:** Limit the number of changed details to 3, to make the game a little easier.

My.VOV.com:

**Source:** Adapted from William J. Kreidler, *Creative Conflict Resolution*. New Jersey: Scott Foresman and Co., 1984.

### **Concentric Circles**

**Purpose:** To practice listening and speaking skills.

To build community.

To reflect on one's own experiences, feelings and patterns.

**Time:** Approximately 20 minutes (varies with the number of questions.)

**Materials:** Selected questions or topics.

**Directions:** Ask the group to count off by twos. Ask the "ones" to move their chair into the circle and sit facing the person who was on their right. There should now be two circles, one inside the other. The inside circle faces out, and the outside circle faces in.

Explain that you will ask a question, and that the "ones" should answer, speaking for about one minute. Ask the "twos" to listen attentively, using all of their listening skills. When one minute has passed, call time. If the topic has been an emotionally charged one, ask the listeners to change the focus with a silly question, such as "What did you have for breakfast?" The listeners "twos" then answer the same question.

When both partners have discussed the questions, ask the outer circle to move one chair, clockwise. Repeat the process with the next question. This time, ask the inner circle to move one chair, counter clockwise. Repeat until all questions have been discussed.

### **Concentric Circle Questions for Communication**

1. What is the best book you have ever read, or movie you have seen, and why is it your favorite?
2. Who is the person, living or dead, who is most important to our times, and why are they important?
3. If everything about you were to change except one, what is the one thing you would keep? Why?
4. What is one goal you would like to accomplish by this time next year, and why is it important to you?
5. If you could invite any three people, living or dead, to dinner at your house, which three would you invite and why?
6. What is the thing most needed in the community where you live, and why is it lacking?
7. If you could rule the world, what is the first issue you would change, and why?
8. What do you hope to be doing five years from now?

**Variations:** Ask the partners to switch after one person has answered the question, rather than after both people have answered. This variation allows more people to interact with each other. The drawback is that it may feel unbalanced: each speaker does not hear their listener respond to the same question. In this variation, prepare questions to equal  $\frac{1}{4}$  the number of participants.

This exercise can also be done in two parallel facing lines-the last person in one of the lines moves to the head of the line each time you switch partners.

To have fun and create another way for the pairs to get to know each other, create fun ways for the partners to determine who will speak first. Here are some examples.

1. The person who is shorter answers first.
2. The person who has the longer pinkie on the left hand answers first.
3. The person with the longer hair answers first.
4. The person who lies farther from here answers first.
5. The person with the larger right foot answers first.
6. The person whose full name has fewer letters answers first.
7. The person who ate a donut more recently answers first.

Notes: Once you put together all the components of this activity, it can be rather complicated. You may want to write it all out, as in the sample that follows.

This activity is used with many other topics. See Conflict Resolution and Affirmation for more questions, and start making up your own!

### **Self-Esteem Questions for the Concentric Circles Activity.**

#### **Question One**

- The person who is shorter answers first.
- What is the best book you've read, or movie you have seen and why is it your favorite?
- Thank your partner, and the outside circle moves on seat clockwise.

#### **Question Two**

- The person who has the longer pinkie on the left hand answers first.
- Who is the person, living or dead, who is most important to our times? Why?
- Thank your partner, and the inside circle moves one seat counter clockwise.

#### **Question Three**

- The person whose birthday falls later in the year answers first.
- If you had to change everything about yourself except one thing, what is the one thing you would keep? Why?
- Thank your partner, and the outside circle moves one seat clockwise.

#### **Question Four**

- The person with the longer hair answers first.

- What is one goal you would like to accomplish by this time next year, and why is it important to you?
- Thank your partner, and the inside circle moves one seat counter clockwise.

#### **Question Five**

- The person who lives farther from here answers first.
- If you could invite any three people, living or dead, to dinner at your house, which three would you invite and why?
- Thank your partner and the outside circle moves one seat clockwise.

#### **Question Six**

- The person with the larger right foot answers first.
- What is the thing most needed in the community where you live, and why is it lacking?
- Thank your partner and the inside circle moves one seat counter clockwise.

#### **Question Seven**

- The person whose full name has fewer letters answers first.
- If you could rule the world, what is the first issue you would change and why?
- Thank your partner, and the outside circle moves one seat clockwise.

#### **Question Eight**

- The person who ate a donut more recently answers first.
- What do you hope to be doing with your life five years from now?
- Thank your partner.

### **Good and Poor Listening**

**Purpose:** To demonstrate good and poor listening behavior.

**Time:** 30 minutes.

**Materials:** Newsprint and markers.

**Directions:** Introduce the idea that some behaviors encourage people to talk and others discourage people from talking. Present a skit which you have arranged with a participant, in which the participant tells you something they know well, such as how to brush your teeth. The participant should take care not to speak about something very personal or important. Demonstrate poor listening by distancing yourself in your chair, looking bored, spacing out, cleaning your fingernails, looking at your watch, asking someone else a question, interrupting, changing the subject, tapping your feet, etc.

Stop the skit and ask the group to respond to what happened. Was it good or poor listening? One of the facilitators should post a piece of newsprint to record the list of poor listening behaviors as the group names them. Ask them to describe how they can tell when someone is really listening and when someone isn't listening. What do they do when someone isn't listening? How do they feel?

Continue with the skit, or invite a participant to continue the skit, this time demonstrating good listening skills: Keep eye contact, face the person, look attentive, use appropriate facial expressions, don't interrupt, ask clarifying questions.

Stop the skit and elicit from the class the characteristics of good listening. Make a list on newsprint. Ask them how they knew that this was good listening, to describe the response of the speaker, and whether the questions asked encouraged the person to speak. List good listening behavior.

Wrap-up the activity by asking what role good or poor communication plays in conflict and violence.

**Variation:** Run the good/poor listening skills skit as if it were the t.v. game show, The Gong Show. The listener should mix up the good and poor listening skills. When participants see poor listening behavior, they "gong" the listener, and name the behavior. When participants see good listening skills, they make another noise (which the group chooses) and name the skill. As with the other version, a facilitator records the list of skills on two pieces of newsprint.

**Notes:** This role play can be followed by a listening exercise in which pairs take turns practicing good listening, such as concentric circles or introductions in pairs.

One of the challenges of presenting listening skills is making them real and usable to the participants. Participants may feel that if they apply the skills literally, such as keeping eye contact, the interchange feels awkward and forced and may make the speaker feel uncomfortable. A group that is advanced or has practiced listening skills before can move quickly into a discussion of how to make people feel listened to while also seeming relaxed and natural.

**Source:** Adapted from Educators for Social Responsibility/Resolving Conflict Creatively Program.

### **Gossip Line-Up**

**Purpose:** To explore our ideas and assumptions about gossip.

**Time:** 15 minutes.

**Materials:** 3 pieces of paper, labeled “Agree,” “Disagree,” and “It depends.” Masking tape.

**Directions:** Post the three sheets of paper in different places in the room. Ask the participants to listen to the first statement about gossip, listed below, and move to the appropriate area of the room, depending on whether they agree or disagree with the statement. When everyone has moved, ask one or two people from each group to explain their response. If participants change their minds while listening to the reasoning of others, they are free to move to another spot in the room. Let the conversation continue as long as everyone seems engaged, then move on to the next statement.

1. Gossip is never true.
2. Gossip always hurts someone.
3. Everyone gossips to some extent.
4. Males gossip as much as females.
5. Gossip can be addictive: the more you hear, the more you want to hear.
6. People gossip because it makes them feel better about themselves.
7. People gossip in order to make sense of what is going on around them.

**Variations:** Adjust the statements about gossip to make them more relevant to your group.

**Notes:** Gossip is often associated with women and girls, so you may want to think out beforehand how you will respond to any stereotyping you hear during this activity.

## “I” Messages

**Purpose:** To distinguished between expressing a personal feeling or viewpoint (I-Messages) and blaming or accusing (You-Messages).

To understand how “I” and “You” messages affect conflict.

**Time:** 30 minutes.

**Materials:** I-Messages Handouts [See Appendix] and below.

### I-Messages Handout

#### Skit #1

**Lydia:** I can’t stand sharing a room with you. You are such a slob. Every time I try to clean up in here so I can find my things when I want them, you mess it up again. Why do you have so much stuff anyway? There’s no room for me in here. I just can’t live with you, and I hope you plan on living alone because nobody in the world is going to put up with this stuff.

**Donna:** What is your problem? Just because I don’t spend all of my time in my room cleaning, you think I’m a slob? You think you’re so perfect? Well, let

me tell you, not everybody thinks you are so great. You should see some of the things people say about you. You can spend all your time cleaning if you want to, but I have a life. I clean up when I need to. And don't worry, I plan on moving out as soon as I can.

### **Skit #2**

**Lydia:** I'm really having trouble living in this room. It makes me really upset when I come home and there's stuff all over the place. I can't think when there's a mess all around me. Plus my things get lost, and I can't find them when I need them. I guess I just need to have more things more organized in here. Do you think that we can work on that?

**Donna:** Yeah, I'm sorry, Lydia. I'll try to be neater. My mind's just on other things, and I don't even notice the mess. It just doesn't bother me. Is there some way we can divide the room so my stuff doesn't get in your way? Maybe we can make clear space that is just yours.

**Directions:** Ask for two volunteers to read aloud parts of Lydia and Donna in Skit #1. After Skit #1 has been read, ask students to discuss these questions: How do you think Lydia felt about Donna in this skit? How do you think Donna felt about Lydia? Do you think that Donna is going to stop spreading her things around the room? Why or why not?

Have the same volunteers or two other participants read Skit #2. Then discuss: How do you think Lydia felt about Donna this time? How do you think Donna felt about Lydia this time? Do you think Donna will make an effort to keep the room in order? Why or why not?

Ask the group to compare the two skits. What were some of the comments and non-verbal behaviors being used in the first skit? What were some of the comments and non-verbal behaviors used in the second skit? What was different about the way Lydia communicated in the two skits? Which was more effective?

Explain that the first skit contained You-Messages and the second contained I-Messages.

You-messages blame another person. Since the receiver of the message often feels attacked and judged, usually she/he thinks primarily about defending himself or herself. The likely reaction will be to retaliate with a counterattack or withdraw from the relationship. The result is anger, resentment and perhaps long-term damage to the relationship.

With an I-Message, the speaker communicates his or her own wants, needs, or concerns. The receiver of an I-Message learns that he or she has done something the speaker didn't like. Although he or she may still react defensively at first (nobody likes to feel like they are in the wrong), the door



has been left open for dialogue. There is less likelihood of damage to the relationship between the two.

1. I feel \_\_\_\_\_ (state the feeling)...
2. ...when you \_\_\_\_\_ (state the behavior)...
3. ...because \_\_\_\_\_ (state the effect it has on you)...

Discuss the formula by asking the participants when it would be useful. When would it not be useful? What are some other ways you can say what you need without attacking or blaming others? How can you get yourself out of a potentially violent situation without escalating the conflict? Bring out the following points, if they don't come out in the discussion:

The formula shows the elements of an I-Message. At times it may be helpful to use it directly, and at other times, the formula will sound awkward. In potentially violent or very hostile situations, you may make yourself too vulnerable by telling people how you feel, setting yourself up to be hurt more. In such a case, using a variation on "I-Messages" may be more useful in getting you out of the situation safely. In all cases, the main idea is to express yourself without attacking the other person. Here are some non-formulaic examples of how to do this:

1. I need...
2. I disagree.
3. I have a problem with that.
4. I'm going to/not going to...
5. I have to go.
6. I'm not interested.

Ask participants to share, from their own experiences a time when an I-Message instead of a You-Message would have been helpful in a problem situation.

Variations: Ask the role-players to ad-lib a skit between two roommates. The first time they should blame each other. The second time, they should speak for themselves and try to take responsibility for their own actions.

Notes: I-Messages are re-introduced in the "Win/Win Steps" and practiced in "Hassle Lines" and "Practicing I-Messages."

### **Lego Listening**

Purpose: To demonstrate the need for active listening.

To practice clear articulation of perception and ideas.

Time: 20 minutes.

Materials: Colorful plastic blocks with interlocking pieces, such as Legos.

Plastic bags.

Newsprint and markers.

**Materials:** Select 8-10 plastic pieces, and fit them together into a structure. Put the structure into a bag. Gather an identical set of pieces and put these into a second plastic bag, unassembled. Label both bags "A." This is now one complete set. You'll need half as many sets as there are participants.

**Directions:** Divide participants into pairs, and have them sit back-to-back, on the floor or with their chairs turned. Give one partner the assembled structure without letting their partner see it. This person will be the speaker. Give the other partner the unassembled pieces; he or she will be the listener. Explain the task: the speaker must describe to the listener how to assemble the structure, step by step. Following the speaker's directions, the listener will try to duplicate the structure. The listener may not speak, but the pair may use nonverbal and non-visual communication. Give the pair a minute to set up systems of nonverbal communication, if they choose to.

Debrief by asking how it went, what made it harder or easier to duplicate the structure, what would have made it easier to understand. Explore whether our assumptions, on either side, got in the way of clear communication. Try to bring out the point that an active listener must ask questions to clarify the information they hear, and an effective speaker must continually check to be sure that the information is being heard accurately. Both the listener and the speaker have an active role in clear communication.

**Notes:** The less regular you make the structure, the more difficult the task will be.

### **Perceptions Based On Partial Knowledge**

**Purpose:** To examine how stereotypes affect how people are judged.

**Time:** 30 minutes.

**Materials:** 4 fact sheets, on paper or index cards.

Newsprint and markers.

### **Creating Fact Sheets**

One of the facilitators should select 15-20 facts about themselves. The facts should be truthful but ambiguous. Some of the facts should sound positive, some negative and some neutral, based on common assumptions and stereotypes about what makes a person trustworthy. For example, someone who works in a prison could say, "Is in and out of prison a lot." Group the facts to create four profiles of trustworthiness as in the example below. Write each profile on a separate sheet of paper or index card.

### Example A

- Person 1: has been in and out of prison, uses drugs, dropped out of school.
- Person 2: hangs in alleys, deals in drugs, works with young people.
- Person 3: goes to church twice a week, member of a gang, cares about community.
- Person 4: drinks a lot, goes to school occasionally, loves children.

### Example B

- Person 1: attended an Ivy League College, is a business owner, has traveled overseas.
- Person 2: Attended a public university, has a steady job, is close to their family.
- Person 3: doesn't exercise regularly, stays up late, plays guitar.
- Person 4: Dropped out of school, moves from job to job, never goes to church.

On newsprint, draw a bar or line graph to chart the ratings of the group: Label one axis "Trustworthiness," and write the scale from one to ten. Label the other axis "Profiles" and list Persons 1-4.

**Directions:** Divide participants into small groups of 3-4. Place the trustworthiness graph on the wall and explain the rating system of 1 to 10, from least trustworthy to most trustworthy. Give each group one fact sheet. Ask participants to rate the person individually, and then use consensus decision-making to agree on a group rating of trustworthiness. Ask each group to write down their rating.

Redistribute the fact sheets so that each group has a different one. Repeat the process until each group has considered each fact sheet and you have a rating for each Profile from each small group. Then ask each small group for their ratings, and record the information on the graph.

Debrief by looking at the patterns revealed by the graph. Discuss both the group decision-making process and what makes someone trustworthy.

Gradually reveal the identity of the person described. First reveal that the profiles are all of the same person, and that this is a living person. Ask who the participants think it might be. Next, reveal that it is someone they all know. Again, ask who they think it might be. Tell them that it is someone in this room, and reveal who it is. Clarify the meaning of some of the "facts," and continue debriefing, if needed.

Notes: Be careful about how you create the profiles. In Example A, common phrases such as “drinks a lot” or “uses drugs,” are meant literally, not idiomatically. Some people may feel frustrated or tricked by this play on words.

### **Practicing I-Messages**

Purpose: To practice standing up for ourselves without attacking others.

Time: 20 minutes.

Materials: The scenarios described below, or ones you create.

Directions: Review the I-Statement formula and the non-formulaic alternatives. Explain the directions: In pairs or small groups, participants should come up with two or more ways that they could stand up for themselves in the following scenarios, without attacking the other person or escalating the conflict. Divide the group into pairs. Read the first scenario. Give the pairs or small groups 1-2 minutes to come up with ways to respond. Have the small groups report back to the large group about the options they came up with. Read the next scenario, and repeat the process.

Scenarios:

- A week ago, you spent \$200 at the mechanic getting your car fixed. Now the problem seems to be coming back, and you are very angry. You don't believe that this mechanic does a good job, and you are determined to get your money back and go to a new garage. How can you tell the mechanic what you need without attacking or blaming him?
- You live in an apartment with very loud neighbors. They often have parties late at night, which is difficult for you because you get up early. Tonight, the music is especially loud. How can you tell your neighbors what you need, without attacking or blaming them? When will you choose to talk to them?
- Your good friend borrowed a jacket from you. When you got it back, there was a rip. You are upset that she didn't mention it to you, and you would like her to pay for a new one. How can you tell your friend what you want, without blaming or attacking her?
- You and your housemate share the household chores. For a few weeks, she was very busy with school finals, and you took over some of her share of the chores. Now school is over, and she still hasn't started doing her share. How can you tell her what you need without attacking or blaming her?
- Your neighbor's dog is always outside on a chain and is constantly barking. You have gotten really sick of the barking, and you want to say something to the neighbor about it. What can you say that will express your needs without attacking or blaming him?

- Your sister is constantly on the phone. Tonight, you told her that you are expecting a call to make arrangements to go out and you asked her to stay off the phone. You have just realized that she is on the phone anyway. Tell her what you need without escalating the conflict by attacking or blaming her.

To debrief, talk about when it helps to use the formula. In what situations is it helpful to tell the other person how you are feeling? Is it ever detrimental to tell someone how you are feeling? Did it get easier with practice?

Variations: Come up with additional scenarios that are appropriate for your group.

### **Serial News**

Purpose: To demonstrate how rumors develop.

Time: 15-20 minutes.

Materials: A short story full of details, such as the one below, written out or memorized.

Directions: Ask for five volunteers to be listeners. Have all but one leave the room. Tell the following story, or a similar one, to the first listener, so that the whole group can hear you.

“Yesterday, I was driving down Stouffer Avenue in my black Bronco, and I was stopped three cars behind the Chambersburg trolley. Two children were jus getting off when suddenly a silver Corvette came speeding down McKinley and ran through the stop sign. The children were almost hit, and I almost rear-ended the gray Cavalier in front of me.”

Bring the next listener back into the room. Have the first listener tell the story to the second listener. Continue to bring the listeners back into the room one at a time, and have each one tell the story to the next. Each person should tell the story only once, and should not repeat any information. It may be helpful for someone to make notes on how the story changes. Finally, read or recite the original story, and note the changes.

To debrief, ask, “Does this have any similarities to what happens in real life? What does it have to do with conflict and violence?”

Variations: Change the story to fit your setting.