



Constructivist Listening

Adapted from Becerra, A. & Weissglass, J. (2004). Take It Up: Leading for Educational Equity. Santa Barbara: The National Coalition for Equity and Education.

Constructivist listening is an effective strategy for engaging in conversations that are both intellectually demanding and emotionally challenging. It is distinct from most forms of listening in that its purpose is for the benefit of the speaker, not the listener.

Constructivist listening protocols ask that you give full attention to another person to hold space for them to:

- **Reflect**
- **Release emotion; and**
- **Construct new meaning about whatever challenges they face.**

The purpose is to allow new and clearer ways of thinking and acting to emerge. In constructivist listening processes, we put aside our own needs and “agendas” to offer the gift of deep listening to another human being, and the results can be profound. According to Weissglass, “these processes assist in the construction or reconstruction of the meaning of distressful experiences as well as in the recovery from the physiological and emotional tension they produce” (Weissglass 2004).

Distress and hurt contribute to unintelligent and uncaring behaviors and decision-making. Constructivist listening allows for the safe release and processing of thoughts and feelings, no matter how painful or repressed. Since most adults have been conditioned to temper or repress their feelings in the workplace, many of us are reluctant or even scared to express our feelings or show vulnerability. These protocols provide a safe, formal structure that both allows and encourages self-expression and emotional release.

Constructivist Listening Structures

Structure	# Participants	Basic Premise
Dyad	2	Each talker responds to a prompt with equal time given.
Support Group	3-6	
Personal Experience Panel	3-5	Panelists are given equal time to respond to a prompt with a larger group listening.

Constructivist Listening Guidelines

- **Equal time.** Each person is given equal time to talk and to listen. Because everyone deserves attention.
- **No interruption.** The listener doesn't paraphrase or interpret the talker's thoughts or feelings; analyze, give advice or break in with a personal story. Because people are capable of solving their own problems.
- **Confidentiality.** The listener doesn't talk about what the talker has said to anyone else, or even bring it up to the talker afterwards. Because one needs to be assured of confidentiality in order to be authentic.
- **No criticism.** The talker doesn't criticize or complain about the listener or about mutual colleagues during their time to talk. Those challenges can be addressed in a different structure, based in dialogue. Because one cannot listen well when he/she is feeling attacked or defensive.
- **Undivided attention.** Don't eat or drink, glance at your cell phone or email. Remove any other distractions.

The practice of constructivist listening acknowledges that our feelings at any given moment do not necessarily represent our rational thinking (or even our own feelings) five minutes later. By offering a safe, confidential space for release and reflection, constructivist listening allows us the gift of space and time to heal so that we continue to grow as powerful leaders.

The simple act of sharing our story with another person, be it a colleague or a stranger, creates an opportunity for relationship. While the constructivist listening guidelines stipulate confidentiality, the act of listening and being listened to encourages trust, caring, and authenticity.

Constructivist listening strengthens your ability to address challenges by offering you insight into another person's unique lens and experience. It is particularly powerful in creating alliances across racial or other social difference, which form the basis for a thriving community.