

Workshop 5: Active Listening

Introduction

Come sit by our fire and let us share stories. Let me hear your tales of far off lands, wanderer, and I will tell you of my travels. Share your experience of the holy with me, worshipper, and I will tell you of that which I find divine. Come and stay, lover of leaving, for ours is no caravan of despair, but of hope. We would hear your stories of grief and sorrow as readily as those of joy and laughter, for there is a time and a place and a hearing for all the stories of this world. Stories are the breath and word of the spirit of life, that power that we name love. Come, for our fire is warm and we have seats for all. Come, again and yet again, come speak to me of what fills your heart, what engages your mind, what resides in your soul. Come, let us worship together. – Worship Web
[Jennifer Kitchen](#)

This session describes why listening is an important aspect of leadership and provides practical skills for active listening.

Goals

This session will:

- Give participants the opportunity to practice listening and synthesizing information
- Explain non-verbal communication, how to paraphrase and ask probing questions

Learning Objectives

Participants will:

- Experience feeling truly listened to and be able to identify key aspects of active listening
- Understand the impact of body language
- Practice paraphrasing to communicate they are truly listening
- Learn ways to ask questions to get more information that will be helpful for their leadership.

Workshop-at-a-Glance

ACTIVITY	MINUTES
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Spiritual Preparation

Think about a time when you truly felt heard and reflect on the behaviors and tools the person used to signal that they truly heard you.

Opening (10 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- ❑ Chalice, candle, lighter or LED/battery-operated candle
- ❑ Newsprint and markers
- ❑ Chalice lighting words: Worship Web [The Silence](#) by Sara Eileen LaWall

Spirit of life and love,

In the silence

In the stillness

We hear the call of our own heart

Its tender dreams

Its sorrows and its triumphs

*In the silence
In the stillness
We hear whispers of days gone by
Of dreams still becoming
The promise of the future
We celebrate together
Our individual journeys and dreams
And our collective ones
Knowing the journey is so much richer
With others to share in it.
In the name of all that is holy we pray.
Amen.*

- Group covenant (from Workshop 2, Living in Covenant)
- Check in question:
When was a time you really felt heard?

Preparation for Activity

- Post the chalice lighting words on newsprint and post
- Post the group covenant developed in Workshop 2, Living in Covenant.
- Post the check in question in the designated place

Description of Activity

Welcome first-time participants. Invite participants and facilitators to go around the circle and say their names and briefly answer the check in question (in 3 or 4 sentences). Tell participants to really *listen* to other people's answers today. Remind participants that check in is not a time for cross talk - clarifying questions can be asked if necessary. After everyone who wants to has had a chance to check in ask for a volunteer to light the chalice and another to read the chalice lighting words.

Including All Participants

Let participants know they have the right to pass or pass for now. For participants who have trouble being concise you can ask them "how would you sum up your experience in one sentence?" For participants who have trouble refraining from cross talk remind them of the

group covenant and to be respectful of their peers' time to share and the leaders' time to facilitate.

Activity 1: Listening Practice (10 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- Bell or chime

Preparation for Activity

None

Description of Activity

In this activity participants will experience being truly listened to and identify key aspects of active listening.

Split the group into pairs and ask them to decide who will be partner A and who will be partner B. Tell them partner B will begin by telling a story for 30 seconds about a favorite experience. Inform them if they run out of things to say before the 30 seconds is up, to find something more to talk about. Ask participants to choose a story they would not mind sharing with the whole group. Tell them you will ring the bell or chime when 30 seconds is up and that is the signal for partner A to share a story of their own with their partner. After partner A has shared their story tell the partner As to find a new partner B. Tell the partner Bs to tell the story they heard from their original partner as if it were their own to their new partner.

After both people have told the story of their original partners, ask participants to switch partners one more time, telling the most recent story they heard to a new person.

Call the group back together and ask for one or two volunteers to tell the most recent story they heard to the group. Ask the group if the story sounds familiar to anyone. If it has been transmitted well, someone will recognize their story.

Ask participants what they noticed about how people listened and were listened to. Ask questions like:

Did you pay more attention once you realized you needed to remember what was said?

Did you feel like any of your partners weren't paying attention to what you were saying?

How did that feel?

Did you have trouble remembering new stories because you were thinking about the stories you had to tell?

Conclude by saying something like:

A vital part of being an effective leader is being a good listener. Interactions with your co-leaders will go more smoothly if you can demonstrate that you are truly listening. The people you are leading will be more likely to trust your leadership if you can demonstrate that they are being heard.

Including all Participants

For participants with auditory processing issues or who are hearing impaired, this activity can be challenging. Ask these participants how they prefer to do this activity so they can listen well. Some options are for the person to speak and listen with their partner in the hall to cut down on background noise, take notes or ask their partner to repeat key points of their story. If they choose to go into the hall, monitor the group to ensure they remember their fellow participants in the hall.

Activity 2: Nonverbal Communication (15 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- Handout 1 Nonverbal Communication
- Newsprint and markers

Preparation for Activity

- Make copies of handout for all participants.
- Write “Active Listening Skills” on newsprint and post.

Description of Activity

In this activity participants learn how our body language affects how we are heard and how we listen.

Begin by asking for a volunteer. Ask them to tell a story about the last time they were in church. As the person tells their story demonstrate a number of negative body language signals (yawn, cross your arms in front of your chest, look away, check your watch, etc.). Do not make verbal comments to the person so participants can focus on your body language. Continue this for about a minute. Afterwards, ask the volunteer and the group what they noticed about the way you were listening to the story.

Ask the volunteer to retell the story. This time be attentive and focused on the person, using positive body language, (body posture open, some eye contact, facial expressions that reflect what the person is saying, etc.). Do not make verbal comments to the person so participants can focus on your body language. Afterwards, ask for a volunteer to act as scribe. Then ask the volunteer storyteller and the group what they noticed that was different about the way you were listening to the story this time. Ask the scribe to write what the group noticed on newsprint.

As you pass out Handout 1 Nonverbal Communication say something like:

Non-verbal communication is happening all the time and is often unconscious. Sometimes you can receive deeper information about a person's mental/emotional condition by the non-verbal signals they give you.

Ask for volunteers to read the handout aloud.

After reading the handout conclude with something like:

Keep in mind that the way we communicate non-verbally is often shaped by our culture. Be aware that if someone's level of eye contact or physical proximity is different than yours it may be because they received different cultural messages about what is the appropriate level of eye contact or physical proximity. Mirroring someone's nonverbal signals can make a person more comfortable than suggesting or demanding that they mirror yours when you are in a leadership position.

Including all Participants

For participants with visual impairment, ask them if they'd like to sit closer to you. After you demonstrate listening, verbally review your behaviors.

Activity 3: Paraphrasing and Asking Probing Questions (20 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- Handouts 2 Paraphrasing and Synthesizing and 3 Asking Probing Questions

Preparation for Activity

- Make copies of handout for all participants.

Description of Activity

In this activity participants learn ways of communicating so others know they are truly being listened to and learn ways to ask questions to get information helpful for their leadership.

Pass out Handout 2 Paraphrasing and Summarizing and Handout 3 Asking Probing Questions. Briefly explain the basics of paraphrasing and asking probing questions by saying something like:

Paraphrasing is a great way to let people know that you're really listening to them and that you care about what they are saying by reflecting what you hear from the other person. When you paraphrase it is helpful to include the basic elements of what they're

saying and the emotions they convey. A very simplified version of paraphrasing that you can use is: "It sounds like... and you feel..." These examples and the practice we'll be doing may seem unnatural or mechanical. With practice, you'll learn to incorporate paraphrasing into conversation in a natural fashion.

When paraphrasing or summarizing what someone has said, it is helpful to be tentative in your paraphrasing to leave room for the other person to correct you ("it sounds like..." "if I'm getting this right..." "correct me if I'm wrong," etc.). Sometimes you might be off track, and that's ok. There are times, however, when you'll be able to see things (trends, underlying messages, etc.) in what the person is saying that they hadn't noticed, and this can be very helpful to them.

Ask for two volunteers to read Person A and Person B on Handout 2 Paraphrasing and Summarizing as an example.

In addition to paraphrasing or synthesizing what someone has said, you can ask probing questions. Asking probing questions is basically a way to get more information from a person. If a person is upset they may not think the same way they do normally. By using probing questions, you can help a person examine themselves, their situations, and their reactions. If things get too off topic, probe questions can be used to refocus.

Ask for volunteers to read the headings and examples under Use of Probing Questions in Handout 3 Asking Probing Questions.

Break the group into triads. Tell the groups to choose one person as the speaker, one as the listener and one as the observer. Instruct the groups that the speaker will talk about a recent event in their lives that produced a moderate, but not extreme, reaction in them; the listener will listen attentively to them, practicing the paraphrasing, summarizing and probing questions that they just learned, as well as the non-verbal communication from the previous activity, and the observers will remain completely quiet and simply observe the entire process. After three minutes, stop the exercise. Ask the observers to share what they noticed about the interaction with their small group. Continue the process until everyone has had a chance to be in all three roles.

Gather the big group together and ask questions like:

How did it feel to be the speaker?

How did it feel to be the listener?

What did you notice as the observer?

Close the discussion by paraphrasing or summarizing the group discussion. Point out that you just practiced the technique the group learned.

Including all Participants

For participants with auditory processing issues or who are hearing impaired, this activity can be challenging. Ask these participants how they prefer to do this activity so they can listen well. Some options are for the person to speak and listen with their partner in the hall to cut down on background noise, take notes or ask their partner to repeat key points of their story. If they choose to go into the hall, monitor the group to ensure they remember their fellow participants in the hall.

Closing (5 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- Taking it Home

Preparation for Activity

- Make copies of Taking It Home for each participant.

Description of Activity

Invite participants to gather in a circle. Thank everyone for their contributions to the group. Pass out Taking It Home and explain that it contains ideas for ways they can continue to explore workshop topics with family and friends.

You can offer that the group can continue a discussion about this session at a later date or in a closed Facebook group if your group has one. End the workshop with this guided meditation by [Stephen W Dick](#) available on [Worship Web](#).

...Let us pause to listen to the unheard world . . .

Relax into a comfortable position . . .

Breathe in and out very slowly . . .

Quiet yourself and listen to the rhythm of your breath, your heart . . .

Listen to the silence . . .

You will think something . . .

let it pass into you and through you . . .

You will feel something . . .

let it pass into you and through you . . .

Spend some time in the unheard world . . .

(Several moments of silence)

We begin to return now to the world we usually hear . . .

As you do, try to bring something of that unheard world with you . . .

And, remember to give yourself permission to return to the unheard world. Amen.

Leader Reflection and Planning

As leaders working with youth in a Unitarian Universalist context, this workshop offered an opportunity to practice active listening to honor each individual's inherent worth and dignity. What did you notice about your participants' ability to listen and synthesize information in the Listening Practice activity? How can you incorporate practicing active listening skills in future sessions? What did you as co-leaders learn from your co-facilitator? Share your feedback and learnings from this session with the minister and religious educator.

Alternative Activity 1: Listening Back to Back (10 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- Handout 4 Back to Back Tangram Building

Preparation for Activity

- Make a copy of Handout 4 for each participant
- Cut the tangram into shapes and paperclip each set

Description of Activity

In this activity participants learn to listen and follow directions to complete a task and to provide clear and concrete directions for another person to complete a task.

Break participants into pairs and ask them to decide who is partner A and who is partner B. Have each pair sit back-to-back either on the ground or in chairs facing a table or other flat surface. Give both partners a tangram set. Instruct partner A to arrange their puzzle pieces into a shape where all pieces are touching. Tell the pairs that person A must now verbally describe the shape they have created and instruct their partner to create the same shape with their pieces, step by step. Tell the groups that the goal is for the shapes to match each other exactly. Once partner B has finished their shape, invite the group to take a look at their partners shapes to see if they match. Repeat this process with partner B creating a shape and describing it for partner A to replicate. After both have had a turn giving direction and listening invite the group into a circle and ask questions similar to:

What was it like to describe and provide instructions to your partner?

What was it like to listen to and recreate your partner's shape?

What can we learn about listening and providing instruction when you are in a leadership role?

Including all Participants

For participants with spatial learning disabilities or auditory processing issues, ask them how they prefer to do this activity so they can listen well and recreate the shape. One option is to create a group of three where one partner can see the shape of partner A it and provide suggestions or clues to partner B if they get stuck.

Alternative Activity 2: Mirroring (15 minutes)

Materials for Activity

- Handout 1 Nonverbal Communication

Preparation for Activity

- Make copies of handout for all participants.

Description of Activity

In this activity participants practice communicating non-verbally, learn how to mirror the movements and facial expressions of others and why that is an important part of listening.

Invite participants to find a partner, stand facing each other about three feet apart and decide who is partner A and who is partner B. Invite partner A to think of a simple story of something they did this week: perhaps how they got ready for school; something that happened at dinner or a conversation with a friend. Instruct them that this should be a story they wouldn't mind telling to the whole group. Tell them that partner A, silently, will begin making simple gestures, movements and facial expressions to tell their story and partner B is to mirror or duplicate their partner's movements and facial expressions exactly, just as a mirror would. Coach them to look into each other's eyes rather than at their hands to facilitate more precise communication. Tell participants that if they are doing it well, the facilitators will not be able to tell who is the leader and who is the "mirror." Remind participants that slow, fluid movements will help their partners more easily mirror them. After one or two minutes, instruct participants to switch roles and give partner B a moment to think of their story before beginning.

If time allows, challenge the groups to attempt mirroring each other without designating a leader. Or you can challenge partner A to close their eyes and, by following the heat signature in their partner's hands, attempt to mirror partner B who will keep their eyes open so they can track partner A's progress, and then switch roles.

After each person has had a turn leading and mirroring gather the group into a circle pass out Handout 2 Nonverbal Communication. Ask participants to read the handout silently. Say something like:

Subtly mirroring someone's behavior is one nonverbal cue we can give to show someone we are actively engaged and listening to them. In fact, we often unconsciously mirror people in attempt to build rapport with them. You can also use mirroring to gain a sense of empathy for how someone else is feeling. In this activity we literally "acted out someone else's story" and hopefully you were able to glean what their story was.

Then ask questions like:

What do you think was your partner's story?

What do you think was the emotion behind your partner's story? How could you tell?

What did it feel like to mirror your partner?

What did it feel like to be mirrored?

Including all Participants

For participants on the autism spectrum who have trouble with eye contact or physical proximity, ask them how they want to participate in this activity. One option is to encourage them to tell their partner at what distance they feel comfortable in this activity and don't enforce eye contact.

Handout 1: Nonverbal Communication

At the heart of leadership lies communication. For many of us, even in the digital age, speech is the form of communication with which we are most comfortable. It is far from the only means of communication. Here are some other examples of in-person communication.

The Use of Silence:

Although an excessive amount of silence can cause an uncomfortable environment, it is not something that should be avoided. A leader who effectively uses silence can add an entirely new dimension to the relationship they have with their co-leaders and participants.

Some of the uses and advantages of silence include:

- Showing a person that you are willing and able to really listen to them, and that you are not going to try to talk at every instance available to you
- Showing a person you value what they have to say and that it is worth your time to wait for them to say it
- Helping provide motivation for more reluctant people to speak
- Giving both parties time to reflect upon what has just been said and what they are presently thinking or feeling
- Giving both parties time to rest and regain their strength and composure after intense or exhausting experiences
- Providing the opportunity to really tune into other modes of communication such as facial expression, body posture, etc.

Source: Doyle, Robert E. [Essential Skills and Strategies in the Helping Process](#). Pacific Grove: Wadsworth Group, 1992.

Nonverbal Signals

By studying a person's nonverbal messages with care and dedication, you send them a profound message that you are interested in and committed to them. Many people will really appreciate this extra level of attentiveness, and it can greatly enhance the relationship between you and those you are leading. This perceptiveness also facilitates your work by giving you important information about a person that might not be communicated otherwise.

Some nonverbal signals to look for include:

- Body Language: Are they sitting straight up or are they slumped? What kind of movements or gestures are they making?
- Eyes: Are they making eye contact? Are they staring at one place, are their eyes darting around?
- Facial Expressions: What might be the emotions behind the facial expressions a person is making?
- Voice: What is their tone of voice, pitch, volume, inflection, spacing of words, emphasis?
- Space: How close did they decide to be next to you? Are they facing you or turned away? Are they higher than you or lower than you?

Source: Egan, Gerard. [The Skilled Helper](#). Pacific Grove: Wadsworth Group, 2002.

Handout 2 Paraphrasing and Summarizing

Paraphrasing and summarizing are fundamental tools in active listening. These are the foundation upon which everything else is built. Essentially, paraphrasing and summarizing consist of taking what someone has said and repeating it back to them in slightly different words. An example would look like this:

Person A: I'm really frustrated by coffee hour. Last week the coffee was not hot enough and this week it is too hot. I want 2% milk for my coffee but there is only cream and soy milk. It's so crowded and I have a hard time finding people to talk to. The snack assortment only has sweet stuff in it and I like fruit. Even if I did like the snack options, they're always gone by the time I get through the line and I wouldn't get any anyways. How am I supposed to enjoy myself in this chaos?

Person B: It sounds like you're unhappy with the food and beverage options offered at coffee hour and that it's hard for you to connect to people. You're not certain what to do in this situation and I hear you saying coffee hour is stressful for you.

Here are a few phrases you can use to introduce paraphrasing and summarizing:

"It sounds like..."

"I hear you saying..."

"So let me see if I have this correct..."

"So, basically..."

"You're feeling... because..."

"Would it be correct to say that..."

Why Paraphrasing Is Effective and Important:

- Paraphrasing is one of the most important ways to let people know you are listening to them. It shows people that you haven't been ignoring them or thinking of other stuff while they talk
- If you don't know what to say or are afraid you will say the wrong thing, paraphrasing is how you show that you care and that you are listening
- Sometimes, by hearing what they have said reflected back to them, people can get a new perspective on their situation or realize things about what they're saying which they wouldn't have realized otherwise.

A Few Tips to Keep in Mind

- You might not always be able to capture the essence of what a person is immediately trying to say to you. This is perfectly okay, and by being tentative, ("So, I think that what you're saying is... is this right?") you give the person permission to correct you,
- Asking whether you've heard someone correctly shows them that it's important to you that you fully understand what they're saying,
- It is very important for you to genuinely understand what's going on with a person so that you can know how to respond effectively. Paraphrasing is a way to double-check that you understand correctly,
- If possible, reflect back both the facts and the feelings involved in whatever someone is saying to you. If you don't hear much in the way of feelings, it may helpful to ask some probing questions. See Handout 3 Asking Probing Questions.

Handout 3 Asking Probing Questions

Fundamentally, asking probing questions is simply a method of seeking more information from a person. There are many ways to seek this information and many reasons for you to do so. Probing questions are NOT meant to satisfy your curiosity about the details of a person's life or to gather irrelevant information which will only detract from the effectiveness of your leadership.

Types of Probing Questions

Questions

- "How did that make you feel?"
- "What was your response to that?"

Requests

- "Could you tell me a little bit more about...?"
- "So, could you describe what your ideal outcome to the situation might be?"

Statements

- "I'm still not quite sure about..."
- "I hear you saying... and ... but I'm confused about how they relate to each other."

Uses of Probing Questions

Start a Dialogue

Example: "So, how have things been going at church for you so far?" or "How are you doing?"
People may come to you wanting to talk about something or get support, but they're nervous or not quite sure how or where to begin. A little probing at the beginning of a conversation can be helpful.

Help People Explore and Express Feelings

Example: "How did that make you feel?" or "What was that like for you?"

If most of what a person is giving you is just narrative detail about things that have happened or situations in their life, probing questions can help focus in on the really crucial material of a person's feelings.

Keep Things Focused

Example: "So, of all of those things you just mentioned, which feels like it's the biggest or most pressing right now?" "Earlier you were talking about... could you give me a little more info about that?" "So, going back to the situation with... what were you hoping to get out of that experience?"

Probing questions can be used to figure out the key issues on which to focus. Sometimes people will inadvertently wander off the topic. Sometimes people will intentionally (although sometimes unconsciously) start to stray from the topic if it is getting particularly difficult or uncomfortable for them to talk about it. You can use probing questions to keep the conversation

on track and to gently challenge people to confront feelings or situations that are difficult for them.

Help People Explore Options/Possibilities

Example: “What would be some possible ways that you might respond to...?” “So, if you were to do that, what do you see as some of the potential ways others might react?”

Asking probing questions can help people explore options or possibilities in a given situation they are facing.

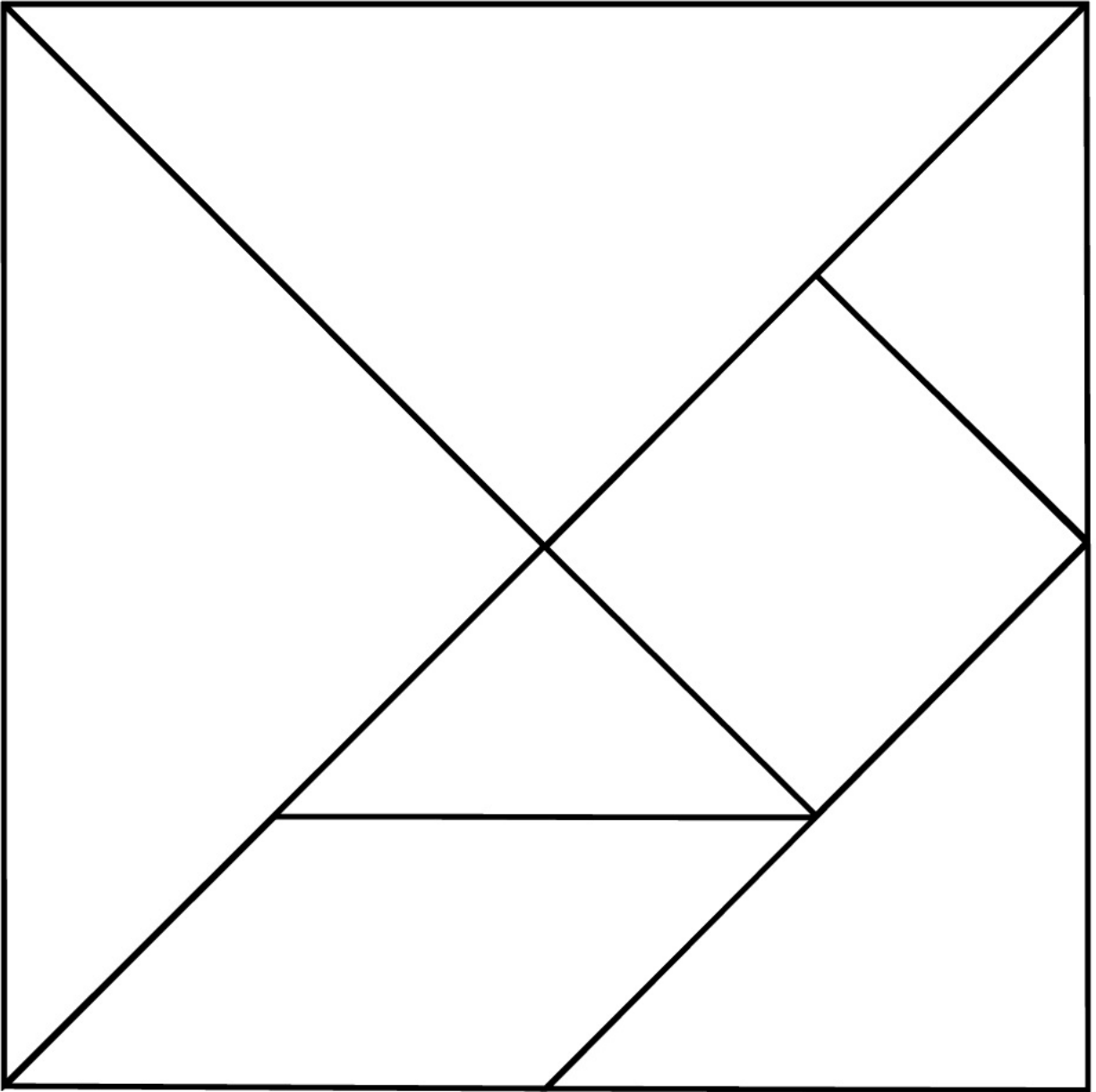
Help People Remain Concrete and Practical

Example: Person A: “I don’t like this curriculum it all. It’s full of boring stuff that I already know.”

Person B: “What sorts of things in this curriculum have you already done?”

Vague generalizations and nebulous statements are often not very helpful. Asking probing questions can help bring the conversation into more productive territory.

Leader Resource: 1 Back to Back Tangram Building



Taking It Home

Come sit by our fire and let us share stories. Let me hear your tales of far off lands, wanderer, and I will tell you of my travels. Share your experience of the holy with me, worshipper, and I will tell you of that which I find divine. Come and stay, lover of leaving, for ours is no caravan of despair, but of hope. We would hear your stories of grief and sorrow as readily as those of joy and laughter, for there is a time and a place and a hearing for all the stories of this world. Stories are the breath and word of the spirit of life, that power that we name love. Come, for our fire is warm and we have seats for all. Come, again and yet again, come speak to me of what fills your heart, what engages your mind, what resides in your soul. Come, let us worship together. – Worship Web
[Jennifer Kitchen](#)

IN TODAY’S SESSION... we learned to identify when we are truly being listened to, explored key aspects of active listening, and learned how our body language affects how we are heard and how we listen. We practiced paraphrasing to communicate we are truly listening, and learned ways to ask questions to get more information that will be helpful for our leadership.

USE LISTENING TO COMMUNICATE WITH OTHERS **Ask** a friend or family member to tell you a story. Practice nonverbal cues, paraphrasing and asking probing questions to show you are listening. **Tell a story** to a friend or family member who is a good listener and pay attention to their behavior. See if you can pick up any skills you could use in the future.

USE LISTENING TO LEARN MORE **Identify** a concept in school or at work you are struggling with. Talk with a peer, teacher or supervisor who understands the concept. Ask probing questions and attempt to paraphrase their answers. Reflect on whether this has improved your understanding of the concept. **The next time** you experience a miscommunication with someone you know on social media, call them or talk to them in person. Practice your active listening skills to gain clarity about the situation.

ENGAGE IN SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: Sometimes it’s hard to truly listen when we don’t make time for the absence of words in our lives. **Spend five to 20 minutes listening to your own breath and the sounds around you.** If thoughts come into your head, recognize them, let them go and return to listening to your breath and the sounds around you.

Facilitator Feedback Form

We welcome your critique of this program, as well as your suggestions. Thank you for your feedback! Your input improves programs for all of our congregations.

You may choose to [complete this feedback form online](#).

Otherwise, please forward your feedback to:
Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries
youth@uua.org

OR

Office of Youth and Young Adult Ministries
Ministries and Faith Development
Unitarian Universalist Association
24 Farnsworth Street
Boston, MA 02210-1409

Workshops You Field Tested: *

- Workshop 1: Web of Youth Ministry
- Workshop 2: Living in Covenant
- Workshop 3: Meaning of Leadership Worship
- Workshop 4: Shared Leadership
- Workshop 5: Active Listening
- Workshop 6: Creating Inclusive Community
- Workshop 7: Leadership Styles
- Workshop 8: Building Multigenerational Connections
- Workshop 9: Conflict Resolution and Transformation

Number of Participants: * _____

Age Range: * _____

Did you work with (a) co-facilitator(s)? *

Yes No

Congregation: * _____

Overall, what was your experience with this program?

What specifically did you find most helpful or useful about this program?

In what ways could this program be changed or improved (please be specific)?

Did you enrich the program with any resources that you would recommend to others?

What impact, if any, do you think this program will have on your life going forward?

What impact, if any, do you think this program will have on your congregation going forward?

Your Name: _____

Your Email: * _____

Participant Feedback Form

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Workshops You Participated In: *

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Your Age: * _____

Congregation: * _____

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Your Name: _____

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