

Communication Skills : The OARS Approach

Open questions, affirmation, reflective listening, and summary reflections (OARS) is a motivational interview technique that is used for effective communication. Here's a quick primer on using these techniques.

1. Open questions

Open questions invite others to "tell their story" in their own words without leading them in a specific direction.

Examples

- ✓ Tell me more about that ____.
- ✓ Help me understand ____.
- ✓ How would you like things to be different?
- ✓ What were your expectations?

Guidelines for Open questions

- Ask fewer questions
- Ask strategic questions
- Don't ask three questions in a row
- Think engagement rather than assessment as your initial task

2. Affirmations

Affirmations are statements and gestures that recognise the person's strengths and acknowledge behaviours that lead in the direction of positive change. Even during a challenging interaction, it can be very helpful to find opportunities for affirmations and take a strength-based approach.

Examples

- ✓ I appreciate that you are willing to meet with me today.
- ✓ You handled yourself really well in that situation.
- ✓ That's a good suggestion.

Guidelines for Affirmations

- Appreciate a strength or positive action
- Be both true and genuine
- Express positive regard and caring
- Create empowerment
- Not the same thing as praise

3. Reflective listening

Reflective listening involves paraphrasing what someone has said to you in an attempt to demonstrate understanding and encourage further communication. It helps you to 'look below the surface' and acknowledge the emotions a person is experiencing.

Examples

- ✓ So, what I'm hearing is that you were not expecting this outcome.
- ✓ It sounds like this is a difficult time for you that is causing substantial stress.
- ✓ It sounds like this has been a really frustrating process for you.

Guidelines for Reflective Listening

- Be attentive and focused on the person
- Don't interrupt or change the subject
- Paraphrase accurately and avoid adding personal opinions
- Focus on content, meaning and feeling.

4. Summaries

Summaries are essentially reflections that collect what a person has been saying, offering it back in a package. Summaries refer to recounting what occurred in the conversation with the person.

Examples

- ✓ I would like to make sure I understood you correctly, what you've told me is ____, and that means that ____ is this correct?
- ✓ If I can please summarise what I heard you say to ensure we are still on the same page ____.

Guideline for Summaries

- Keep track of the main points
- Make sure the synopsis clarifies and highlights the main themes.
- Ensure actions are identified