Key Mentoring Skills - Listening

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Adapted from the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People

One of the biggest obstacles facing learning mentors when communicating with young people is our tendency to respond from our own frame of reference.

We often don’t take the necessary time and effort to properly identify the issue before proceeding and the general inclination as adults (and in particular teachers), is to advise, probe, interpret and evaluate others’ messages based on our own experiences, motives and values.

This can lead to students becoming ‘distant’ and unwilling to participate or talk in mentoring sessions as they feel the Learning Mentor does not understand them or want to understand them (lack of trust).

Examples of autobiographical responses could be:

- ‘I don’t think you should do that’
- ‘Why don’t you apply yourself a little more’ or
- ‘Maybe you could try being nicer to your teacher’

As learning mentors, we need to learn how to develop Empathic Listening: reflecting what the young person feels and says in our own words. If we can connect to the ‘emotional’ side of the young person, we are more likely to be successful in our interactions.

The diagram below shows the Chinese character which makes up the verb “to listen”. It suggests that the Chinese understand listening very well - to listen effectively involves giving undivided attention to the young person by using ones ears, eyes and heart to really understand.

Listening is one of the most powerful skills that a learning mentor can possess.

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1 The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People. Training Manual 2005 FranklinCovey