Improve Your Incident Investigations with Active Listening: 4 Steps to Active Listening



The goal of an incident investigation is to uncover what happened and why it happened so the right set of corrective actions can be taken. A large part of the “WHAT” and the “WHY” will come from victim and witness interviews. The depth and quality of the information you get during those interviews has a lot to do with how you are as interviewer.

Communication is a large part of your role as a supervisor or safety person, but it’s not necessarily something you are taught to do or feel comfortable doing. The good news is picking up just a few key communication strategies can make a big difference.

Practicing active listening is one way you can improve your interviewing technique and your communication skills overall. Here are four steps to help you become a more active listener.

Step 1 – Tune In

- Don’t get caught up thinking about what you’re going to ask next, or how you’re going to reply. In other words, pay attention, or you’ll miss what’s being said.
- Listen differently. Don’t just listen to the words being spoken, be aware of the interviewee’s tone of voice, facial expressions, and body language.
- Don’t interrupt. Make a quick note of the thought and come back to it when it’s your turn to speak.

Step 2 – Show You’re Listening

- Your body language can say a lot to the victims and witnesses. If you’re sitting with your arms folded across your chest and frowning, shaking your head, or even a rolling your eyes, these are not signals that say you are someone to trust and confide in.
- Nod your head, smile when appropriate, keep your posture relaxed and open.
- Use encouraging words such as yes, mm hmm, or go on.

Step 3 – Repeat and Confirm

- Check for understanding by repeating and summarizing, in your own words, what the interviewee said.
- Ask questions to clarify important points and anything you're not sure you understand. "What do you mean when you say…" or "Can you tell me more about…"
- Avoid questions with a simple yes or no answer. Instead opt for open-ended questions such as, "Tell me what you heard before the incident occurred." your next question is or what you

Step 4 – Thoughtful Follow Up

- Continue to ask clarifying questions and answer their questions.
- Summarize the conversation and ask if the interviewee if they have additional comments.
- Explain to them any relevant next steps in the interview and investigation process.

Active listening is about putting distractions aside and focusing on the person you are talking to, or, in the case of an incident investigation, the person you are interviewing. It takes some practice, but even using a few of the suggestions we just covered (i.e. asking open-ended questions and not interrupting) can have a positive impact on the interviewing process and your communication skills.