‘You cannot teach a man anything; you can only help him find it within himself.’

Galileo Galilei

Summarising and reflective listening is the skill of responding to the other person’s comment by saying what you understand them to have said. In a skilled facilitator it is an art form that enables the service user to explain their world without the facilitator helping to write their script.

**PURPOSES OF REFLECTIVE LISTENING**

1. To clarify
2. To let them know what you understand
3. To encourage further disclosure
4. To encourage ownership
5. To highlight discrepancies in desired outcomes
6. To shape an interview.
UNPACKING THE SKILL

Clarify: check out your story of the other person

Whatever you think you have discerned with your ears and eyes, needs to be checked out by summarising and reflection. Humans are practically incapable of obtaining objective evidence of what is happening in the world, let alone inside another person. In our attempts to make sense of what we see and hear, the information of our five senses is filtered through our brains. Pre-existing ideas and stories cause us to emphasise some evidence and ignore other information. In this way we construct a story to make sense of the evidence. Scientific theories are simply the best story the scientist has that best fits the current evidence. As more evidence comes to light, theories are modified.

You are not dealing in facts, but trying to listen to someone else’s reality, and possibly enabling them to see for themselves that their world can be different if they so choose. If your understanding of their world is faulty, they will find it difficult to respond to your work with them. Reflection allows the other person to correct any misunderstanding, thereby enhancing accurate empathy.
Let them Know What you Understand – Empathy

‘Empathy is the quality of understanding, as experienced by the service user.’

To express empathy is to allow the other person to know what you understand about them, without judgement. Empathy is not so much a kind of understanding you have of the service user, but rather, a quality of understanding as experienced by the service user.

Empathy is both an accurate understanding of what it is like to be the other person, plus letting them know what you have understood. It is not enough to know, the other person has to feel understood by you. This can only happen if you have told them what you understand.

Such understanding does not include any judgement on your part, you do not need either to collude or disagree, you simply know something of what it is like for the other person. Reflective listening achieves just that, because you are using only what you have learned from the other person. Nothing of yourself or your own experience is included.

Empathy leaves control, responsibility and decisions entirely with the interviewee. It is the essential building block of motivational skills.

Encourage Further Disclosure

Reflection encourages the service user to say more about themselves.

If you mishear, misunderstand or misinterpret feelings, reflection not only gives opportunity for the other person to correct you, but encourages them to paint a more complete picture of the issue you misunderstood.
How it works
People who are new to reflection often think at first that it sounds patronising, just to repeat back what you have heard. They can feel it takes the interview round in a circle by going over ground already covered. What happens in practice is very different. As the interviewer becomes fluent, the reflection is followed quite naturally by the interviewee saying some more to add to what has been reflected. No question is required after the reflection; just leave it hanging in the air. When done skilfully the conversation flows between the two, but all the information comes from the other, the interviewer just reflects (and asks occasional open questions).

Powerful
The approach is so powerful that the other person can sometimes quickly disclose intimate and deeply-held information about themselves. Sometimes they will not be consciously aware of the issues themselves until they say it out loud. Care must be taken that the circumstances and professional purpose of the interview is appropriate to the level of disclosure.

Encourage Ownership

Only they can know what matters to them.

Reflection helps ensure that what is disclosed is not directed by you or your assumptions about the other person’s experience. Rather it flows from the storyteller and what is important to them.

You may be constantly surprised by what is said in response to reflection; how the direction of the unfolding story takes an unexpected turn, rarely what you would have guessed or sought to tease out. An intervention, which short-circuits the conversation to the issues that you see as important, will cause the true concerns to remain hidden. When exploring the story and the motivational balance, a reflection, with a few open questions will often lead to the disclosure of what is really important to the other person.
The emphasis on the story being determined only by the other person has another important consequence for motivational work. The storyteller is more able to take responsibility for their own story because all that is said comes from them. Their story is not distorted by our guesses and interruptions. Ownership can be emphasised in the style of reflection, by referring to, ‘What you said earlier was…’ or ‘So what you are saying to me is…’

**Highlight Discrepancy**

Explore discrepancies using the service user’s own words.

As the interview progresses the storyteller owns what is being disclosed and is eventually able to own the disparity between different parts of the story, and especially their stated longer term goals and present behaviours. From this comes a wish and eventual responsibility to change; in other words, motivation to change. The service user can be helped to see their discrepancies, from the facilitator’s careful and matter of fact reflection of what they have said. This sort of reflection is always made as information giving, never as an argument for change.

If you attempt to work for solutions, give advice, make judgements or add from your own experience, then responsibility for change flips across to you and the work can be ‘ah butted’ or argued with by the interviewee. It is difficult for the storyteller to argue if the only material being worked with comes from them and has been checked out with them.
Shape the Interview

The interview is shaped by what you choose to reflect.

Reflective listening can take a wide variety of forms and styles, mostly to serve different purposes as the interview unfolds. The interview has an aim and a structure. You are concerned to increase motivation by enabling the storyteller to explore the motivational balance. The benefits and loss of staying put and the benefit and loss of changing are explored and eventually the storyteller is helped to contrast these for themselves, and set them against their long-term desires and goals. (See Chapters 11 and 12 for a detailed description of the motivational balance.) Reflection will shape the interview, by what you choose to reflect back, and the style of your reflection. Different kinds of reflections are described below.

**Words**

**Reflect Words**
The simplest form is to reflect back the actual words used by the other.

**Purpose**
Accurate empathy; encourage further disclosure; checking out accuracy.

**Meaning**

**Reflect Meaning**
To reflect back in your own words, the meaning you have gathered so far.

**Purpose**
Accurate empathy; encourage further disclosure about the meaning; checking out accuracy of understood meaning; focus interview on some aspect of the meaning.
Reflect Non-verbal Information
To reflect back what you have noticed that may be significant.

Purpose
To understand non-verbal signals that seem significant to you.
To check out any interpretation you have made of non-verbal information.
To show that you are sensitive to the whole person and the way they express their concerns in other ways than words.

Reflect Emotions
To reflect back emotion and feelings.

Purpose
We cannot mind-read but we often guess or feel sensitive to others’ (presumed) emotions. You may need to check out your interpretation of their feelings; to encourage more disclosure of feelings; to focus on one particular feeling or emotion.

Focus
To focus on one aspect (words or tone of voice).

Purpose
Can result in the other person drawing back from an
exaggerated meaning to a position they really own; can be used to emphasise one aspect or to focus the interview.

**Summarising the Story so Far**

To summarise what has been said so far in the interview or since the last summary, or at the last meeting.

**Purpose**

A way to start a subsequent interview or round off a current interview.

Useful to recap at any time, especially if the interviewer is not sure where to go next.

Will often be followed by more disclosure. If this explores a new area, the interviewee has chosen where to go next. If repetition then this may indicate the area of ambivalence. Regular summaries help the interviewee to feel understood (empathy) as well as keep track of the direction and story so far.

**Selective summary**

**Purpose**

Used to draw attention to some aspects, and guide the interview.
**A balancing summary**

Sets out pros and cons understood so far.

**Purpose**

A summary of goals that seeks to draw out the discrepancy between present behaviour and long-term goals. Can produce a self-motivating statement. The summary should emphasise their words, ‘earlier you said…’, ‘but you also …

**The Art of Reflection**

Using all these types in part or in mixture, together with your own style becomes an art form. This is the skill used in following through the exploration of the issues, the ambivalence, the motivational balance, short- and long-term goals and to help the other see the discrepancies for themselves. Even simple practice of the above will produce worthwhile results.
Facilitator’s Worksheet F8.1: Group Training Exercise in Summarising and Reflective Listening

This simple exercise is especially useful for facilitators who are new to the art of reflection. The exercise helps people grasp what a reflection is and demonstrates how reflections are experienced as helpful by those on the receiving end. A minimum of five people and an exercise leader are needed.

The Exercise

1. Invite a volunteer from the group to describe, for two or three minutes, something they are either ambivalent about or a piece of work they are stuck with. An alternative might be to describe their journey to work that morning. You are only looking for a brief description. Before they tell their story explain that you are going to ask some people to listen very carefully to what has been said and to reflect back in different ways. It is important the listeners are positioned so that they can see the storyteller, or they will not be able to listen with eyes and ears.

2. After the story each reflector is asked to turn to the storyteller and give their reflection directly to them. The storyteller can respond in any way they wish. (The exercise leader should note down any responses.)
   - The first person offers the speaker a simple reflection of the content
   - The next person summarises the meaning
   - The next reflects back any piece of non-verbal behaviour they have noticed
   - The next reflects back the feelings they think they have understood
   - The fifth focuses on just on one aspect of what was said.

3. When all five have reflected back, ask the storyteller about their response to the feedback they have received. Check if they felt understood (accurate empathy). Check if the issue was clarified for them in any way. Give positive feedback to good examples of reflection. Add any of your own observations on the way the listener responded to reflection.

4. Repeat the exercise asking the person next in line to describe something as above, and asking the next four people to reflect as previously. Take feedback and repeat the exercise until all have had an opportunity to reflect including those who told their stories.

5. Draw out what was helpful. The exercise leader should take note of any interesting responses to illustrate how reflection helps someone to express their own world experience. For instance, the storyteller may correct the reflector, may give more information, or may just nod when the emotion is correctly described.
Facilitator’s Worksheet F8.2: A Reflective Listening Exercise Part 1

Possible meanings
The essence of reflective listening is to reflect your perceived understanding. For the following statements suggest some possible different meanings that you might reflect.

1. That’s doing my head in.

1. (meanings)

2. I’m not a racist.

2. (meanings)

3. Perhaps it was not a good idea.

3. (meanings)
Facilitator’s Worksheet F8.3: Reflective Listening Exercise Part 2
Possible reflections

Having considered possible meanings above, now jot down how you might word an actual reflection as a response to the following statements.

1. That’s doing my head in.

2. I’m not a racist.

3. Perhaps it was not a good idea.
Facilitator’s Worksheet F8.4:
 Some Possible Meanings for F8.2

Note, there are no right answers; only those that might prove accurate for one unique person.

1. That’s doing my head in.

I don’t understand any of this.
I am confused.
I’m getting angry.
I feel upset and hurt.
I’ve started to realise there is an alternative way of looking at this.
I’ve always thought what I was doing was ok and now I don’t know.
I need some space to think about this.

2. I’m not a racist.

I don’t want to be labelled.
I don’t think I’m prejudiced against black people.
I don’t want you to think I’m racist.
I wouldn’t want to be a bigot.
I don’t really agree with racism although some of what I do is racist.
F84 continued...

3. Perhaps it was not a good idea.

I’m feeling uncomfortable with my behaviour.
Possibly other people were hurt by it.
There may have been some disadvantages.
I could have done something different.
Facilitator’s Worksheet F8.5: Some Possible Reflections for F8.2

Note, there are no right answers; only those which are more useful.

1. That’s doing my head in.
   1. (Reflection)
      You need some space to think about it.

2. I’m not a racist.
   2. (Reflection)
      You feel labels are not very helpful.

3. Perhaps it was not a good idea.
   3. (Reflection)
      It sounds like you think there were other things you could have done which would have been more helpful.
**SUMMARY**

The important thing is to notice what response you get and to change tack when it is unhelpful, especially if there are ‘ah buts’ and arguments – it takes two to argue! Reflective listening is really the heart of motivational skills. It is the non-confrontational way of achieving confrontation between short- and long-term goals. Reflective listening can be supplemented by the careful use of open questions and these are discussed in the next chapter.