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COMMENT AND ANALYSIS

**The art of moving negotiations forward**

By Carole Spiers, Special to Gulf News  
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Anyone who regularly conducts negotiations soon learns a good deal about the theory of conversation - chiefly how dialogue is driven by many different forms of question (open, closed, rhetorical etc.), each of them stimulating quite different kinds of response.

Clearly, people who can master this kind of conversational terrain enjoy a big advantage when talks have broken down and there is an urgent need to re-start them.

At these times, they often make use of a subtle and diplomatic form of questioning that does not make people feel they are being questioned at all - 'active listening'.

This is the technique of guiding a conversation by making minimal gestures and utterances that suggest empathy, while not actually indicating agreement or making concessions.

This diverts attention away from the questioner and on to the speaker, so it feels to them more like a flattering interview rather than a negotiating session. The effect is to maintain conversational momentum - a vital factor in moving negotiations forward.

Active listening is sharply distinguished from passive listening, another officially recognised mode in which you go through the motions of listening but do not actually become engaged and involved, not remembering any of it (in other words, basically ignoring.)

In active listening mode, you are specifically aiming to retain and recall what you hear.

One active listening tactic is to repeat the other person's point back to them, not parrot fashion, but in a summarised form (paraphrase) that shows you have given it proper attention, and are genuinely wanting to understand it.

An alternative response is to play-back the emotional charge that is coming out of the other person's dialogue ("I can see that you may feel frustrated at times like this..."). Both of these clearly generate a degree of goodwill that can only help to lubricate a tense situation.

Active listening has been defined as the essential blend of factual comprehension and emotional accord.

It is easy to see how widely it can be

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applied in cases where someone is reluctant to talk. Industrial disputes are the most obvious one. But police work, investigative journalism and salesmanship are three others.

The overcoming of a silence takes a very similar routine of sympathetic promptings - and for the same purpose. There is the same need to ask the right questions.

There is the same need to show that you are genuinely listening.

There is the same need not to appear judgmental. The parent is having to encourage the sharing of an important confidence, perhaps with serious implications, while not alienating the child and driving it further into secrecy, perhaps further into trouble.

#### Key points: How to practise active listening

- These routines of repeating and interpreting can be formally studied.
- There are clear parallels with talking to difficult teenage kids.
- Active listening is distinguished from passive listening (basically ignoring).

- *The writer is a BBC broadcaster and motivational speaker, with 20 years' experience as CEO of Carole Spiers Group, an international stress consultancy based in London.*

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