



Using Conversational Receptiveness to demonstrate active listening during conflict resolution

Joy L. Hulton, LLB., Q.Med, Q. Arb
Hulton Workplace Resolutions
June 2023



Conflict Resolution requires active listening

Conflict resolution requires many skills but perhaps the most important is active listening. The extent to which people in conflict feel heard and see that the other person is actively trying to understand their perspective is a strong indicator of the likelihood of resolution. Of course, the most important tool is to actually listen to the other person – by remaining quiet while the other person is speaking and ensuring, through your body language, that the other person sees that you are listening. Once you listen, you then need to engage in conversation in a manner that reflects your **active** listening. While there are different ways to engage in active listening, many are difficult to learn and can take years to master. One technique that is both effective and relatively easy to learn is conversational receptiveness.

What is conversational receptiveness?

Conversational receptiveness is the use of language to communicate one's willingness to thoughtfully engage with opposing views. It is a means of engaging in and demonstrating active listening – so that others feel heard.

Conversational receptiveness is not about persuasion – it is listening and evaluating without having to agree on all points. It does, however, allow you to be more persuasive by making others want to engage (or continue to engage) in conversation. Acknowledging others does not mean agreeing with what they say or think, but it shows that we listened and understood that a different perspective was presented. Feeling heard powerfully de-escalates conflict and improves willingness of people to interact.

How can you use conversational receptiveness to show others you are listening?

Researcher **Francesca Gino** of Harvard Business School suggests using **conversational receptiveness** to improve your active listen **and** demonstrate that you are doing so.ⁱ In a 2020 studyⁱⁱ, Gino and a group of researchers looked at the use of specific language during conflict and, using an algorithm, identified specific words and phrases that sound receptive to other people. The researchers wanted to see if people can improve the ways they communicate with others who hold different views – and whether it is possible to communicate receptiveness.

The study found that when people in conflict used conversational receptiveness, their counterparts found them to be more trustworthy, reasonable, and objective. The participants were more willing to interact with their counterparts, both during and following the conflict conversation. The study also found that

people mimicked each other’s language such that the conversational receptiveness exhibited by one person affected the behaviour of their counterpart.

Researcher Julia Minson explains the **4 key elements of conversational receptiveness** using the acronym **HEAR**ⁱⁱⁱ:

<p>H – hedge (soften) your claims when responding:</p> <p>“I think it is possible that...”</p> <p>“This might work if...”</p>	<p>E – emphasize areas of agreement:</p> <p>“I think we both agree that...”</p> <p>“I agree with...”</p> <p>“We are both concerned about...”</p>	<p>A – acknowledge other perspectives:</p> <p>“I understand that...”</p> <p>“I see your point”</p> <p>“I hear your concerns”</p>	<p>R – reframe by using positive statements:</p> <p>“I really appreciate it when...”</p> <p>“It would be helpful if...”</p> <p>“Moving forward we can...”</p>
--	---	---	--

When people in conflict are (and are seen to be) receptive, they are not only able to see and understand opposing views and find areas of agreement, but they also communicate that understanding and have it received by others. This allows people to see each other as more trustworthy, reasonable, and objective – and they will be more willing to engage with them during conversation and in future interactions.

Conversational receptiveness is a conflict resolution skill that is relatively easy to learn and apply – and will result in greater likelihood of resolution and relationship repair. Leaders can also use conversational receptiveness to ensure that employees feel heard – and can model this behaviour for others to improve communication, build trust, and foster healthy workplace relationships.

Hulton Workplace Resolutions offers a range of conflict management and resolution services. We can support managers and HR professionals to develop and implement stronger conflict resolution skills to address conflict where and when it happens.

ⁱ “Preventing Toxic Work Cultures as a Manager” (LinkedIn Learning – December 2022).

ⁱⁱ Yeomans, Michael, Julia Minson, Hanne Collins, Frances Chen, and Francesca Gino, “Conversational receptiveness: Improving engagement with opposing views” (2020) *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*
<https://www.hks.harvard.edu/publications/conversational-receptiveness-improving-engagement-opposing-views>

ⁱⁱⁱ Julia Minson, <https://spsp.org/news-center/character-context-blog/be-heard-listen>