

# Techniques for Effective Empathy and Listening

By Andrew Sobel

1. **Synthesizing** (as opposed to summarizing): “So it seems like there are really three different issues going on here, which are...”
2. **Active listening**: Interjecting “OK, Uh huh, That’s right, I see”
3. **Non-verbal listening**: Using your body and eyes to show you are completely focused on the client
4. **Echoing\***: Repeating the last word spoken. Client: “So as a result, there’s very high attrition.” You: “Attrition.” Client: “Yes, we think it’s well above the industry average. In fact, last year we lost 20% of the sales force.” You: “20%” Client: “Well, some of it was uncontrollable attrition like retirements, but...”
5. **Disclosure**: “I know what you mean—I missed my husband’s birthday one year too”
6. **Open-ended questions**: “What would it take to get alignment around this issue?” “What have your past experiences been with outside advisors?”
7. **Provocative questions**: “Why?” “So what?” “Why do you want to keep this business?” “Why do you think an outsider can help?”
8. **Provocative or “turnaround” answers\***: Client: “So what can you do for us?” You: “I don’t know” Client: “The CEO is challenging our use of consultants” You: “I don’t blame him”
9. **Questions about the meaning of words**: Client: “This is a very dysfunctional department.” You: “What do you mean by ‘dysfunctional?’” Client: “Basically, we want our people to up their game” You: “What does ‘up their game’ mean in your organization?”
10. **Questions about the past**: “How and when did this start?”
11. **Questions about the present**: “What are you doing now to fix this?”
12. **Questions about the future**: “If this project succeeds, what would things look like a year from now?”
13. **Personal questions**: “What are your own aspirations in the organization?” “Who have your mentors been?”
14. **Questions about feelings**: “How did you feel about that decision?”
15. **Use of humor**: Appropriate jokes or quips, self-deprecation, “break the ice” humor, etc.
16. **Not answering**: “I don’t know your company well enough to answer that. I can tell you what I’ll be looking for, however”; “I don’t know. Let me get back to you.”
17. **Silence**: You don’t have to fill every second of the conversation! Take a pause!
18. **Letting the client answer provocative or dangerous questions**: You’re presenting to a group of client executives. Someone asks the question, “So you’ve demonstrated that our costs are 20% over the benchmark. I just don’t believe that.” You look at the person attentively, and remain silent for 3-5 seconds. Given the opening (your silence), another executive in the audience may very well jump in: “Oh come on, we’ve known this for years. That’s why our operating margins are so bad.”

\*Thanks to author Alan Weiss for numbers 4 and 8