

Figure 17.1

**An Exercise in Active Listening and Speaking**

To practice active speaking and listening, find a willing partner and use topics that don't have too much of an emotional overtone for either of you.

1. Have one person be the speaker and one be the listener. Stay in those roles until you both decide to switch. To help keep track of the roles, place an object, such as a box of tissues, in front of the person who is the speaker.
2. The speaker says about three or four average-length sentences about where he or she stands and how he or she feels about a particular topic. Only "I" statements should be used; for instance, say, "I feel angry that I didn't get my project done," as opposed to, "I think you caused me to not complete my project." "I" statements let the listener know how the speaker experiences his or her life. Such statements are more valuable than expressing the speaker's assessment of what the listener's thoughts, feelings, or opinions may be.
3. After these three or four sentences, the listener paraphrases back to the speaker what the listener heard—for instance, "What I heard you say is that you didn't get your project done and that you are feeling angry about that." If the listener is confused about what the speaker said, the listener may ask a simple question. At this step in the exercise, the listener should not add his or her own opinions, insights, or reactions to what the speaker said. To hear the speaker, the listener must stop the internal dialogue and potential rebuttals forming in his or her own mind and pay full attention to the speaker. This is harder to do than we might think!
4. The speaker decides whether the listener was accurate or not. If not, the speaker gently, calmly, and directly restates what he or she said until the listener can paraphrase it accurately, including the feelings of the speaker.
5. The speaker can continue until he or she feels that the communication is complete for the moment. This usually requires about four to five exchanges. Then the switch is made—the speaker is now the listener and vice versa. The speaker and the listener may need to change roles many times in order to complete a topic. Time spent in each role should be equal.

Remember, as the listener, you cannot express *any* of your own ideas. This disrupts the speaker and conveys that you are not interested in that person. You will have your chance when you are the speaker. Notice how hard it is to just listen to another person. You do not have to agree with the speaker to be a good listener.

At first, focus only on seeing each other's point of view before you attempt to solve the problem. You can't fix a problem if you don't know with accuracy what the problem is. You are more likely to come to a good solution and follow through on it if you have the experience of being heard and understood.