Active Listening: What Did You Hear?

Listening may be the most important skill in face-to-face fundraising. This exercise reminds solicitors who tend to talk too much (in other words, most of us) about the value of active listening. To quote a training manual for hospice volunteers, “We listen, waiting to impose on the speaker a detailed account of our own personal experience”—which is obviously a poor model for building respectful relationships. This exercise will help you create a better model.

**Facilitating the Exercise**

1. Ask participants to pair up, preferably with someone they don't know well.

2. One member of the pair says to the other, “Tell me a story—the more specific, the better—about your favorite relative. Why is this person your favorite? Why is this story important to you?” The speaker can take up to two minutes to answer. The listener should listen without taking notes.

3. After two minutes, ring the bell. The listener then repeats the story in his or her own words. The goal is not to remember the story word for word, but rather to accurately paraphrase it.

4. The speaker provides feedback to the listener: you remembered this part well, here’s something you might have missed.

**Why Do This Exercise?**
To help your trainees focus less on the pitch—what they say about your organization—and focus more on the donor’s needs and interests.

**Audience**
Anyone who plans to conduct meetings with donors.

**Setting**
A quiet room large enough for people to pair up, talk, and hear each other.

**Materials**
- Stopwatch or timer
- Bell or whistle

**Time Required**
10-15 minutes
5. After a minute or two, ask the teams to switch roles and repeat the exercise.

6. Reconvene the full group. Debrief the exercise by asking the following questions.

- What did you learn?
- While your partner was speaking, what did you find yourself doing other than listening? How might you address that tendency in the future?
- If you were asked to do this exercise again, what would you do differently? Why? How?
- What are three things you can do when you visit a donor to make sure you really listen?

TRAINING TIP As with many role plays, it helps to model what you want in front of the group before asking everyone to participate. In this case, recruit someone to tell you a story about a favorite relative, then follow the instructions above.