MeTA Communication Toolkit:
How to listen, observe and take notes

Everyone involved in research and documentation needs to pay attention to and develop their skill and expertise in listening, observation and note-taking. These are some of the fundamental skills for improving transparency and accountability around medicines. Because these skills are often seen as ‘common sense’, they are easily neglected. However, as your engagement with seeking out information around medicines and your research experience and skills develop, you will become more aware of the importance of refining your skills and ability in these areas.

When you are conducting research, carrying out needs assessments, and getting to know and work better with different stakeholders, listening skills are among the most important of all the skills you need. They are often taken for granted, but in fact take time, effort and practice to develop. Becoming more aware of yourself as a listener and an observer is the first step towards strengthening your ability in these areas.

Listening and observation skills are important throughout any project. For MeTA, they are essential. At the beginning it is important to get an idea of prevailing attitudes, understanding and beliefs. During the development of any communication resource, listening and observation will help to monitor progress.

I. Listening

You need to consciously reflect as an on-going process on how well you and colleagues actually listen. Ask yourselves the following questions.

Are there parts of conversation you miss because you:

• (Unconsciously) make assumptions about the speaker as a result of their appearance, accent, educational and professional background?
• Are making assumptions based on the speaker’s gender, age, ethnic background, cultural and religious background?
• Are too opinionated and therefore not open to hearing what is being said?
• Disagree with the speaker because his or her beliefs and opinions differ from your own?
• Think or assume that the speaker is wrong?
• Are making assumptions about the benefits of formal education, literacy or professional status?
• Are too tired or too distracted to listen carefully and actively?

Make use of situations where people gather and talk – for example, in a market place, shops, bus, bar, hospital waiting room, or queue - to develop your active listening skills and learn more about the local community, their interests, beliefs, attitudes and practices.
Exercises to develop your listening skill and ability

(i) Role play
The aim of the role-play exercise example that follows is to practise and learn more about your own listening and observation skills. You need 30 – 45 minutes for this exercise.

In groups of 3, each play a role: 1 speaker, 1 listener, 1 observer (to be rotated so you each play all 3 roles).

The speaker and listener sit facing each other. Agree on a time limit of 5 – 10 minutes during which the speaker will talk about something important to them, as naturally as possible. The content should be something to which the listener can relate and respond. The observer sits nearby (but not intrusively), listening and noting down any observations about strengths and weaknesses that the listener displays. This should include any non-verbal communication that is observed.

When the time is up, the observer should share what they observed and noted down. Did any behaviour seem rude? Did the listener appear bored? Did they really listen? Did they pick up on any issues and seek clarification or request more detail? Did they seem to respond appropriately and sensitively to any sensitive issues that came up?

Following this, the speaker should share what they noticed and how well they felt they were really listened to. The listener should share anything they found difficult or anything they noticed about their own behaviour.

Rotate roles until you have all played each role.

Following this, discuss together how it felt to play each role. How well did the speakers feel listened to? Did the listener appear to notice what was important to you? Did they respond appropriately? What did you notice and what can you learn from the exercise to improve your work and relationships with colleagues, community members and other stakeholder groups?

Remember that there is almost always more distance between people working in different organisations, communities or sectors than among people within the same organised groups. This makes active listening even more challenging and the need for it even more essential.

(ii) Together with colleagues, consider the following:
Identify all the factors you can think of that can impact (positively and negatively) on communication between staff from your organisation or sector and those from other stakeholder groups.

What could you do to strengthen those factors that have a positive impact on communication? What could you do to lessen the impact of those that are negative? What are the implications for yourselves as listeners and observers?

Reflecting on past practice, in the light of this exercise, what can you learn in terms of improving your behaviour and related work practice?
II. Observation

In any research and community work, finely developed observation skills are essential. Observation is particularly important if you are facilitating a group, or if you are responsible for documenting the process (note-taking). In such instances, it is important to record non-verbal behaviour and any signs as to how such behaviour might be interpreted. Remember that about 80% of communication is non-verbal! When you are working with people from different cultural backgrounds (including professionally and geographically) where issues of language and interpretation are key, observation is particularly important.

Keen observation should guide and inform your practice. For example, in an interview situation, observation tells you a lot about how comfortable and at ease an interviewee is (which will directly impact on the quality, depth and honesty of his or her responses). In Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), community work settings, or in multi-stakeholder meetings, observation will draw attention to who is or is not present, and who is or is not participating, dominating or keeping silent. This enables you to direct efforts to bringing other people in, or silencing dominant group members, as appropriate. You should observe whether particular groups of people are dominating or keeping quiet (in terms of gender, age, class, educational and professional background and so on), and why.

In research situations it may be appropriate to develop an observation checklist, or at least to think about what should be observed and noted, ahead of the research exercise. The people you are working with, in particular group facilitators, should work with note-takers on this.

III. Note-taking

This guide is to assist the people responsible for note-taking during individual interviews (the interviewers themselves) or FGDs.

Like all research skills, note-taking is not easy but it will improve with practice and attention to detail. It is vital that any note-taker remains alert and practises active listening and keen observation skills.

Before the FGD (or interview, if appropriate)

Prior to the FGD, it is the facilitator’s responsibility to ensure that the note-taker is well briefed and understands the following:

- The aims of the exercise
- The importance of thorough documentation in the context of research and, therefore, the importance of their role. Without thorough documentation, the whole exercise might be wasted
- The gist (main theme) of the conversation – that is, the types of issues that are likely to arise. If a note-taker is warmed-up to the issues, they are more likely to 'hear' them
- The importance of confidentiality – the note-taker does not have the right to pass on any information shared to people outside the group
- You cannot assume that a tape recording will be clear. Do not rely on a tape to capture the discussion, tone or importance of issues raised
Who is expected to attend – characteristics of different participants and the likely impact of these, for example, gender, age and educational differentials

What background information should be recorded, for example, age group, gender and areas of work of the participants. This will depend on what information is needed in the particular context

What kind of non-verbal information it is important to look out for and to note down. Much of this will relate to group dynamics - are some people dominant or quiet? Why? Some will relate to the issues being discussed and how the discussion evolves: are some issues particularly sensitive or controversial? Do different participants hold very different views? Are participants’ experiences relating to the issue very diverse? What is the impact of all this on participation and on the discussion itself? Are some people actively participating more than others? Are some not participating at all?

The importance of noting down who (which groups of people) is making what particular comments, or behaving in a certain way

The importance of recording the tone of the discussion - is it free-flowing and comfortable, or uncomfortable and uneasy at particular points? What might explain this?

The importance of capturing key points, rather than all the detail, an impossible task

The importance of capturing good quotes if/when possible, in the speaker’s own words

The responsibilities of the note-taker, which might include managing a recording of the session on tape

Equipment they need to bring. Note-takers are advised to use pages with margins: note key discussion points on the page itself and non-verbal communication and the tone of the discussion in the margins alongside the key points. Highlight important things, things said with emotion, and so on.

The importance of remaining alert, looking interested and not expressing any judgement about comments made

**During the FGD**

- The note-taker needs to be ready with pens (at least two colours are advised, one to note the discussion itself and one to capture non-verbal communication and tone of the discussion) and plenty of paper (with margins – see above)

- The note-taker might be responsible for managing a tape recording. Any equipment used must be checked before the FGD starts

- The note-taker should sit quietly, behind or next to participants (who are usually in a circle)

- The note-taker is not to be part of the discussion and should not interrupt it! The only reason to do this would be if they feel they have missed an important point. However, if the note-taker interrupts more than a few times, they are probably not the right person for this task

- Be sure to capture the make-up of the group (as above)

- Be sure to capture non-verbal communication and the tone of the discussion at particular moments

**Immediately after the FGD**

- The note-taker and facilitator should sit together and read over the notes. This is an opportunity for the note-taker to check any important points he or she might have missed with the facilitator, who may at this stage still remember them.
- Explain anything about the notes that will help the facilitator make better sense of them (for example, any abbreviations or unclear handwriting)
- Unless the note-taker needs to type up the notes, they should be passed immediately to the facilitator
- You are advised to photocopy the notes as soon as possible and keep two copies in separate places. Note that these should be treated in confidence and filed with this in mind.

**Sources**

Healthlink Worldwide 2009. *Communication Toolkit*

