

Memorial Student Center

Student Worker Learning Outcomes Focus Groups

April 2016

Background

In early fall 2015 the Memorial Student Center (MSC) offices (Box Office, OPAS, Student Programs Office or SPO) developed student learning outcomes for their student employees for the 2015-2016 academic year focused on active listening as a component of the Texas A&M University learning outcome for undergraduates of demonstrating effective communication. During the MSC student employee retreat held in August, students were asked to identify major components of active listening (identified as pay attention, show you are listening, provide feedback, defer judgement and respond appropriately) and choose one on which to focus during the 2015-2016 academic year. Supervisors then met with their students throughout the year to gauge progress and ensure students were still focused on improving their chosen component. The MSC supervisors wanted to evaluate the student employees' learning regarding this outcome and contacted Student Life Studies (SLS) to help create an assessment, and decided on a near end-of-term focus group, which would include approximately 50% of the MSC student employees.

Three focus groups were conducted in April, near the end of the spring semester at Texas A&M University. This is the second year that Student Life Studies assisted the MSC in conducting student employee focus groups in effort to evaluate their learning while working in the MSC.

Method and Sample

The focus group protocol and questions were designed by supervisors of MSC and Student Life Studies. The three focus groups were facilitated by staff from Student Life Studies on April 14, April 19 and April 20, 2016. Additionally, the focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by student employees within Student Life Studies.

MSC supervisors solicited student employee participation, and the student employees were paid for their time as participants of the focus group. Twenty-five of approximately 52 student employees signed up to participate and 24 showed up for the focus groups. The focus groups were mixed in representation of student employees from the MSC Box Office, MSC OPAS and Student Programs Office.

Data was analyzed in a formal content analysis conducted by four MSC supervisors and one staff member of Student Life Studies to identify main themes that were presented by the student employees. This report presents the qualitative themes developed from the analysis. The complete interview transcripts can be found in separate documents.

Results

Results will be reported as themes for the questions that were asked in the protocol. Questions focused on the student employees' improvements regarding their chosen component of active listening, and its effect on employment, as well as how the student employees plan to or have transferred these listening skills to their academic, personal and future career endeavors. MSC also inquired about how student employees used active listening in conflict resolution.

Identifying the five aspects of active listening

The first question asked the students to identify which of the five aspects of active listening discussed during the August retreat they chose to focus on during the year, and how they have improved in that skill. The five aspects identified during the retreat were pay attention, show you are listening, provide feedback, defer judgement and respond appropriately. Nineteen of the 24 students identified the component of active listening

they tried improving upon during the year and included examples. The most frequently articulated selections were providing feedback, showing they are listening, paying attention and responding appropriately. In an example provided by a student regarding the importance of providing feedback, the student said “I think that active listening, like responding to what people say by summarization and reiteration of what they said, is something that is important to make sure that you get the correct messages, so that way there’s no misinterpretation.”

Another student, who chose the aspect “show you are listening,” took into account customers’ feelings:

Okay, personally I focused on show you’re listening, because in the past I would be typing into the database things as I was talking to a customer and its more efficient but it doesn’t show the customer that I care about what they’re saying at all. So I’ve tried to, you know, keep my hands off the keyboard and the mouse while they’re talking to me.

A student in the MSC Box Office had this to offer about the importance of paying attention:

I would say pay attention to what the customer wants. So, like at the Box Office there’s a lot of different shows so basically when you’re on the phone with the customer, or in front of the customer, you just have to make sure you’re selling them what they want, what seat they want, and you just have to accommodate their needs.

One student talked about responding appropriately and controlling their emotions when addressing customers:

For me I guess respond appropriately, because every once in a while, working the front desk we all get a long line of people, and that’s not a big deal but some of the people get really antsy and start questioning us, telling us how to do our jobs. It’s just [angry, frustrating screech}, but instead of going [angry, frustrating screech] I have to say no I’m sorry I can show you all the pictures here, we don’t have your item, etc....

Active listening impact on academics

The next question asked the participants whether the focus on active listening this year had a noticeable impact on their academics and to provide examples. Thirteen of the students provided comments and some examples on how their chosen active listening component impacted their academics. In one example a student spoke on the component of deferring judgement, “... right now I’m taking a course over policy solutions for climate change, and I don’t always agree with my professor’s teaching, but I listen and take notes anyway, so I guess that would fall under the category of defer judgement.”

Other students spoke of using the paying attention component of active listening in a classroom setting. One student explained,

I’d have to say I’d have to agree...truly listening to what my supervisor has to tell me as far as instructions the first time is extremely important so that way I don’t have to keep going back and saying ‘okay what did you say about this part?’ and you know, so I think just listening fully to exactly what I have to do has helped a lot with what I have to do at work and as far as school with teachers it’s really helped.

Another spoke about learning focus, saying, “Yeah, I learned how to focus completely on the professor instead of, you know, getting on my phone zoning out, so it helped me understand what they’re saying a lot better.”

However, quite a few of the students did not think that the components of active listening they practiced were a good fit with their classroom experience. They did not think lectures lend themselves to using the components of active listening. One student said,

I would just like to say that I think a lecture and work environment are two different forms of active listening because if you're smiling and making eye contact and nodding the whole time you aren't going to be able to take notes. I think that in a lecture environment, it's more passive listening, at least in my opinion and past experiences; you listen and absorb everything but you don't respond to the professor.

Impact of active listening exercises from the retreat

The student employees were next asked if they felt that the active listening exercises and the retreat had been helpful to them personally and how would they take the skills and apply them to their future experience. Many of the students responded focusing on the whether the retreat had been helpful to them personally, and those who responded affirmatively thought the exercises at the retreat were useful both at work and in their personal lives. Many focused specifically on an exercise during the retreat which deliberately asked a student to act distracted while another talked to them about a problem; that exercise enhanced students' awareness of their own distracted behaviors and how it makes the other person in the interaction feel. One student said,

In a smaller sense, we used to do that at the desk. We'd be fiddling over here or stapling or something and it really showed how big of an impact it makes on the person trying to speak to you since we did it so dramatically. I think that opened my eyes to actually putting everything down and looking up, and taking in the information and communicating with someone and that can help in the future with job interviews, or out in the real world if you're at the doctor's office.

However, a few others disagreed that the exercises during the retreat were really beneficial, and thought being at work practicing these skills in real life more practical. When referring to the exercises during the retreat, one student said "I don't think that helped me. I think what helped me is work because that's (the retreat) only something I went to like three hours one day so I don't really think was helpful. I think being in practice and being in the work situation is more beneficial for me to practice active listening".

Active listening practices carrying over to future career

The next question asked what active listening practices have the student workers used at work that will carry over to their future career. Twenty of the students talked about their future career choice and the importance of active listening within their chosen careers, especially the components of paying attention, providing feedback and responding appropriately. One student who plans on becoming a CPA mentioned,

I want to do tax so you're actually looking for ways to save money for your client. So anything that you can discover or learn, you can help them save money. So even if it's, even if they didn't include it on their papers or forms, you know they'll maybe have someone who moved in the house with them that's a dependent, that you can save money, so just catching those details.

Another student provided an example of how paying attention and providing feedback will help their future teaching career:

I want to be a teacher, and so I think it's extremely important to listen to my students' needs or whatever they're trying to ask even if it's not verbal. I think it's important to pay attention to those things and as well ask their parents and listening to what they want for their child and expressing feedback to them about how much I care about their child and what I want from their child and what I can do to help them with their child.

A future veterinarian also expressed the importance of responding appropriately:

Especially in the medical field, because you're going to be describing complex problems or conditions to this patient or this client that has a pet and just being able to know what their intelligence level is on the subject is important in the way you go about describing it to them, and telling them how they can go about fixing the problem.

The deferring judgement component of active listening was also commented on by a few participants, as this student who plans a career in consulting indicated,

...consulting is directly related to listening to people, right? So you come up from a third party, you're not inside the organization, and you're not a customer, but you're coming from the third party unbiased, and you're there to present either gaps in what they're doing or a strategic solution or ways to implement strategy.

Active listening tools used in conflict resolution

The last question to the focus groups asked what active listening tools they have used to help them in conflict resolution on the job. The students most often focused primarily on the active listening components of deferring judgement, responding appropriately and showing you are listening. Below, one MSC Box Office student worker talks about the necessity of deferring judgement as well as responding appropriately when talking to student customers:

Well, I've been in multiple situations with conflict because college students don't like to shell out money, they hate, they call us and they're like 'oh there's a twelve dollar convenience fee online I never knew.' Well, you pressed it, I'm sorry, I can't do anything about it when they want a refund for tickets. We have no refunds, but we have to listen respectfully and listen to them and try and solve that problem to the best of our ability, but you know, you try to defer judgement, you're like okay I hear your problem...

Other student workers in the MSC Box Office spoke about calming customers down by showing they were listening and responding appropriately by involving their supervisor. As one explains,

... just trying to help them as best you can, it's always good to calm them down and listen to their needs, and try to reassure them, but don't break the rules, don't lie to them, don't say 'oh we'll fix this' or 'we'll refund this for you' without contacting a supervisor first. But it's important to calm them down, listen to what they need [and] try to explain the situation to them.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Over three quarters of the MSC student employees who participated in the focus groups identified the components of active listening which were their focus of development during their work at the MSC this year. The students provided examples of how they put their improved skills to practice and how these skills would carry over into their future careers. Although some did not find the components of active listening useful or transferable to their academics, slightly more than half the student employees were able to provide examples of practicing active listening within their academic endeavors.

The student employees who participated in the focus groups were generally positive about the contributions of the August retreat, but perhaps more for the opportunity to get to know other student employees than for the value of the exercises they participated in while at the retreat. However, some found the exercises increased their awareness regarding the effect of their behaviors when interacting with others. A few of the focus group participants indicated not attending the retreat, but still spoke about their choice of active listening component development and efforts to practice them, as both were subjects of discussions with their supervisors. The MSC

supervisors planning this year's retreat should review the transcripts, which may stimulate ideas of improvement to the retreat's agenda this year.

The MSC supervisors are encouraged to continue engaging their student employees in discussions on how their work relates to the student's academics to assist them in making that connection, and more generally, the learning that is occurring as a result of their employment. As learning outcomes are developed for the student employees for the 2016-2017 year, using more direct measures of learning should be considered. For example, a rubric could be used as part of the supervisor and student employee discussions, in which the supervisor provides feedback to the student at the beginning of their term of employment, then near the end of the academic year in effort to measure student learning.

All the MSC supervisors of student employees are encouraged to read the transcripts from each focus group to better understand the themes and examples that were presented.

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