

## **Reflecting Back and Acknowledgement as Tools for Building Mutual Respect and Trust**

**Reflecting back** is simply the process of mirroring back, in different words, what you are hearing from someone, without judging it in any way. This means not adding your opinion or assessment (in words, tone of voice, body language), just staying curious about whether you heard them well.

It might sound like:

- “I think I am hearing you say that you really need this done today because you are afraid you’ll get evicted if you don’t have this. Is that right?”
- “I think I understand what you are asking me to do, but I want to make sure (LIST). Is that right? Did I miss anything?” [You can then go on to say whether or not you can do those things, but that comes after this clarification.]
- “I have heard you say several times now that you really want to go back to school, and that it is important to you both because you want to be supporting your kids better, and because you think it’s important that they have you modeling the value of education. That sounds like a high priority for you. Is that right?”
- (See more examples under “acknowledgement” below)

It serves **three key purposes**:

1. **It tests to see if you have heard them well.** Often we think we understand what someone is saying, but we miss – we get it wrong because their framework, assumptions and language are different from ours. You can build an entire plan on a misunderstanding of what someone wants, intends, or is experiencing. And when you do, those plans often fail to help someone make the changes they want to make.
2. **It helps them feel genuinely heard.** Often the thing people need most is to be heard without being judged.
3. **It offers them a chance to recognize what they already know.** Often wisdom emerges out of our mouths, but we don’t hear it. Reflecting back what we think we hear someone saying is important to them, or what they are saying they want or don’t want, or what they see as barriers, is a great way to help them hear what they are saying more clearly. Make sure you offer such reflections as guesses, and check whether you heard them correctly. From there you can get curious about what the thing you just reflected back means to the conversation you are having.

**Acknowledgement** is a form of reflecting back. It can also be done proactively – that is, without the other person speaking first, reflecting instead our experience of them.

Notice what happens when we start a dialogue by acknowledging:

1. **What is happening** – i.e. “It sounds like you are feeling overwhelmed by all that you are already doing, and that you aren’t sure you have the energy to take on one more thing.” Or “It sounds like you feel like you don’t have any good options here.”

and/or

2. **What people are contributing/have contributed** – i.e. “Reflecting on what you just told me, it sounds like you have been working hard on x, and that you’ve gotten y done – that’s a lot!” Or “I want to say that I really appreciate all the work you’ve been doing on x – it’s really made a difference.”

Beginning this way helps the other person see their own strengths and needs, indicates your respect for them, and invites a sense of connection between the two of you.

**It’s important to notice that when we do this kind of reflecting and acknowledging, we are guessing – and we could be wrong.**

This is an opportunity to model transparency/reflective practices. When we are not worried about whether we are right when we reflect back what we think we are hearing/seeing/understanding – when we are truly standing in curiosity, hoping to learn more, and can respond with grace when corrected – then we leave room for others to:

- Offer us more information, and
- Feel less defensive about their own uncertainties.

At a broader level, being willing to acknowledge our own uncertainty and mistakes, and to respond to other people’s uncertainty and mistakes with curiosity and support, is critical to creating an environment in which people will:

- Feel respected and trusted, and can extend respect and trust,
- Take risks,
- Take leadership, and
- Ask when they need help.

All of which makes it easier for them to make the changes they want to make to improve their lives.