

Listening That Builds Chapters: How AFSA Leaders Strengthen Trust and Engagement

Active listening is a simple but powerful leadership tool that helps AFSA chapter leaders build trust, uncover member needs, and strengthen engagement across their chapters.

Active Listening Checklist for Chapter Leaders

- Pause for two seconds before responding to show genuine consideration.
 - Paraphrase and confirm: “So what I hear you saying is... Did I get that right?”
 - Listen in informal settings — hallway chats, happy hours, and side conversations often reveal unspoken needs.
 - Notice emerging voices and encourage quieter members to take on leadership opportunities.
 - Focus on understanding first, problem-solving second — don’t rush to fix before you’ve heard fully.
 - Use the “Name, Reflect, Check” method in hard conversations to combine empathy with clarity.
-

When Jessica Cox first stepped into her executive leadership role with the AFSA Florida Chapter, she noticed something at happy hours and chapter events: members often shared more in those informal settings than in meetings. “They’ll tell you what’s really going on,” she says. “But you have to listen closely, respect their confidence and follow through.”

That same instinct to listen well has shaped Ellen Ballard’s leadership in the AFSA Louisiana Chapter. As executive director, she recalls one member who rarely spoke up during meetings. By simply starting a conversation and giving him space to respond, she uncovered insights that might have gone unnoticed. “We don’t always pay attention,” she says. “But it pays to listen.”

For both leaders, active listening has been more than courtesy – it has been a cornerstone for engaging members, building trust and navigating challenges. As therapist Jared Broussard explains, the skill is also one of the simplest and most powerful tools any leader can employ.

Broussard is a licensed professional counselor in the Greater Houston area. With more than a decade of experience across private practice and inpatient care, he helps clients align with their personal values and build lives worth living. With deep family roots in the fire protection industry, he views his work with AFSA as a way to give back to a field that has given him much.

Why Listening Matters

“Active listening is everything when it comes to establishing and maintaining effective relationships,” Broussard says. “It creates the foundation for building trust, avoiding miscommunication, and resolving misunderstandings.”

Jessica has seen this firsthand. When she joined, the Florida Chapter was emerging from financial troubles and leadership turnover. Rebuilding trust required her to listen with humility and consistency. “I had to rebuild relationships, which often meant having tough conversations and showing I was accountable,” she says.

Ellen points to trust as the bedrock of her own chapter’s work. Her approach – open body language, doing what she promises, and addressing issues directly – echoes Broussard’s therapy-informed techniques. “People want to know they’re heard and respected,” she says. “That’s where trust begins.”

Listening Habits That Work

While “listening” may sound basic, Broussard suggests leaders develop specific habits that elevate conversations:

- **Pause before responding.** A two-second pause signals you are truly considering the speaker’s words.
- **Summarize and confirm.** Try, “So what I hear you saying is... Did I get that right?”
- **Name the value.** When someone raises concerns, reflect the principle behind it – efficiency, fairness, or safety.

These strategies align with Ellen’s practice of following up after conversations and Jessica’s habit of connecting people with the right resources. Each reinforces respect and engagement.

Listening in a Technical World

The fire protection industry presents unique challenges for listening. Members juggle codes, regulations, and heavy workloads. “It’s easy to half-listen while you’re doing calculations in

your head,” Broussard notes. Leaders also tend to default to problem-solving before they’ve fully understood the concern.

His solution: take intentional notes and slow down. “Active listening first, problem-solving second,” he advises. “Pump the brakes until you have confirmation you understood them correctly. Then solve the right problem.”

Jessica echoes that approach. She finds value in informal conversations, where members reveal pressures they won’t voice publicly. Ellen agrees, noting that quiet members often have the sharpest insights once they feel safe to share.

From Quiet Members to Emerging Leaders

Listening also uncovers hidden potential. Jessica recalls Matt, a member who once sat quietly at events with his boss. Over time, with encouragement and opportunities, he became branch manager, chair of the NextGen committee, and a leader in his own right. “Watching his growth has been inspiring,” she says.

Ellen sees a similar link between listening and leadership development. With two board members nearing retirement, she knows her chapter must draw out new voices. “When you listen, you discover who has ideas and who’s ready to step up,” she says.

Leading Through Setbacks

No chapter is without challenges. Jessica admits to missteps – including a PAC reporting error early in her tenure. Her response: own it, explain it, and put safeguards in place. “Being transparent, learning from setbacks, and moving forward are critical,” she says.

Ellen’s experience echoes this resilience. When she faced resistance to ideas, she shifted her mindset from pushing an agenda to guiding discussion. “I realized I can’t change others,” she says. “I reflect, reassess, and take a new path.”

Both leaders highlight listening as the reset button during setbacks. By hearing concerns directly and addressing them with honesty, they rebuild confidence and momentum.

Casting Vision Through Listening

AFSA chapters exist to advance training, education, and life safety – but leaders like Jessica and Ellen know members need to see how those goals connect locally.

Jessica’s chapter demonstrates vision by offering scholarships to AFSA’s design school, supporting veterans through Homes for Troops, and funding the Children’s Burn Foundation.

Ellen highlights the role of younger trainers in attracting younger members and ensuring continuity.

In both cases, leaders listen first – understanding what their members value – then translate AFSA’s mission into initiatives that resonate.

Hard Conversations, Human Connections

Discussing sensitive issues is part of leadership, whether about regulations, conflict, or member concerns. Ellen favors directness, balanced with timing. “You have to read the room,” she says. Jessica relies on humility and fairness.

Broussard recommends a simple “Name, Reflect, Check” strategy:

1. **Name** what you heard.
2. **Reflect** the emotion or value behind it.
3. **Check** that you understood correctly.

For example, if a member says, “The new standards are doubling my paperwork,” a leader might respond: “*So you’re saying the standards have added a lot more paperwork (Name). That sounds overwhelming (Reflect). Did I get that right? (Check).*”

This approach blends empathy with clarity, ensuring members feel both heard and understood.

Sidebar: Quick Listening Tips for Chapter Leaders

- Pause two seconds before responding.
- Summarize and confirm what you heard.
- Translate technical jargon into plain language.
- Ask curiosity-driven questions: “How is this change affecting your daily work?”
- Reflect emotions as well as facts: “It sounds like that deadline left you stressed.”
- Keep open body language – eye contact, relaxed arms, nods.

- Follow up to show accountability.
- Practice “Name, Reflect, Check” for tough conversations.

Final Word

Whether it’s helping a quiet member find their voice, restoring trust after setbacks, or guiding through regulatory pressures, active listening remains a leader’s most versatile skill.

As Broussard puts it, “Listening goes beyond hearing concerns. It’s about understanding the pressure someone is under and responding in a way that shows empathy and respect.”

For AFSA leaders, that practice doesn’t just build better conversations – it builds stronger chapters.