

Stop Talking and Start Listening

The second way to make a connection is to stop talking and start listening. Proverbs 18:13 tells us that “he who gives an answer before he hears, It is folly and shame to him.” To be an effective small-group leader, we must master the skill of listening. Now we go to all kinds of training courses, and we’ve learned and been educated in school about how to speak and pull together messages, and a lot is discussed in the area of communication. But listening is typically not something that we spend a lot of energy around, yet it is such a critical skill. And what we learn about listening, we learn when we’re children in the way that we’re taught. Oftentimes as children, we are interrupted because we just don’t know how to capture our messages in a few sentences or less. And so we get interrupted, and what we learn is that we can talk around or through or over someone just to get our message heard.

Now in corporate America, it looks like this. The first to take a breath, well, he’s declared the listener. It’s such a critical skill to master. When we’re communicating with other people, as the speaker I’ve a message I’d like to say to you. So I send that message to you and I have an intention behind it. Now between my speaking to you and you hearing me, there’s quite a large gap. That gap consists of noise, all kinds of noise, and some of it is literal noise. Maybe you need to close the door, turn your back to a door or a window to make sure there is no physical noise in the room. But other noises are things like your personal prejudices toward the subject that’s being talked about; whether or not you feel the speaker has any credibility with you; whether you even find the topic interesting. Maybe you’re just thinking ahead to your reply or what interesting thing you can mention to them or what kind of verse you might be able to offer them in comfort; and rather than listening, we’re busy getting distracted and that gap stays really wide. Good communicators do everything they can to shrink the gap. There’s going to be a little bit there. There’s never an assurance that my intended message is going to be interpreted exactly as I wanted it to be, but good communicators shrink that gap. When my intended message is interpreted just as I intended, that’s when you have great communication.

Listening is an active skill; it’s not a passive one. The only easy listening is on the radio. I heard a great story about two gentlemen

who were walking along the streets of New York, and it was very crowded and busy and hustly and very loud. And all of a sudden one of the gentlemen turned to the other and said, "Did you hear that?"

"No, what did you hear?"

"It was a cricket. Did you hear it? Look there he is."

And the other gentleman said, "How in the world in the midst of all this noise, did you hear that cricket?"

Well, he was a trained zoologist, and so he was trained to listen for that sound. "You hear what you want to hear" was what he told the other man he was walking with. And so he said, "Here, I'll prove my point." And he pulls out of his pocket a quarter, and he drops it to the ground and there goes the clink. The clink of the coin on the concrete, and 10 people turn to immediately look. "You get my point," he said. "You see, they're interested in money, and so when they heard the sound of the coin, they responded. You hear what you listen for."

So in listening, listen for the intended message, listen beyond the words, listen for what the heart is saying. Look at the body language and see what is accompanying that message when it's said to you.

One of the ways that you can become a better listener is to physically just position yourself as a good listener would, and in time, as you do that, you will become a better listener. What I mean by that is lean forward. Tilt your head toward the person who's speaking to you. Make direct eye contact. Make sure you put your body to the back of anything that might distract you. Be in that moment focused on what they're saying and intentionally try to capture both the words and the feelings that are coming your way, and make sure that you get the intended message. Now occasionally what you might want to do is also ask questions and paraphrase to make sure that you understand what they're saying. You also want to make sure that you don't interrupt and finish their sentences. It's such an annoying thing, and it's a sign of just being impatient and not wanting to let them think through their thoughts. Sometimes people need to process their thinking a little further when they're talking; and if we quickly interrupt, we're simply filling in the space and we're not necessarily getting it right.

Another thing is: react to the idea being expressed and not the person. When you find someone who speaks a lot and talks a lot and always has an idea, at times we begin to kind of shut them out. And sometimes the less they say the more their words weigh. But people who do speak a lot, there are times they have great points and you just don't want to let the person necessarily hinder you from hearing the message. It might be something of true value, and certainly if it's something that's from their heart, it is. If the conversation includes some exchange of information, take out a pen and a paper and write it down. That really demonstrates that you're listening intently to what's being said.

When we're listened to, it's almost magical. Our hearts begin to stir and things that are inside of us begin to unfold, and we really start to solve what is on our hearts just in being listened to—just to speak out and know that someone is truly wanting to hear both what we have to say and what is behind the message in terms of the emotion and feeling there. "I often ponder," this anonymous quote says, "over the nature of true human transparency." It's a rare and difficult thing and so much of it depends on the person who is listening to us. There are those who pull down barriers, and they make the way smooth. And there are those who force the doors and enter our territory like invaders. They throw up walls and dig ditches around us. There are those who set us out of tune and listen only to our false notes. There are those for whom we will always remain strangers and as if we're speaking in an unfamiliar tongue. Well, then, it's our turn to listen. Now which of these are we? I would encourage you to take the time, position your body, make it a very active skill that you engage in in your small group; and then you'll begin to set a tone, and you'll see that others will begin to follow in your small group.

I'll leave you with this thought by Henry David Thoreau "The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when someone asked what I thought and attended to my answer." Now, how often does that truly happen for us that someone says, "Well, what do you think about this or that?" and you truly feel that they're in the moment listening to your answer? So stop talking and start listening.