

10 Ways to Be a Better Listener

Follow these steps for greater understanding, attention, and empathy.

By Michael Mack

Listening is a crucial skill for small-group leaders to master. Here are 10 practical tips for improving our listening habits:

1. **Be quiet.** This should be obvious, but often it's the biggest obstruction to listening. The leader should be part of the discussion without monopolizing it.
2. **Try to understand.** The goal of listening is to understand, not just hear, what the person is really saying.
3. **Eliminate distractions.** People feel comfortable sharing when they're not interrupted. Turn your phone on silent. Make sure you have childcare arranged. Don't look at your watch or lesson plan when someone is speaking.
4. **Empathize.** Interject short statements to show you understand and accept what the person is saying. "That sounds exciting!" or "That must have been a hard decision to make" are good examples of how to show empathy.
5. **Don't judge.** Especially when someone is already hurting, a judgmental attitude can do more harm than good. Don't condone sin, of course, but recognize the difference between acceptance and approval.
6. **Avoid advising.** Unless they ask for it, people usually don't want or need you to try and solve their problem. They just need someone to listen.
7. **Verify and clarify.** If you don't understand what someone is saying, ask. "Here's what I hear you saying. Is that right?" is one good clarifier.
8. **Listen for what is not said.** Try to hear the meaning behind the words. Listen to tone of voice and be aware of facial expressions. Sometimes what a person is really saying is hidden behind a clutter of words.
9. **Watch body language.** A person's posture or gestures can sometimes say more than words.
10. **Affirm.** "Thanks for sharing that. I'm sure it isn't easy to talk about right now." This shows that it's okay and good to talk about difficult things and will make it easier for someone else to share.

—MICHAEL MACK is a co-founder of SmallGroups.com and serves as an editorial advisor; copyright 2007 by Christianity Today.

Discuss

1. Which one of these tips do you think will be the most difficult for you to put into practice? Why?
2. Can you think of anything that might be a distraction for people during your small-group time? What can you do to eliminate that?
3. Think back on a conversation where you felt like someone was really listening to you. What did he or she do to make you feel heard?