

Listening Leaders

Being a good listener really starts in your heart.

By Steven B. Rowe

As the small-groups pastor in my church, I used to think that my lack of listening to people was due to either adult ADD or an extremely overactive leadership gift. I figured that some were gifted at listening, I wasn't, and therefore I could excuse it away.

But then God began to convict me about the errors intrinsic to that belief system. He showed me that I didn't listen to people because I didn't really care about them or love them. And even when I did love and care about a person, I loved and cared about myself more. Ouch!

As I worked to improve, I originally viewed listening as a discipline. I wanted to adopt the skill of listening into my spiritual growth. But the issue is much bigger than that—it deals with the very core of our hearts. If we don't really love or care about the people God has entrusted to us, there's not enough discipline in the world to help us become better listeners.

Listening Requires Genuine Care

That's when it hit me: the first step in listening is genuine care, concern, and love for the people God has entrusted to us. In other words, effective listening is just one of the byproducts that occurs when we share God's heart for other people. No other technique or motivation will help you listen effectively until you get your heart squared away.

So the first step in becoming a better listener is to lay a new foundation. Ask God daily to change your heart so that you share his love for others. In addition, ask God to remove your selfish tendencies and help you to put others first.

Listening Seeks Understanding

The second step to becoming a better listener involves the actual skill. At its core, listening is a search for understanding. That understanding allows us to truly celebrate a victory, mourn a loss, process or dialogue a question, digest a concern, and validate a hurt.

When someone shares a deep need, listening for understanding provides the starting place where we can discern what questions to ask, or how to pray for them. This understanding communicates value and affirmation—stuff we all need.

Listening Must Be Modeled

The last step in becoming a better listener is to model listening to your group. Most people don't naturally know how to do this, and you can see it within their marriages, their relationships at work, their children, or even within the group. By modeling listening, and pointing to its effectiveness, you begin to challenge the people in your group to practice it within every scope of their relationships.

Be honest in the modeling, and talk about the difficulties at times. This will help break down the "you've got it all together" myth.

Listening is a lifelong discipline because our hearts are "leaky." We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit regularly to make sure we're loving people the way he wants us to. May the "listening leader" not be an oxymoron in our churches and small groups; may it be the natural outgrowth of our love for the people we serve.

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Discuss

1. Do you agree that effective listening is based on a love for the people we are listening to? Why or why not?
2. Why is listening well so critical for shepherding well?
3. What step will you take this week to grow your love for your group members and become a better listener?

