

# The Power of Active Listening

*Learn a skill that is necessary for all small-group leaders.*

By Reid Smith

I like this quote from David Burns, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania: "The biggest mistake you can make in trying to talk convincingly is to put your highest priority on expressing your ideas and feelings. What most people really want is to be listened to, respected, and understood. The moment people see that they are being understood, they become more motivated to understand your point of view."

This is why it's so important that small-group leaders develop the skill of active listening. Active listening begins with being truly interested in what the speaker has to say. It means removing distractions from your mind and focusing on the person talking. Start by really concentrating on them and watching for body language, stance, and position of the arms and hands. It's estimated that only 10 percent of actual communication is delivered verbally. The rest comes to us in the attitude and posture of the body.

It's also important that you avoid the temptation to interrupt. More often than not, we interrupt with our own thoughts and ideas—in other words, we have our own agenda. One of the most important steps in active listening is providing and receiving feedback. Let the person sharing know, with a nod or an affirming word, that you understand. Better yet, restate your understanding of what the person just said after they've finished.

By listening to others we not only show respect, we also increase their sense of self-worth within the group. This builds a greater sense of cohesion among group participants. Cohesion brings encouragement and motivation for true discipleship. And as a group's cohesion increases, so does the level of communication, positive interactions, and regular touchpoints among members.

## Quiz: How Good Are Your Listening Skills?

The following test can help determine your active listening quotient. Give yourself four points if the answer to the following question is *Always*; three points for *Usually*; two points for *Rarely*; and one point for *Never*.

- Do I allow the speaker to finish without interrupting? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do I listen between the lines for the subtext? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do I repeat what the person just said to clarify the meaning? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do I avoid getting hostile or agitated when I disagree with the speaker? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do I tune out distractions when listening? \_\_\_\_\_
- Do I make an effort to seem interested in what the other person is saying? \_\_\_\_\_

*Scoring:* If you scored 22 points or higher, you're an excellent listener. If you scored between 18 and 21, you're better than average. At 14 to 17 points, you have room for improvement. And if you scored below 13, find someone who can help you practice the following skills:

## Basic Skills for Active Listening

**First, give your full attention to the person speaking.** Maintain eye contact and focus on them as they share. When a group participant is passionate about what they're sharing, let them fully vent their fears, frustrations, and other important feelings. You can show you're really interested in what they're saying by giving subtle affirmations like nodding.

Resist the urge to interrupt or interject advice. Either action can signal to the one sharing that you're not really listening, even if you are, and can shut them down. Make it your priority to be present with the person speaking and avoid the temptation to rehearse your response. On this note, consider that thoughts move about four times as fast as speech. Since time is on your side, learn to take your time to think about what you're hearing, strive to understand it, and then give appropriate and timely feedback.

**Next, identify the root issue being discussed and look for main ideas.** Listen for the most important points the speaker is trying to get across. They tend to be mentioned at the start or end of a talk or repeated a number of times. Pay special attention to phrases like, "My point is . . ." or "The thing is . . ." Dig deeper into statements where the person sharing inserts emphatic words like "I really don't like . . ."

For example, you could say: "John, you seem to feel strongly about . . . Tell me more about why you don't like that." Active listeners seek to understand what a person is sharing, but they also recognize that it's of great importance to understand why they're sharing it. When you understand the "why" behind a person's sharing, you're better equipped to respond meaningfully with feedback and prayer.

**Stay focused on the person speaking until they feel they're being heard.** It can be tempting to dive into a story of your own to show how you relate, but it's important to let them get everything out. It's okay to reference something similar that happened to you, but be sure to swing the attention back to them quickly. Your diligence in staying focused will help the speaker feel understood and genuinely cared for. Once feelings are expressed and completely downloaded, a person is open to receiving input and guidance if that's what they desire.

**Reflect back your understanding of what they're saying.** In your own mind, summarize what the speaker has said and then reframe what you heard so they know you're hearing them. Compassionately acknowledge and ask about (don't diagnose) the emotions they appear to be expressing. For example: "It sounds like the hurt from that tough experience still affects you at times. How has it been for you dealing with the issues that came out of that?"

It's okay to ask them to expand on what they're feeling. Oftentimes, when a person begins to open up, they won't open up all the way until they're invited to do so. Address the emotion first and then clarify the facts.

**Collaborate on ways they can process.** It's frustrating to the speaker when the listener tries to give advice or prescribe quick fixes—especially early on in his or her sharing. Even though most advice is well-intentioned, it has a way of short-circuiting further discovery and communication. Often, all people really need is to get something off their chest and be heard. Unless the person sharing directly asks for your advice, he or she probably just wants to feel understood.

For that reason, only offer to help people process through their own solution after the emotional pressure behind what they're sharing has diminished *and* if they invite input. (Depending on the situation, your group dynamic, and the available time, you might suggest doing this after your group's actual ending time.) Weave biblical wisdom into your solution-oriented collaboration.

The more you practice active listening, the more you'll come across as a caring and supportive small-group leader. When you express your love through listening in the ways suggested above, your group will become a safer place for all. Participants will forge a stronger bond and future discussions will take on a more supportive nature.

—REID SMITH is the founder of 2orMore; copyright 2011 by Christianity Today.

### **Discuss**

1. Besides nodding and interjecting empathetic phrases, what are some ways we can affirm the speaker?
2. How can we ensure we're only suggesting possible solutions and not giving unwanted advice?
3. In what situations might it be appropriate to share a similar experience of our own? When might that be unhelpful?

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## Self-Awareness in Listening

*Understanding our prejudices can help us hear more accurately.*

By Emma J. Justes

Listening well requires that we be aware of ourselves. Specifically, we must be aware of our attitudes in matters of race, class, gender, culture, age, religion, language, sexual orientation, level of education, marital status, disability, gender roles, political affiliation, and so on. We all have certain prejudices and stereotypes—views we assume are correct yet have not really questioned. Often, we're not even aware of them. In addition to the differences named above, most of us have wounds from our past that may bias our thinking.

### The Danger of Mishearing

In Luke 7, Jesus' dialogue with Simon, a Pharisee, is a good example of mishearing. Simon questions Jesus for allowing a sinful woman to pour perfume on his feet. Jesus responds to him, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven—as her great love has shown." He then tells the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." What the other guests at the table *hear* Jesus say is that *he* forgives her sins. They respond, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" What they're really asking is, "Who does he think he is?" Their view of Jesus—what they expect from him—causes them to hear him inaccurately. Jesus doesn't claim to forgive her sins. Rather, his words point to and affirm the action of God.

When we're listening to people speak, we bring our past experience with us to the conversation. Sometimes we bring misconceptions we have about them or others like them, anticipating what they might say or do. This can prevent us from hearing accurately.

The Pharisees gathered had an underlying motive to find fault with Jesus. They, along with Simon, were eager to discredit him. We operate in ways very similar to the Pharisees when we listen without honest self-awareness—holding our views in absolute certainty, bearing attitudes and expectations that can't be overcome by what the person is actually saying.

We also understand some of our views to be biblically supported. In these cases it doesn't seem like we hold prejudices but rather have a view that is *right* according to our faith. In this we resemble Simon and the Pharisees. They held certain interpretations of the Torah that Jesus challenged. To them, he wasn't being faithful. Because his interpretations differed from theirs, they misheard what he said.

### Moving Beyond our Barriers

Our aim must be to determine what stands in the way of our listening well, and to attend to what causes these barriers. We need to be willing to grow in faith and understanding, remembering that the Holy Spirit is not done with us yet. This stance comes only from appropriate humility and accurate self-awareness, which is grounded in deep faith.

—EMMA J. JUSTES; excerpted from *Hearing Beyond the Words* (Abingdon Press, 2006). Used with permission.

### Discuss

1. Do you agree that all people carry stereotypes and prejudices, whether they're aware of them or not? Why or why not?
2. For what issues or debates do you hold an especially strong opinion? For what issues do you hold a more subtly strong opinion?
3. Think back to a situation when someone misunderstood you. How did it feel? What was the cause? How were things resolved?