

# Small-Group Listening Skills

## *Simple tips for helping your group members become great listeners*

By Bill Search

In order to care for your group members, you have to listen to them and know the real issues they're facing. A healthy, vibrant small group is one where people feel they can share the real stuff of life. In order to experience that kind of group, members need to learn how to listen to one another. Listening is a skill that must be cultivated, and although many people are not natural listeners, everyone can learn. Here are some helpful bits of advice to help your group members grow as listeners.

### **Set a Tone**

Every group has a vibe or an undercurrent. Sit with a group and, within an hour, you can pick it up. Is the group superficial? Is it super-spiritual? Is it populated with amateur Bible scholars? Is it filled with opinionated intellectuals? In less than 60 seconds you can sense the tone of the group. It's in what people say—and what they don't say.

To promote an atmosphere of listening, try these two things:

- Tell people you expect them to share honestly. You'll probably have to tell them over and over until they naturally talk about what's truly happening in their lives. Also, affirm people when they do share real experiences and feelings.
- Model the way you want people to listen. The way you interact with the group sets the tone for how people will act.

### **Create an Environment for Listening**

Space matters. I serve at one of the largest churches in America. The worship center seats nearly 9,000 people. When we have 4,000 or more people, it feels pretty good. But once a year we feel lucky if we draw 2,000. A little horse race known as the Kentucky Derby is held on the first Saturday in May. On that night, Louisville shuts down. As you can imagine, 2,000 people in a room that seats 9,000 doesn't feel too good. (Can you imagine thinking that 2,000 people in church is a bad night?) It has everything to do with the space.

In order to create an environment conducive to listening:

- Arrange the room with circles instead of rows. This is obvious in living rooms, but if your small group meets in a church facility, be sure to rearrange the furniture into circles. If you have a large small group, consider creating two or more circles.
- Minimize distractions by silencing phones, putting away pets, and turning off music.

### **Seek to Understand, not Judge**

We live in a world full of opinion holders. We are trained to judge people by what they say. News commentators pounce on a person if they hear something they disagree with. Celebrity magazines sell copies by quoting stars out of context in a way that spells scandal. Twitter wars document disagreements between people for the whole world to see. Unfortunately, this communication pattern also exists in many small groups. We internally make judgments and draw conclusions based on what we hear. Many times we do this without flinching. But good listening requires that we suppress our tendency to judge, and focus instead on what the person is *trying* to say—not just the words they're using.

If you want to seek to understand and not judge, try these two things:

- Don't just listen to the words the person is saying. Figure out what they're trying to say. Many people struggle to say exactly what's in their head or heart. It doesn't help when we parse their sentences.
- Put judging aside. You should attempt to discern what people are communicating, but as they're sharing, avoid labeling them or their words as good or bad. As a listener, your job is simply to understand them.

### **Restate What's Been Said**

Most of the time when we're listening to someone talking, we're just trying to figure out what we want to say when he or she pauses. We aren't listening; we're reloading. But when we're listening well, we repeat what people say back to them in order to clarify and affirm that we're listening. Try to put their thoughts in your own words and see if you've figured it out.

If you want to succeed at restating, here are some helpful tips:

- Tell people you want to understand them simply by repeating to them what they said. For instance, after listening to a college student explain her fears about life after graduation, you might say, "So it sounds like you're having a hard time facing the unknowns of life after graduation."
- After making your statement, ask if you're correct. Ask if you've captured the essence of what he or she is saying. You could ask, "Is that how you feel?" or "Is that what you're saying?"

### **Ask Follow-Up Questions**

One of the best tools for sharpening your listening skills is follow-up questions. You can keep the conversation moving along and avoid listening to a monologue by asking people to elaborate or explain certain parts of their story.

To develop the skill of asking follow-up questions:

- Force yourself to ask one or two follow-up questions before you comment. We're prone to commenting, so make it a rule that you can't comment until you've asked a question or two.
- Ask open-ended questions. Get someone to elaborate or clarify an idea instead of answering simple "yes" or "no" questions.

### **Don't Story Top**

Recently, a friend shared a story with me about a funeral he conducted. The man who passed away was not only a family friend but also a former U.S. senator. As I sat across from him, stunned, I simply stated, "I can't top that story!" Many of us have a compulsive urge to top stories. In other words, when you tell me about your difficult day at work with a coworker, I want to share that I had a difficult week with three coworkers. We like to win the story competition.

Here are a couple of things to help you retire your story-topping tendencies:

- Remind yourself that the only reward for story toppers is fewer friends. No one likes a story topper. If you want people to share, they have to feel you won't try to beat their story with one of your own.
- There is a place for story swapping (and occasionally topping). Save it for wings with your buddies or over coffee at Starbucks. In the right context, story swapping and topping is fun—just beware of how it affects your small group.

### **Don't Interrupt**

As a parent of three kids ranging from elementary to middle school, I'm used to being interrupted. My daughters will occasionally burst into a conversation and my son will physically push his way into the situation. However, because I love my children, I remind them it's selfish and rude to interrupt. It's strange that we teach our children not to interrupt but are often comfortable with the habit among adults. But know this: nothing will curtail your ability to listen quite like interrupting.

In order to work on interruption management:

- Don't complete other people's sentences. It's another way of saying, "Hurry up and end your story. I've got things to do!"
- Keep your lips shut—literally. It's hard to talk if your mouth is closed, so pretend your lips are sewn shut.

### **Look Interested**

Your demeanor is important. Non-verbal cues can either encourage people to talk or shut them down. If you look bored, angry, or upset, you can disrupt the listening culture of your group.

Here are two things you can do to show your interest:

- Turn your body toward the person talking and keep eye contact.
- Remind yourself to smile slightly. Many of us may naturally frown or look glum even if we aren't feeling that way on the outside. It doesn't hurt to tell yourself to smile.

### **Don't Gossip**

What's said in the group stays in the group. If people know sharing in the group is like speaking into a megaphone, they won't share much. And what they do share will be rather shallow.

If you want to kill gossip in the group, try these two things:

- Remind the members of your group that what's said in the group stays in the group. State this with new members and repeat it with veteran members.
- A good rule of thumb: if you're not part of the problem or solution, don't share it. If you're not part of the problem or solution, don't make sport of it. Sometimes group members need this clarification.

### **Thank People for Sharing**

Extroverts are used to sharing. In fact, most extroverts are used to *oversharing*. But many people are too intimidated to share personal feelings. Regardless of whether a person is an extrovert or introvert, it's a cause for celebration when a person shares a deep, heartfelt matter.

Here are a couple of things you can do to thank people for sharing:

- Tell the person you are thankful that they had the courage to share honestly.
- Remind your group often that it's a great privilege to have a community where members can share what's on their hearts.

### **Call Them Out**

Some of your group members will have a difficult time listening well—even after establishing a good environment and watching you model good listening. For instance, you might have a chronic interrupter. The only recourse is to talk to the group member outside of the meeting. Meet one-on-one. First, affirm the group member and thank him or her for being part of the group. Then explain how his or her behavior is impacting the group. I've found that most interrupters (and others who have difficulty listening well) don't realize what they're doing. They may even believe what they're doing is helpful.

If you have people who are consistently not listening well:

- Love them enough to help them change. Make a date to meet outside the meeting and gently explain how the behavior is impacting the group. Don't beat around the bush; share honestly and in a loving way.
- Create a plan for the future. You may decide to check in after a few weeks to talk about how the behavior has improved. One time I had a group member who was a long talker and a chronic interrupter. We came up with a signal (me touching my ear), so he could keep his dignity while he learned what was appropriate.

### **Follow Up**

The final listening skill really comes after the official group meeting has ended. Listening is a culture, not just a discipline. If you want to develop the culture of listening in your group, you will need to put forth effort outside of the official group meeting.

Here are a couple of things you can do to follow up with your group:

- Call or text the people who shared and thank them or remind them you're praying for them. This can be short and sweet.

- Send a note or an e-mail thanking group members for sharing. This can be a bit longer, and you can encourage them with a prayer or verse of Scripture.

Listening is much more than a discipline or a skill. In a healthy group, listening is a cultural value. Regardless of the natural bent of your group, you can develop as great listeners. As these suggestions become natural for your members, the group will become a safe place where people share openly and listen intently.

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### **Discuss**

1. Are you modeling how to ask clarifying and follow-up questions? How can you do a better job at this?
2. How can you prevent gossip in your group?
3. How comfortable do you feel calling out group members for not listening well? What steps can you take to become more comfortable with this?