

Hearing Aids for Small-Group Leaders

Why listening is such a valuable tool for those of us in charge.

by Cathy Mogus

Most leaders are good talkers, but the best ones excel in listening, as well. This is especially true in a small-group setting. Many people join discussion groups so that others will listen to them. A good leader acknowledges this need and will use it as a valuable tool to help those people learn and grow.

If you are a small-group leader, here are some "hearing aids" that can help you tune in to your members even better than you do now.

Be There

Our adult son Chris recently visited us from out of town. While the three of us were driving to his brother's home, he was telling us about his new house and job. As we passed a service station, his father interrupted him by pointing out the price of gas.

"You're not really listening to me, Dad," Chris commented.

"Of course I am," Allen shot back.

"Then why did you cut me off to talk about the price of gas?"

This example shows how important it is to be all ears when another person is speaking. If you are perceived as inattentive, you may hurt someone to the point where they will refuse to open up again—or come back.

A good leader keeps focused. It takes discipline to listen attentively when your mind is on something else—especially if that something else has to do with what you're going to say next! Remember, your group will know when your mind has wandered. They can tell by your eyes, your body language, and your comments whether you are with them or off somewhere in lulu land.

If you happen to be male, you might note the following: In a recent study conducted by universities in Arizona, Texas, and Washington, psychologists recorded 400 students of both genders over a seven-year period. The data concluded that men talk just about as much as women. It also noted that in a mixed setting, "women self-censor while men interrupt a lot Men see conversation as a competition They will interrupt; they will talk over (others) and get air space, because if you get air space, you're a winner. The research shows men do 98 percent of interruptions."

Be Fully Together

It's hard to be attentive if you are dealing with personal problems. In his book *Finding Serenity in the Age of Anxiety*, Psychotherapist Robert Gerzon noted that "anxiety interferes with human relationships It becomes harder to listen, harder to empathize, when we are wearing anxiety's armor."

If you are dealing with a severe situation—such as the death of a loved one or marriage problems—you may want to take a sabbatical from your group until the storm passes. This could be beneficial for both you and your members. However, if your worries are minor, such as a problem at work or a leaky faucet at home, do your best to leave them at the door.

Once you're with your group, give them your full attention. You are there for them—not yourself. If you want them to listen to what you have to say, be sure to hear them out first.

Be Real

Some people are leaders because they have a need to control others. These are the ones who want to talk more than listen. For them, hearing a group member out can actually be painful. But those leaders who are confident in themselves and in their divine calling get the big picture. They work at knowing when to talk and when to listen.

And they are real. They easily admit when they don't have an answer, and are willing to listen to someone in the group who might. Like Job in the Bible, many people are thinking, "Oh, that I had one to hear me!" If your group members feel that you genuinely care for them and are willing to listen to them, they will tune in to you better. So ask lots of questions—and then listen intently to the answers. You never know what you may learn!

Be Patient

It has been said, "One way to be popular is to listen attentively to a lot of things you already know." It takes effort and self-control to be a good listener—and patience. This is especially challenging when one group member tries to dominate a discussion. These people often have insecurity and control issues. They obviously should be heard, but this is when you need to step in as the leader.

In such situations, try sitting directly across from them in the group. Let your eye contact communicate to them that you are listening, but that others also need to be heard. If this doesn't work, take them aside after the meeting and gently remind them to give others the opportunity to participate.

Be Observant

Learn to listen between the lines. It's worth noting that, "Opportunities are often missed because we are broadcasting when we should be listening."

The apostle Paul led a lot of small—and big—groups in his time. He was speaking to a gathering in Lystra when he noticed a crippled man in his audience. Acts 14 says that Paul observed him intently (listened between the lines) and felt the man had enough faith to be healed. Without further ado, Paul commanded him to get up and walk!

One man in my Bible study group appeared touchy whenever a certain issue came up for discussion. Since I felt he might have personal struggles in that area, I tried to be sensitive in how I led the group whenever the topic arose. By hearing what had not been said, I was in a better position to speak the truth in love.

Listening can be hard work, but it always pays off. As someone once said, "Always listen to the opinions of others. It may not do you much good, but it will them."

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