

Editorial: A hypocrite's guide to learning to listen

April 23, 2015

How many church fights—or marital spats, office conflicts and community brouhahas—would end harmoniously if people simply listened to each other?

Disclosure: I've been putting off writing about listening for several weeks. Listening is vital. Unfortunately, I'm naturally lousy at it. Lousy for the reasons you probably are: I approach conversations with my own agenda. I don't really want to learn what others have to say; I want them to hear what I have to say. I have a short attention span and a big ego. Usually, I engage discussion for my benefit, not yours.

Why I decided to talk about listening



Editor Marv KnoxSo, call me a hypocrite, but I can't put it off. Here's the reason I decided to "talk" about listening—my granddaughter's eyes.

Joanna and I spent a weekend with our daughter Molly, her husband, David, and their 4½-month-old daughter, Eleanor. Of course, we soaked up Eleanor's attention. That's why I rode beside her practically every time we got in the car.

During trips, my job was to make sure she enjoyed the journey. So, I leaned over her car seat and sang a stream of silly songs, interrupted by even-sillier banter. Every time I convinced her to coo, I felt as if I won a goofy-grandparenting gold medal. Amidst silliness, I noticed how Eleanor watched as I prattled.

On closer inspection, I realized she wasn't just looking at me in general. She was studying my mouth, intently paying attention to how my lips, teeth and tongue move. She's teaching herself to talk, and before we know it, she'll get there. (Just imagine how smart we would be if we learned as much every year as we learned our first year.)

Focus on the other person

Eleanor doesn't understand my words and can't form her own, but she's learned the first principle of listening: Focus on the other person.

This requires discipline, as well as hard work. It means holding the other person in front of your attention and moving yourself to the back. It means zeroing in on what the other is saying and, sometimes, not saying. And it means placing the purpose of the conversation on the other person and not yourself.

Tom Yorton, CEO of the Second City Works improvisational troupe, knows listening is vital for success—in his business, comedy, as well as in all kinds of relationships. In [an interview](#) on the Big Think website, Yorton says: “If you want to become a better listener, probably the single most important thing you can do, or the best thing you can do, is ... listen to understand as opposed to just listening merely to respond.”

Keep your hand off the buzzer

Unfortunately, we often treat conversations as if we're a game-show contestant, Yorton adds. “Halfway through what another person's saying,

we've got our hand on the buzzer ready to complete the answer. ... We want to come in with our own response, usually to redirect or control a conversation. And often at that point, that halfway and beyond point, we lose vital information."

So, good listening involves suspending our own agenda in favor of the other's purpose. If we're not trying to direct the conversation or impress, we're free to follow her train of thought. And when we do, we gain vital information.

Sometimes, we listen well by asking helpful questions. Diane Millis, a business consultant and author of [*Deepening Engagement: Essential Wisdom for Listening and Leading with Purpose, Meaning and Joy*](#), parses the questions that often crop up in conversations.

Among unhelpful questions are those that comprise "just another form of telling," Millis insists in an interview posted on the [Faith and Leadership website](#). Rather than draw out the other's thinking, these questions telegraph what we think. For example, she cites, "Have you thought about using this approach instead?" as the kind of question that suggests only one "correct" answer.

Other unhelpful questions are so conventional, they treat people like Pez candy dispensers, she says. "With each subsequent question, I pop out another prefabricated Pez tablet. All the while, the energy in my container, along with my engagement in the conversation, diminishes."

Ask great questions

Great questions are the kind organizational development professor Edgar Schein calls "humble inquiry," Millis contends. Humble inquiry is built upon "the skill and the art of drawing someone out, of asking questions to which you do not already know the answer, of building a relationship based on curiosity and interest in the other person."

Humble inquiry asks open-ended questions. It listens closely and follows up with related questions. It asks “how, what, where, when, in what ways ... or tell me more about ...,” she observes.

Christians, of all people, ought to be great conversationalists. Jesus taught us to put others first and ourselves last. He praised humility, meekness, selflessness and care for others. When we incorporate those qualities into our conversation, we show respect for others, and we learn from them. In so doing, we build the foundations for relationships that heal churches, marriages, families, friendships, businesses and communities.