

Listening Opens Door to Reconciliation

VORP Newsletter, June 1998

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Have you ever noticed that arguments get louder and louder? The reason for this is because each of the participants in the argument are subconsciously aware that the other is not listening to them and speaking louder, or shouting, in hopes that the other will listen. If, when, you find yourself in another argument, you can prevent this escalation by listening to what the other has to say. This isn't an easy thing to do and highly unlikely unless you have prepared yourself. In fact, even when you have prepared, it is likely that after an incident you will come to the recognition, "I could have tried out listening." If you try it, you will find that it is surprising to the other person. The voice volume will come down and after they are sure you have listened to them, you will be in a position to invite changing the argument into problem solving. To do that, of course, you need to know a few strategies for constructive problem solving. The VORP Peacemaking Model is one strategy and there are others you can add to your conflict management tool box. What I want to focus on in this article is listening. You will find that all constructive conflict management tools include listening.

In the argument mentioned above, you know they disagree with you. So, to some extent, you did listen. But the kind of listening necessary to lead to constructive problem solving and healing of injuries, requires more. Following are some ideas I have borrowed from David Augsburger:

1. Decide that you want to hear what the other has to say. This can be very hard when you disagree with what they are saying or if they have offended you. It is also true that you will be in a much better position to suggest something constructive if you know what they want and why they want it or why they are doing something. It doesn't mean that you have a feeling of warmth for them or that you are too weak to shout back. It means that you have decided to control yourself and that you have remembered your commitment to be constructive (this is the best translation for agape love).
2. Don't judge immediately. Try to understand what they are saying from their point of view. This doesn't mean that you will never judge or evaluate what you are hearing. It means that you will first try to see it the way they see it and to feel it the way they feel it. This requires some very conscious effort. You are in this incident or argument because you have different thoughts and feelings and you really think if they would just see it the way you see it, then you wouldn't even be having this disagreement, conflict or argument. It means giving yourself permission to explore the possibility that just maybe there might be another way of looking at it that is different from how you see it. It requires accepting the idea that I might not be the sole possessor of the truth. It just might be that my truth, as I understand and feel it might not be the whole truth.
3. Use nonverbal ways to let them know you are open to hearing their thoughts and feelings. This is essential and very complex. It is essential because if our bodies tell the

other person that we really don't want to listen, they won't tell us as much. For example, for some rubbing the back of your neck subconsciously conveys the meaning that what the other one is saying is a pain in the neck and I don't really want to hear it. It is complex because so much of it is done subconsciously. It is especially complex in cross-cultural situations. We all are part of several cultures. Part of what this means is that we know certain things that others of our same culture know, without being told. It might include meanings attached to words, symbols, dress, etc. It also includes meanings attached to body movements or gestures. By definition, when you cross cultures, you don't know all of these meanings. So, the best we can do is to be authentic and honest in really wanting to hear and allow our bodies to convey this to the person we want to listen to. If there is confusion, talk about the confusion and you just might have the great experience of learning a meaning from another culture.

4. Check it out to see if you have understood by summarizing or restating the other person's most important thoughts and feelings. Leave the focus on them. This is a serious attempt to find out if what you heard is what they meant. So it is important that you don't say it in a tone that conveys that now I know what you have said better than you do. Sometimes it happens that you did get the right words but the meaning that the speaker was trying to convey didn't get through with those words so the speaker might want to change the words. I either just start my summary with no lead in at all or use the short lead in, "you said.....?" and then in my own words trying to catch the meaning of their words and the accompanying feeling, when appropriate. I use a tone which conveys that this statement is really a question. It is intended to invite them to modify part or all of it or to confirm what I know so far and to go on and clarify or add to it. I prefer no lead in or the "you said...?" because the intent is to leave the focus on them. I think that using a longer lead in like, "What I think I heard you saying was....?" changes the focus from them to me.

5. Don't advise, judge, analyze, bring up similar feelings, or ask questions? All of these responses change the focus from them to me. These may all be appropriate responses at other times. We often think that to get more information from another person we need to ask questions. This is certainly one option. I have also found that by following the first four steps I usually learn more and at deeper levels than if I ask questions. Because of this I feel it is essential to make the following request. *Please do not use these techniques unless you are committed to being constructive with the person you are listening to.* Because they will tell you more and at deeper levels, it is unethical to use this technique unless you intend to use this information for constructive (for you and them) problem solving and efforts toward restoration and reconciliation.

Following are some examples of the difference it makes when we decide to really listen. I teach several classes in the Master of Arts program in Conflict Management and Peacemaking in the Graduate School at Fresno Pacific University. In one of the courses for teachers, a requirement of the class is to use a skill or strategy presented in class during the time before the next class session and write a reflection on the experience. Following are some quotes from teachers who experienced what we often call Active Listening.

In a conflict situation with a service provider: “While I did not get exactly what I thought I wanted at first, I did feel good when we finished. I felt that I had been in control of myself instead of becoming angry and unproductive. I think if I had approached this situation in the manner that I would have prior to taking this class, the outcome would not have been the same. I probably would have alienated him further and then he may not have been willing to send the money and we would have had to take him to court. I was quite happy that I could take the concepts from this class and apply them in this situation.”

In a conflict with a student over a confiscated note: “It was disconcerting for me when I read the note. I decided this might be a time to listen. Instead of asking questions and trying to probe into the reasons why she had written the note, I just let the student talk. I restated things that she said and checked my understanding so that I was clear about what I had heard. It amazing to me how much this student revealed about herself while I listened. She disclosed many things which I am certain she would not have told me if she’d felt as if I was trying to elicit information from her. Because of this conversation, I am in a better position to help her work though some of the issues in her life that I would not otherwise have had the opportunity to do.”

Sitting on a bus with a co-worker: “We began talking about our families. She was sharing some concerns and delights about her 14 year old son. I immediately began to relate some things about my son at that age. The conversation was now about me and she stopped talking. I felt bad. She tried again with another concern. This time I was determined to listen. I restated some of her feelings, and she talked on and on. It felt really good to really be there to listen to her. I know our relationship is closer than before.”

Husband telling about a bad banking experience. Husband and wife had disagreed about which bank to approach first. “I could tell by the look on his face that he had something to tell me and that it was not good. I decided to listen. It was about the bank. I wanted to say ‘See, we should have used my bank’ but I didn’t. I decided to give him 100% of my attention, try to see it from his point of view, and check it out to see if I understood him. I didn’t frown at him or show him any kind of disappointment. I truly listened to the situation and reminded myself of the times I had insisted on something and it hadn’t turned out for the best. When he finished we discussed some options and soon agreed on our next steps. He did not need my smart remarks about his choice in banks. He has already tormented over it all day. It was refreshing to have a touchy situation not become overheated and I think he appreciated my constructiveness. I will definitely use this more often.”

“On Tuesday morning I made a conscious effort to really ‘listen’ when anybody spoke to me. I listened with my eyes, my facial expressions, with feedback and body language. My children were first. When they talked to me I stopped everything I was doing. I discovered that when I actively listened they felt loved and were more content with themselves. I listened to their entire question before responding and they were more

accepting of my answers. There even seemed to be more harmony between them. When my husband would talk I would let him continue until he was finished before I interjected my own thoughts. This was more difficult. I could tell he liked it. At school I actively listened to any story, concern, or opinion that a student or teacher wanted to share. I felt really good. I felt more relaxed. Let me tell you, it was not always easy for me to let people finish what they were saying. Actually, I found that most people didn't even want my opinions, they just wanted me to listen. When I think about it, the people I like to talk to are those who really listen. I liked this exercise and I am going to make a conscious effort to keep listening!"