LISTENING opens door to reconciliation

by Ron Claassen

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, 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 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 Peace Making 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:

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 effective (this is the best translation for agape love).

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 it and feel it might not be the whole truth.

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 car. He was angry that I was not being held financially responsible by the courts for my part in this. I was glad I wasn’t having to pay but I really hoped my brother and his friend would pay enough to fix the car.

There are a couple of things I wish this man knew. One is that when I started to earn money I gave some to my brother to help with the bills toward the car. The second thing I wish he knew is how much my life changed because of meeting with him. I saw firsthand what my actions did to someone. I hope that this man is not still upset because of what we did.

“My probation officer helped a lot. He got me set up with the Boys & Gits Club and this later led to a job with them for a year. I still work with youth today. I was asked if there was anything he wished he could have continued meeting. The man said he could sue me when I was eighteen if he didn’t get his money. It never happened, but when we went to buy a home I was concerned this person might show up out of nowhere. I also realize cars now as I don’t want to have the chance to meet this man again, maybe even to enjoy the hobby together.”

“Now days, hearing about the same stuff with kids, if really hits home. I see a lot of kids go through the system and I think they change and they don’t get regular jobs. Even today some of my old friends are still not doing much or some worse. We need to teach children to know for themselves that it is not right to steal or instill harm on another. I do what I can at home, and then with the youth and people at my church. Its here I find God’s love for me and others. When God’s peace is in my heart I can be more peaceful with others.”

“I am sorry for what this man had to go through. I hope that this man did not lose interest in his hobby because of what happened. Although he was really mad, I think he did this for more than just to get his money. I think he wanted to help me.”

“VORP is a great way to handle things.
Students in conflict management program learn value of listening

Continued from page 1

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.

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. Either just start your summary with no lead in at all or use the short lead in, “you said...” and then in your own words try 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 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 you said was...?” changes the focus from them to me.

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 asked 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 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, the 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.

“I did not get exactly what I thought I wanted at first; I felt 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 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 amazed 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 through 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 of that age. The conversation was 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. I felt really good to really be there to listen to her. I know our relationship is closer now.”

Husband telling about a bad banking experience.

“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 husband was quite happy that I could take the hints and we were more content with ourselves. I listened to their entire question before responding and they were more accepting of my answers. There even seemed to be more harmony between us. When my husband did talk 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. These even seemed to be more harmony between us. When my husband would talk to me, I stopped everything until he was finished before I intersected 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.”

©1998 Ron Claassen. Any portion of this newsletter may be reprinted. Please acknowledge source and send us a copy of the reprint.

Victim Offender Reconciliation Program
2529 Willow Avenue • Clovis, CA 93612 • (209) 291-1120

Non-Profit Org. U.S. Postage PAID
Clovis, CA 93612 Permit 376

Next VORP Volunteer Mediator Training: September 10, 17 & 24
Call 209-291-1120 for Details