

Jim's Tool Box

Listening: How Effective Are Your Listening Skills in Leading a Group?

Later this month, I will be one of the instructors in the Advanced Course in Lay Speaking that the Capitol Area South Board of Laity is offering. The class is entitled "Lay Speakers Lead Small Groups." Leading small groups is one of the many ministries in which lay speakers can use their gifts and skills in ministry in a local church setting.

Most of us whether pastors or laity spend a fair amount of time in small group settings whether it is a Bible study, a sharing or accountability group, a committee or team meeting, or a staff meeting. Pastors and persons in lay leadership are often expected to lead these small group meeting. Most of us can do a more effective job of leading in these group settings.



While preparing to teach the sections of the class that I will lead, I found some helpful information that I think all of us could use. In the student book for this course *The Christian Small-Group Leader* (the book is available through the Upper Room Book Store by clicking [HERE](#)), a section in chapter six discusses the role of spiritual leaders in facilitating listening. The author, Thomas Hawkins, discusses eight tools to facilitate listening in small groups. I was familiar with some of these techniques, but others were new to me. So I thought I would share these in this edition of the Tool Box.

- **Paraphrasing** – This is probably the basic listening skill which I am most familiar. Thomas Hawkins says that it is the foundation for most other facilitative listening skills. Paraphrasing helps people think aloud. It allows people to judge whether others understand their ideas. When folks express themselves in convoluted ways, paraphrasing helps them focus on the central idea. Participants feel heard when someone paraphrases their ideas. We often preface a paraphrase with comments like, "Let me see if I'm understanding you..." or "I hear you saying..."
- **Mirroring** – This skill is a more formal version of paraphrasing, Hawkins notes, "Rather than paraphrase what the speaker says we repeat his or her words exactly." A single sentence can be mirrored verbatim. If a speaker makes a longer statement, then we repeat exact key words or phrases. The objective is to use the speaker's own words, not ours. Hawkins suggests that mirroring is particularly helpful in new groups. When participants lack trust in each other or are unsure of the leader's objectivity, repeating a speaker's exact words builds trust.

- **Drawing out** – Hawkins points out that leaders use this skill when group members are having a difficult time understanding a speaker’s basic idea. The leader paraphrases the speaker’s statement and then asks an open-ended, non-directive question: “Can you say more about that?” Or “When you say ... what do you mean?”

- **Stacking** – This skill in small group facilitation is helpful when several persons want to speak, but they are unsure if they will be recognized. They will compete over who will speak next. Hawkins notes that this competition usually expresses itself as impatience with other speakers. He points out that if we are waiting urgently to speak our mind, we are not listening to what others say. Hawkins writes, “Stacking helps participants take turns rather than all try to speak at once. Stacking lets everyone know they will have an opportunity to speak.” Stacking also helps the leader avoid the charge of favoritism or bias.

According to Hawkins, there are four steps in stacking:

 1. The leader announces the topic and asks everyone to raise their hands if they wish to speak.
 2. The leader assigns numbers to each person. The number indicates the order in which they will speak.
 3. The leader calls on each person in the announced order.
 4. The leader asks if anyone else wants to speak. If so a second round of stacking is announced and the process repeats itself.

- **Tracking** – Thomas Hawkins writes that in many groups, various strands of thought are developing within a single conversation. As a result, the dialogue becomes fragmented. Focus is lost. Speakers become frustrated because other members are ignoring or overlooking their comments. Tracking allows participants to see that several aspects of a single topic are being confounded, that all are equally important, and that all can receive an equal hearing. Steps in the tracking process include:
 1. Summarize the various strands of conversation.
 2. Ask if this analysis is correct. Have strands been omitted?
 3. Propose a sequence for tracking each strand separately.
 4. Confirm or negotiate this sequence with the group.
 5. Take each strand in the order agreed upon.

- **Making space** – All groups have some members who are less verbally skilled than others. When a conversation picks up its pace, members who are less verbal or think more slowly may feel left out. Newer members may also have difficulty joining the conversation. Hawkins reminds us that these quiet, less verbal members often need someone to create an open space where they feel free to contribute. Some examples of space-opening comments include:
 - Who else has an idea to share?
 - Can we hear from someone who has not spoken yet?

Sometimes a leader may be more specific by offering a quiet member the opportunity to speak. If the group has a few very vocal members, the leader can provide a structured opportunity to speak. "Let's go around the circle and give every person a chance to speak if they want to."

- **Balancing** – Hawkins notes that the first few speakers in a conversation will frequently set the direction for what follows. A leader may wish to balance the discussion by asking for alternative views that have not yet been expressed. Balancing invites those with a minority viewpoint to express themselves. It communicates hospitality. It conveys that everyone's contribution is welcomed. Here are some examples of balancing questions:
 - Does everyone agree with this?
 - What do some of the rest of you think?
 - It might be helpful to hear from someone who has a different perspective.

- **Intentional silence** – Hawkins says that silence is sometimes the best prescription for listening. Intentional silence allows quiet members to collect their thoughts so they are better prepared to speak. It permits tentative participants to decide if they are ready to share something risky or threatening. It gives verbal members time to get in touch with what they are really feeling or thinking. Silence is not a time to think about new ideas. It is instead a time of focusing down and centering. The silence may last no longer than a few seconds or it can continue for several minutes. Hawkins writes that silence is one of the most effective tools available. Yet it is frequently underutilized. He points out that since silence is so rare in our noisy world, leaders may want to give participants concrete instructions on how to engage in silence:
 - Focus on your breathing, letting go of your own thoughts as you breathe out and praying for insight and awareness as you inhale.
 - Focus on an object in the room: a candle, an icon, a cross. Let the mind quiet itself and the body relax.

How many of these tools in facilitating listening in a small group have you used? I would challenge/encourage you to try some of these techniques in a group you lead. Using these strategies helps to strengthen the trust levels and the depth of experience that persons have in a group when they sense that they are valued members of the group.