

Icebreaker: Gestures

Let members speak without saying a word. *Tami Rudkin*

Ask your group a series of questions that they must respond to by the following gestures. If their answer to your question is "yes," they are to respond with two thumbs up. If their answer is "no," they must respond with two thumbs down. If their answer is "I don't know or don't care," have them cross their arms. This is fun in a group because everyone is participating at once and you learn all kinds of things about people in a few minutes. Following the discussion, ask them if they would have learned more if they had answered vocally. Then take a moment to discuss what it brought to light about their listening skills. Here are some sample of questions you may want to ask—

1. Do you like chocolate?
2. Do you cry at romantic movies?
3. Do you enjoy walking in the rain?
4. Do you like to golf?
5. Do you like to sing?
6. Do you enjoy reading poetry?
7. Does it make you mad to wait in line?
8. Have you ever stolen anything?
9. Do you enjoy exercising?
10. Do you laugh when someone embarrasses himself in front of a crowd?
11. Have you said, "I love you" today?
12. Do you see yourself as a big thinker.
13. Do others see you as confident and bold?
14. Have you ever dreamed of being famous?
15. Do you like barrier breakers?

Hearing Aids for Small-Group Leaders

Why listening is such a valuable tool for those of us in charge. *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 a small group so others will listen to *them*. A good leader acknowledges this need and will use it as a valuable tool to help 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 we 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 listening to me, Dad," Chris said. "Of course I am," Allen shot back. "Then why did you cut me off to talk about the price of gas?" This is a reminder of how important it is to be *all* ears when someone 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 if you are with them or off somewhere in lala land.

If you are a male, note that in a recent study conducted by universities in Arizona, Texas, and Washington, psychologists recorded 400 students of both genders over a 7-year period. The data concluded that men talk about as much as women. But in a mixed setting, "women self-censor while men interrupt a lot because men see conversation as a competition. They will interrupt and talk over others to get air space because if you get air space, you're the 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*, Robert Gerzon says, "Anxiety interferes with relationships making it harder to listen and 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—it may be best for you and your members if you take a sabbatical from your group until the storm passes. 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 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 feels 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 challenging if one 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."

Having a Good Cry

Learn to deal honestly and openly with your group's emotions. *Brooke Collison*

At one time or another, small-group members will likely hear this statement: "I can't talk about that; I might cry." If a group is functioning well and has reached a reasonable level of maturity, the tears of a member will be as acceptable in the group as the laughter or smiles of a shared joy. Unfortunately, reaching the point where tears are acceptable is difficult for most groups. In part, this is because it is not okay for many of us to cry at all—alone or with others.

Understanding Strong Emotions

One group skill or task is to learn to deal openly and honestly with emotion, both your own and others'. For example, at some point in the growing process, have your group devote a session to discussing questions like "When do I cry?" or "What do I do when I'm about to cry?" This is because talking about crying is easier than crying in front of others. In this discussion, you may also want to cover the question "What do I do when someone else cries?"

We learned lessons as children about crying (or any strong emotion). What does it show? What does it mean? What happens to us when we do cry? Those lessons will

usually be found alive and well in our adulthood. Your small group will no doubt discover different triggers and meanings of tears for men and women, for example.

Responses to strong emotion will likely provide you with material for several discussions. The corollary discussions about how we respond when someone else cries (or yells or hits or walks away from trouble) will be equally productive.

Addressing Strong Emotions

Crying is not the only strong emotion to be expressed in a group. Anger, fear, guilt, joy, and sadness will be present from time to time. How the group deals with strong emotions says a lot about its nature and maturity. The guidelines for working with strong emotions are as follows:

Listen to the emotion being expressed.

Don't change the subject to avoid the strong emotion.

Name the emotion as you hear it.

Don't tell a person, "You shouldn't feel that way."

Accept the speaker's emotion without saying you feel worse, better, or the same.

Use your own emotions to try and understand the speaker and to communicate your understanding without taking away from anything that he or she is saying.

Examining what you do in the presence of strong feelings is important in understanding how to respond to other people who are expressing emotions. If you know that you usually shy away from emotion, being quiet and listening to another may require extra effort. If you know that your tendency is to leap in and make other people feel better when they are in emotional pain, then it is important to figure out why you must do that and then intentionally work to let other people express their feelings without you taking over and changing their direction.

These are important topics to discuss with other group members. For example, you can say something like, "When I see someone struggling with his emotions, I have this strong urge to jump in and make everything okay for him."

Let the group members know how you react, find out how they react, and discover what the best processes are for your group.