

Good Questions Show Good Listening

Learn to understand people and help them understand themselves.

by *Doug Self* | posted 9/21/2007

According to Robert L. Montgomery, author of *Listening Made Easy*, the ten most common characteristics of a good listener are:

1. Looks at me while I'm speaking.
2. Questions me to clarify what I'm saying.
3. Shows concern by asking questions about my feelings.
4. Repeats some things I say.
5. Doesn't rush me.
6. Is poised and emotionally controlled.
7. Responds with a nod of the head, a smile, or a frown.
8. Pays close attention.
9. Doesn't interrupt me.
10. Keeps on the subject until I've finished my thoughts.

I'm impressed that two of the top three characteristics have to do with the ability to ask questions. A good listener, it seems, is also someone who asks good questions. So over the years I've worked on asking good questions—ones that keep the discussion on target and help me know more about the person with whom I talk.

Subject-Changing Questions

In a small group, there simply isn't time for everyone to conduct a lengthy conversation. So sometimes, when it seems appropriate, a leader must gently nudge the conversation toward spiritual concerns. That must be done naturally and non-intrusively, of course. A good rule of thumb is to change the subject only when others begin to run out of steam on their original topic.

For example, John is excitedly telling me about a remodeling project, going into great detail. I grow restless and want to get on to spiritual matters. While he's between sentences, I may be tempted to insert, "That's great, John. But how's the remodeling of your Christian life going?" That would be jolting and inappropriately timed. If I can't gracefully move the conversation along, then I'd just as soon hear people out on subjects that are dear to them.

At the right time, however, directive questions can link spiritual matters to the person's subject of conversation. For example, if the other person is talking about childhood, I might ask, "What memories of church do you have from childhood?"

Subject-Probing Questions

I use gentle, subject-probing questions to discover background, feelings, attitudes, interests, questions, and needs. These questions help people focus on the subject under discussion. They allow people to sort through their experiences and analyze their reasons and feelings. They also help me learn key facts.

These questions are not that difficult to formulate. I simply ask, in one form or another, the classic journalistic questions: "Who?" "What?" "When?" "Where?" "Why?" and "How?" For example, if I'm talking with someone who expresses hostility about something, I might ask one or more of the following:

1. "When did you begin to feel this way?"
2. "What experience has most influenced you to feel this way?"
3. "Why do you think you responded that way to that experience?"
4. "Who has been helpful to you in this situation?"
5. "Where do you think all this is heading?"
6. "How have you tried to handle this so far?"

Such questions help me understand people and help people understand themselves. As a result, people often discover previously hidden inconsistencies or underlying assumptions.

Discuss:

1. Which signs of a good listener do you demonstrate well? Which need improvement?
2. How long should a leader allow the group to discuss trivial things before changing the subject to deeper matters?
3. In which group situations would subject-probing questions work well?

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