

Learning Deep Listening Skills: Beginning Strategies

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This article is co-written by Rev. Simpson and Dr. Gero and grew out of their many stimulating conversations. At the beginning of each change of voice, they indicate who wrote the thoughts that follow.

Anne

This article is about Deep Listening and what we know about helping Small Group Ministry members develop these skills. The key for getting the most from our Small Group Ministry is deep listening. Since most members do not come to our groups with the skill to listen deeply, how do we engage them in learning these techniques?

I began our inquiry by examining the SGM Network website and was delighted to discover a series of three articles on “Deep Sharing and Deep Listening” by Alicia Hawkins and Susan Hollister that reported the results of a survey conducted in 2012.

Article I describes structural and functional elements that serve to enable deep sharing: Clear Program Guidelines, A Safe Space, Facilitators Setting the Tone, Covenant Criteria, An Atmosphere of Trust and Openness, and Compelling Topics.

Article II identifies ways to increase deep sharing and listening. Learning to listen with our hearts instead of our minds and learning to deepen the silence are both described as centrally important. Along with that, obstacles such as judgment and side talking can get in the way of deep listening. The article closes by naming a wide variety of factors that shape group dynamics.

Article III focuses on meeting structure, showcasing key elements for new members, and ways to support facilitators with initial training and on-going meetings.

A major finding from this study overall is that structural and environmental conditions that make the climate/culture more conducive to using deep listening are very important to supporting the success of small group ministry.

It is my recommendation that all SGM Programs include these three articles from the website and add them to your training manuals. These data provide invaluable information from 34 Covenant Group/SGM programs nationwide. The patterns reported offer basic tenants that collectively can serve to nurture deep listening.

Aija

I, like most 21st century Americans, am a multi-tasking machine. It begins when I roll out of bed and start checking email on my phone while brushing my teeth and goes straight through to bedtime: when I am checking my e-mail and while I brush my teeth. Despite every study that suggests that we aren't actually as good at multi-tasking as we think we are (really, we aren't) the temptation is difficult to resist. Tell the truth: when was the last time you *didn't* work through lunch?

In our busy lives we have to deploy the four listening types at the top of the chart in Table 1 (below). We simply don't have time to focus all of our attention on what someone is saying, let alone the deeper

meaning that might be underneath what they are saying. The world moves entirely too quickly and we have entirely too many distractions and I hate to tell you this: it is only going to get worse. This isn't really good or bad - it just is. Cell phones at the table aren't going anywhere and conversations that are interrupted by a text message every 5 minutes are going to continue to be the norm.

All of this is to say that in this loud, busy distracted world that we live in – deep listening is often not the norm. In SGM we come together and for one hour we do just one thing. We listen. We listen with all of our hearts and all of our souls. We don't check our e-mail and we don't focus on our to-do list. We don't even think about how we might respond – that too is a distraction.

We simply listen as deeply and as empathically as we can. In our modern world that is a revolutionary act.

To give all of your attention to one task is a skill and it is not one that many of us practice much anymore. It takes practice and training to learn how to focus deeply on one person's words. In the next section, Anne will present some strategies that help people to appreciate the importance of and begin to implement deep listening. Once someone learns how to listen empathically in a small group, this is a skill they take into the world. This skill is not just listening deeply but learning to focus and to let yourself be the object of focus. It is a heady and rare thing to have all of someone's attention. It can take as much practice to learn to be deeply listened to as it does to deeply listen. We must practice allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to truly share. Yet it is only in this **true sharing that we can see the truth of our lives.**

To listen deeply and to share deeply are not activities that are prized in our busy, surface focused world. And so the church and our small group ministry programs do what churches have always done. We hold dominant culture in the light and we say "look, there is another way". Deep listening is one of those ways.

Anne

I am so excited about Aija's remarks about deep listening. It is one of the most comprehensive "essays" about the complexity of the subject – done in such a coherent way. I will now build upon this to move into how this foundation requires a variety of learning activities.

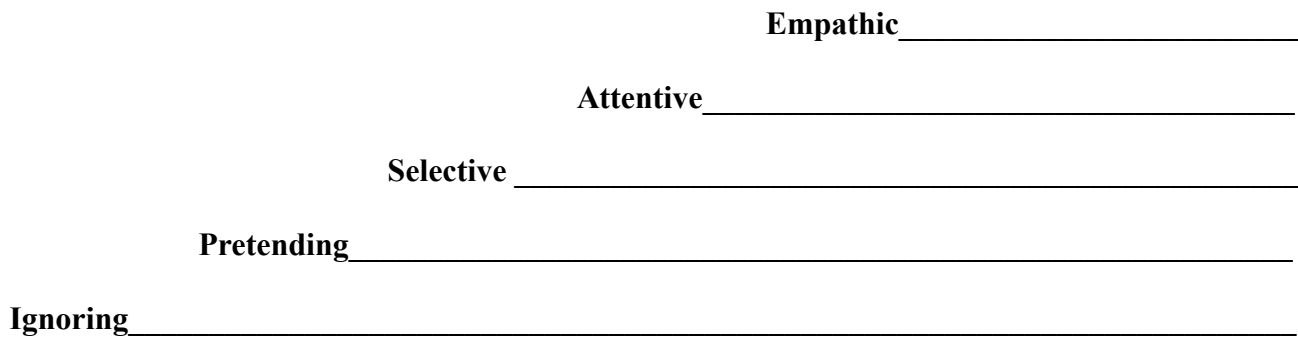
One of my passions is to identify ways that help learners grasp something that has been seen as foreign or, in their minds, impossible. My career has been in teaching graduate social work students, then later undergraduate social work students. Throughout my formal career, I also enjoyed developing training for a wide variety of people.

I tell you this, because I have retired – but I have not lost that passion. Now I focus on challenges in Small Group Ministry. In this section I offer a way to engage members in understanding what gets in their way of moving towards deep listening.

Strategy one: A volunteer has agreed to talk about a very difficult current situation for 10 -15 minutes. This experience is designed to help members get a sense of their baseline listening patterns. After listening, we would first discuss how this was for each of them as listeners. Encourage them to say what seemed easy to understand and what seemed difficult. What obstacles were in their way of understanding the speaker? What did they think the speaker wanted them to identify about what was really going on?

Strategy two: Introduce the Listening Continuum developed by Stephen Covey, author of many books about leadership. Using his model, I suggest that group members use the concepts in the next listening experience to better understand what their patterns of listening are now. The difference is that there is a framework of “kinds of listening” that we can use to determine where members are starting from. This will serve as a way for them to set some goals for further growth and development.

Table 1: Covey’s Listening Continuum



Strategy Three: Have another presentation or play a recording and ask members to listen and pay attention to what kinds of listening they were doing according to the Listening Continuum. Process listening by Listener Categories. For example, which of the categories of listening did you use most often? Which did you not use at all? Were you listening with your heart rather than your head?

Move to Table 2 and examine what your patterns of understanding were in this activity. Remember, this is a learning process. All of us will probably find that we have much to learn.

Table 2: Covey Listener Categories Elaborated by Understanding and Explanations

Listener	Understanding?	Explanation
Ignoring	Not much	No content or Process
Pretending	Very Little	None
Selective	Moderate	Listens for criteria only
Attentive	Good recall but only from what is said	Does not pay attention to nonverbal
Empathic	Overall competency	Hears the spoken & recognizes nonverbal cues

In closing, we ask that you see this exercise as a beginning for understanding and learning new ways of listening and be able to expand and enhance your listening skills. Our ultimate goal is to be able to better hear others, hear ourselves, and to be listened to.

As Aija said so clearly:

“Once someone learns how to listen empathically in a small group, this is a skill they take into the world. This skill is not just listening deeply but learning to focus and to let yourself be the object of focus. It is a heady and rare thing to have all of someone’s attention. It can take as much practice to learn to be deeply listened to as it does to deeply listen. We must practice allowing ourselves to be vulnerable enough to share truly. Yet it is only in this true sharing that we can see the truth of our lives.”

These wise words help us see what we can achieve if we work together in small group ministry. While it is a noble destination, it is important to not get overwhelmed by the journey. We can do this if we make a commitment to help each other in the process.

We are hoping that many of you who read this article will respond to us and let us know what some of your ways are of helping others to listen. What approaches do you use in your training? Perhaps we can continue to share strategies that will help us all have more resources for our SGM/Covenant Group processes. May it be so.

References:

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-Taken from the Small Group Ministry Network Journal, Spring 2015