

Hearing Aids for Small-Group Leaders

Be There

We have a small group that meets once a week to further explain and apply the sermon from our church that was presented the Sunday before. During one of our meetings, Jane began telling the group about some recent problems with her job. Another woman in our group, Gloria, interrupted Jane and complimented her on the color of her blouse. Jane quietly said thank you, obviously thrown off, but continued with her story.

Jane later approached me and described her hurt feelings that were a result of Gloria's interruption. I assured her that Gloria probably didn't mean any harm.

"I just didn't feel important," she said. "I don't want to talk if I feel like I am boring people enough to not listen."

This example shows how important it is to be *all* ears when another person 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 whether you are with them or off somewhere in la-la land.

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*, Psychotherapist Robert Gerzon noted that "anxiety interferes with human relationships ... It becomes harder to listen, harder to empathize, when we are wearing anxiety's armor."

When the members in your group are sharing, give them your full attention, and encourage the other members in your group to do the same. Don't let your hardships cloud your mind when another member is speaking. You are there for each other—not just yourselves. If your members want the group to listen to what they have to say, they need to be sure to hear the other members out in the same respect.

If you are dealing with a severe situation—such as the death of a loved one or marriage problems—seek support in your group. This could be beneficial for both you and your members. When you are vulnerable with your problems, instead of hiding them internally and exhibiting inattentiveness, you become closer with your group, and your group can grow closer to each other. When you show your group that you can discuss serious issues and seek support, this may give members the ability to share their hardships when they didn't otherwise feel comfortable. Your group will begin to become a place for support and close friendship.

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 easily 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 members feel 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 especially challenging when one group 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."

from an article by Cathy Mogus