

The Art of Good Listening – Three Steps to Doing it Well

Article from the “Communicating with Passion” website at

<http://www.homestead.com/uziteaches/articles.html>

Good listening is one of the best and most loving gifts that we can offer to another person. This is especially true when somebody is hurt or upset about something and shares it with us.

All too often, in spite of our good intentions, we find ourselves responding to others in ways that are not effective. Here are three principles that help us to respond with compassion and effectiveness when people share their feelings with us.

1. **Listen with openness, not judgment.** The first thing that people need when they share something that hurts or upsets them is a sense that it is safe to talk. That means that when they tell us what happened or how they are feeling, we will not judge, criticize, shame or blame them. This is what allows them to trust us and feel safe opening up.

That we don't judge does not mean that we have no sense of right and wrong. What it does mean is that we put that aside and listen with compassionate ears. It is to focus on the heart that is sharing its hurt with us, rather than on our sense of right/wrong.

2. **The key is the feelings and needs.** The second thing that people want, after a sense of safety, is for their experience, and especially their feelings, to be understood. This is because the key to any situation is how the person feels about it. This attempt to understand how another is feeling in a given situation, and doing so with no criticism or judgment, is called "empathy."

One excellent way to express empathy is to reflect back to the person what we imagine the experience was like. There is an art to doing this that is hard to convey in a short article; in my Communicating with Compassion course we spend the first four sessions on this.

That having been said, here is a simple example:

If somebody is sharing with us a story about how she was ridiculed for asking a certain question, we might ask ourselves how we feel when we are ridiculed. We would then reflect that feeling back and see if this indeed is how she felt. We might say, "So you felt embarrassed and humiliated." It is of course important to say this in a gentle tone and a caring way.

It is remarkable how often a simple reflection of feelings, when done with no judgment or criticism, creates an initial sense of relief. It also tends to open the speaker's heart to share more of the experience. She might add that she was going to be with these people for the next 10 hours, and was concerned that they might ridicule her again. To which we might respond, "So you were feeling unsafe."

This might go on for a few rounds. If we stay with reflecting feelings, with no judgment or criticism, and only a desire to understand the other's experience, the result will often be a sense of deep relief and the ability to arrive at a sense of resolution.

3. **Wait before offering advice.** We often have ideas and information that might be helpful to the other. And yet, it is very important to first understand and reflect the feelings, and only then to offer advice. When people are upset, what they need first, before anything else, is empathy. Only after the feelings have been heard and acknowledged are people ready for advice. Offering advice before that point might be well intentioned but is in fact misguided. It could easily result in people being irritated or hurt.

(For an excellent introduction to the art of empathy, see "The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People," by Stephen Covey, pages 236-260. For a more in-depth discussion, see "A Way of Being," by the great psychologist Carl Rogers.)

The Art of Giving Advice: Three Steps to Doing it Well

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Giving good advice is a great gift. Yet, we sometimes run into trouble because of the way we offer it. The ability to give advice in a positive, constructive way is an art. Here are three points to help us offer advice with effectiveness and compassion.

1. **Listen first.** While this rule is true for all good communication, it is doubly true when we wish to give advice. Issues are often more complex than they initially appear. By first listening, we open a space for the speaker to more fully describe the situation and for us to more fully understand it. What is the point of offering advice based on partial information?

In addition, when we listen first, it makes it more likely that the other will then listen to what we have to say. In the words of Dr. Marshall Rosenberg, one needs "connection before correction." It is empathic listening that establishes the connection.

2. **Ask permission.** Unsolicited advice is a major cause of grief among friends and family members. It can be experienced as unwelcome intrusion into personal business. It might also be seen disrespectful, as implying that a person is incapable of caring for himself and resolving his own issues.

Asking if our advice is desired shows respect for others and prevents resentments. Here is one way to do this: "As I listen to you, there are some ideas coming up for me that you might find useful. Would you like to hear them?" It is very important to ask that question without attachment, from a place that both "yes" and "no" are equally acceptable responses.

3. **Offer without insisting.** It is worth keeping in mind that even after we have listened, we can never know with certainty what is best for another person. There is so much that we are not aware of. So we offer our insights, experiences and ideas, with the attitude that our advice is another point of view, and we trust the listener's inner wisdom to discern what is right for him or her.

Giving advice is like a waiter in a fine restaurant who holds out a dessert tray and says to the patron, "here, if you wish," and the diner takes what is right for him. This has a practical advantage, as well. By not insisting, we increase the chances of our words being considered.