

The Art of Listening to People & Asking Good Questions

by Garry Miller

Listening to people and asking good questions is most definitely a crucial skill for being a Chi Alpha CareGiver, or for that matter, being a Life or Ministry Coach, or just being a good “disciple-maker.”

Just think about Jesus and the seemingly unlimited archive of stories about Him doing just that! He was awesome at this! He had a way about Him that was so inviting, that again and again, the non-righteous sinner folks, just loved hanging around Him, eating and drinking with Him, and of course listening to Him. But, one of the reasons they listened to Him, was that He first listened to them. They were made to feel so important, so precious, when they were with Him.

Sincerely listening to someone does that. It takes time and patience. It requires attention being put on the other person, rather than on me, and what I want out of the conversation.

And we all know that one person, who starts out listening intently to your great story of what you did, only to abruptly interrupt you with their, “Yeah, Yeah, I had a similar thing happen to me” as they proceed to “one-up you.”

Not everyone can wear the badge “Good Listener.” Most of you can think of someone in your life who really is a good listener. You know, the one you want to connect with if you have something to process or get off your mind. But, usually it’s a short list of names who fit that description.

It doesn’t need to be that way. We can all learn to become better listeners!

It’s a skill. And skills can be taught and learned.

The same is true of knowing how to ask good questions of another that spark connecting communication and in-depth conversation. You may think you’re a lousy conversationalist because you don’t know what to say. There’s hope for you! Because it’s NOT about having lots to say that matters. It’s about asking GOOD questions of others, helping them to open up and share, then practicing the skills of being a good listener. People will love talking with you then.

If you are serving as a XA CareGiver, then you’ve had plenty of experience in Disciple-Making. And you may have discovered that “listening to people” is often the hard part of being a helpful disciple-maker. We think it’s our job to tell them everything we know and we fail to truly communicate. We never really listen to

discover what their real questions are that they are focused on. If we're not careful, we will talk and talk, but not cause any learning to happen.

When wearing the "Disciple-Makers Hat," we may have just been speaking about "forgiveness" and we want to hit scripture and tell them about the obligation we have to forgive. But, all they can think about is the parent or the person who sexually molested them. I've had that scenario occur numerous times, both with guys and girls. Just hearing the scripture doesn't make it go away. They need to hear from God... they need help. We call that stuff "baggage" and baggage is not meant to be carried around indefinitely. It's meant to be temporary in nature, like flying to Buffalo and back for the weekend. They charge you \$25 per bag, each way. The more bags the higher the price. Baggage is very costly! Learn to travel light!

Listening to the person, listening to The Holy Spirit, and asking good questions will help guide individuals into discovery of God's truths and how to implement them into their own lives, with the resulting reduction or elimination of "baggage."

Proverbs 20:5 "Counsel (knowing the right thing to do) in the heart of man is like deep water, but a man of understanding will draw it out." (NKJV)

Now that's an important truth! We want the other person to learn how to hear from God... how to determine right from wrong with confidence... how to find answers. The more they read God's Word, and the more they experience His presence in their lives, the less dependent they will be on you or someone else. You really don't want them to become dependent on you. You are there to lead them to truth and to engage with the Holy Spirit so they can grow into mature believers in every way.

We need to learn to "draw out" of them, from their "deep well," the things they know to be true, and gain confidence in that process. That's also the objective in life and ministry coaching practices... helping them to focus, define what they are looking for, and examine the resources they may already have in their possession, or where to find them.

So, let's talk about some principles to developing good skills in "Asking Questions" first, followed by skills to become "Good Listeners." It sort of flows more naturally that way.

Asking Good Questions:

When you boil it down, there are 2 basic kinds of questions one can ask:

- Open-Ended Questions
- Closed Questions

Open-Ended... Good. Closed... Bad.

Open-ended questions encourage sharing thoughts and ideas. Closed questions are ones that only elicit a “yes” or “no” response.

That’s the typical answers a mother gets from her 16 year old son when trying to figure out what’s going on in his life! Actually it’s more like, “uh” and “nuh.”

Don’t give them the opportunity to “just say no!” Make them think, process, search, and put their own thoughts together.

Remember, often we are trying to draw water out of their ‘deep well – ’get them to bring up the things they know down deep, but haven’t expressed very well.

So, we need to be sure our questions are helpful in stirring their thinking. Again, “CareGiving” just as in “disciple-making” is not about simply telling people all that YOU know.

Good questions are:

“Tell me what are you really happy about in your life right now?”

“Tell me what troubles you most about your life right now?”

“What do you feel you need most right now?”

“Who is the person in your life right now, that is proving to be hard work? What are you thinking you should do? How might you go about that?”

Or, “What would be most useful to you during this conversation we are having?”

Now, having spent time with Jesus already, prior to meeting with anyone, having “listened to God,” you are more likely to be supernaturally prepared to ask good questions. Don’t underestimate that. God wants to use you to help others, to encourage and build them up in their faith. So, the Holy Spirit will often share insights with you about someone or a situation. Maybe lead you to certain scripture that you don’t quite see how it’s all that pertinent to you at the time, but because you’ve listened and took notes, you have the assistance of His leading on your side to help.

In a general sense though, asking questions that begin with:

- Who
- What
- Where
- When
- How

...are wiser choices. Asking “Why” is one you have to be careful how you use.

“Why” is a question that generally implies a sense of “judgment” and can put people on the defensive, or close them up. I think as you develop a deeper more trusting relationship with someone, the “Why” question can be used more as they know your heart. Sometimes just asking, “Tell me more about...” gets the same results as a “Why” questions.

Avoid:

- Complex or Complicated Questions: be concise and clear
- Leading Questions (trying to handle them and maneuver them into something). It’s not very respectful. It’s best to be very honest about what you want to offer them regarding advice, don’t try to manipulate is the point. In fact, it’s good practice to ask permission to offer your advice. Because unsolicited advice is actually often perceived as a criticism. Preferably they will ask you for advice, which makes the whole thing a little safer.
- Left-fielded questions, as they can really take away from getting anywhere. Also known as “Rabbit-Trail” questions.

Listening to People

As I said earlier, Jesus definitely demonstrated His compassion when He listened to people, especially His disciples. Can you imagine... here are the disciples, doing life with Jesus for a couple of years on the road, and Jesus hears them all the time, sharing their thoughts about how things really ought to be... how they think He should manage His growing fame in the land... who should be seated at his side when he takes up his coming throne... and all the time, He is God in the Flesh, dwelling with us, and He patiently listens.

We give the disciples a hard time often when we examine what they did, but how about us? Imagine what our prayers sound like to God way too often? A whole lot a “grip-pin” and “complain-in” trying to gain some heavenly sympathy!

You reflect your Heavenly Father when you demonstrate the patience and kindness to LISTEN to others.

It takes time as well. You can’t be in a hurry. There’s an INVESTMENT you must make of yourself in order to listen.

“Hearing” is not the same as “listening.” It may be close, but someone really knows if you’re “listening” to them, when you are paying close attention to what they are saying and following them.

Appropriate gestures and comments that acknowledge what is being said actually “affirms” I hear you and think it’s important enough to follow.

Asking relevant questions to the conversation, affirms they are being heard as well.

Also, don't be afraid of SILENCE. It's okay to wait for people to think. Let them know it's okay. Don't feel like you have to fill every lull in conversation.

Let's think of some traits that describe POOR LISTENING habits.

Poor Listener

1. Distractions – eyes traveling everywhere but on them. (if in person or via WebVideo)
2. Messing with your Phone or texting.
3. No kind of response or acknowledgement. The dead stare. Or, disconnected feedback that's unrelated.
4. No emotion or tone that is not in keeping with their tone. They are gravely serious and you are "cutting up," having a laugh.
5. Jumping to Judgment before you have listened – Mr. Fix It!

Now how about some traits of a Good LISTENER:

Good Listener

1. Fully Engaged with person & Focused on what they are saying. Avoiding distractions & doing other work. Sure you are busy, but you don't need to prove it to them by multi-tasking when you should be listening.
2. Responds with appropriate emotion & tone in feedback.
3. Doesn't interrupt before they have finished a thought.
4. Demonstrates unselfishness in that they are not making themselves the focus of the conversation. Sure you have much to offer and should, but don't dominate a conversation until you appropriately reach that moment of teaching or sharing of life experience that demonstrates the principle they want to learn.
5. Models a countenance of peace to set people at ease. If you are nervous, distraught, angry, upset, then the focus ends up on you, and the other is distracted. If you are not in a good frame of mind, be honest, tell them and either pray together to put it behind you or reschedule your time together.

Making it normal

So here's the real point. Don't wait until you are in a serious conversation with someone who is in trouble to practice these skills... Practice it now! Practice on your family, your friends, your neighbors, and strangers you encounter in random places. Growing in your skills of "Asking Good Questions & Listening to People" will make you a great person to talk to, and will open all sort of doors of opportunity in ministry. If nothing else, your neighbor will start to feel more like a friend. And, your family member will feel "valued" by you. I'd say those are great starting places that offer some great side benefits!

On a personal note: If caffeine makes you talk a mile-a-minute, try Decaf! Just saying. :) Hope these thoughts are a help to you in your life of service to Jesus.