

Practical Ministry Skills: Becoming a Great Listener



Contents	PAGE
Leader's Guide	2
Listening Skills	
PREPARING TO LISTEN	
<i>by Joel Comiskey</i>	3
ARE YOU LISTENING?	
<i>by David Ping</i>	4-5
SELF-AWARENESS IN LISTENING	
<i>by Emma J. Justes</i>	6
Listening in Groups	
CULTIVATING A LISTENING ENVIRONMENT	
<i>by Diana C. Bennett</i>	7
LISTENING LEADERS	
<i>by Steven B. Rowe</i>	8
FOCUSED MENTAL ATTENTION	
<i>by Doug Self</i>	9
GOOD QUESTIONS SHOW GOOD LISTENING	
<i>by Doug Self</i>	10-11
WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?	
<i>by Pat J. Sikora</i>	12-14
Resources	
FURTHER EXPLORATION	15



Leader's Guide

How to use "Practical Ministry Skills" by SMALLGROUPS.COM in your regularly scheduled meetings

Welcome to SMALLGROUPS.COM. You've purchased an innovative resource that will help you train and direct the leaders of your small-groups ministry. The material comes from respected thinkers and church leaders, and has been selected by the editors of Leadership Resources at Christianity Today International.

"Practical Ministry Skills" is completely flexible and designed for easy use. Each theme focuses on a practical area of small-groups ministry and comprises brief handouts on specific aspects of that ministry. The handouts give a succinct and practical overview of the issues most relevant to your goals. You may use them at the beginning of a meeting to help launch a discussion, or you may hand them out as brief primers for new small-group leaders or coaches.

This specific theme is designed to help improve the listening skills of small-group leaders. These skills can be applied when having individual conversations with group members, or in group discussions. Each handout can be used as part of a training session for large groups of leaders and coaches, or as a way to encourage and educate people individually. Simply print the handouts you need and use them as necessary.

For example, for an overview of three basic listening skills, see "Preparing to Listen," by Joel Comiskey (page 3). For a chart detailing the many meanings of body language in the listening experience, see Pat J. Sikora's "What Are You Trying to Say?" (pages 12–14). Also, see "Good Questions Show Good Listening," by Doug Self (pages 10–11), to brush up on the role of questions in the listening process.

We hope you benefit from this theme as you equip your small-group leaders and members to listen well.

Need more material, or something on a specific topic? See our website at www.Smallgroups.com.

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BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER**Preparing to Listen**

Three skills to help you make the most of each conversation

Job 33:31

When teaching others how to listen, three areas stand out: concentrated listening, eye contact, and non-verbal communication.

Concentrated Listening

Listening is all about standing back from yourself to fully concentrate on what someone else is saying. The word *listen* in the Bible occurs 352 times, and the word *hear* is found 379 times. Sadly, most of us don't listen carefully. Stephen Covey says, "Most people do not listen to understand; they listen in order to answer. While the other is talking, they are preparing their reply." Yet Scripture says, "He who answers before listening—that is his folly and his shame" (Proverbs 18:13). True listening is tough work.

Part of the reason that hearing others requires careful listening is because we talk much more slowly than we think. Some experts tell us that humans think five times faster than they talk. Thus, when someone is talking, the listener can race around to many other thoughts and ideas, while checking in just long enough to get the basic gist of what the person is saying.

Lately, the Lord has been showing me the importance of concentrated listening. I coach various leaders in small-group ministry. I find my mind preparing what I'm going to say next, rather than really listening. Part of the reason is because I don't like the uncomfortable silence of not knowing what to say next. As I've been attempting to diligently listen, I've tried to listen to the very end and then flow with the uncomfortable silent periods. I've tried to make those silent periods work for me, knowing they are the fruit of fully listening.

Eye Contact

Looking people in the eyes while concentrating on what they're saying has been an important revelation for me as I seek to listen to others. For example, when I'm leading my small group and someone asks a question, it's easy to get distracted by the "other voices" in the room—John's yawning, Mary's coughing, the car passing by outside, etc. But looking the speaker in the eyes helps me to lock in to whatever he or she is saying.

Making comfortable eye contact steers the thoughts in your head directly to the person at hand. It helps you give yourself to the needs of the person, rather than trying to deal with all the competing noises.

Granted, there is a fine line between looking someone in the eyes and staring. Staring makes the person feel uncomfortable and is not helpful. Slight glances away can break you free from the staring mode while honing in on every detail of the conversation.

Non-Verbal Communication

Often, the unspoken words are more important than the spoken ones. Yet to hear the unspoken words, it's important to read between the lines. Experts vary on how much of the total communication package is non-verbal, but estimates range from 60 percent to 90 percent. They all agree on one thing: the vast majority of each communication experience is non-verbal. Reading the body language and voice inflection is essential for effective listening.

Listening is a gift we give to others. It requires sacrifice and self denial. The good news is that effective listening is a learned behavior. With the proper training, all of us can improve in this area and ultimately become excellent listeners.

—JOEL COMISKEY; ©2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss

1. How does our church train small-group leaders in the skill of listening?
2. In general, do I begin formulating my response to a person while he or she is still speaking?
3. What resources can our group study to improve our non-verbal communication?

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER



Are You Listening?

Spiritual opportunities surround us when we take the time to practice the fine art of listening.

James 1:19

As an increasing number of outreach-oriented leaders are now discovering, many angry and apathetic people who recoil at religious-sounding words are more than ready to open up when they meet someone who cares enough to genuinely listen. That's not hard to believe. Look at Scripture and Christ's conversations with strangers.

Countless times, Jesus met someone, asked a question, and then listened—without interruption—to his or her story. The people he healed, fed, and talked with felt listened to, and in turn walked away feeling important—their lives changed for eternity. James 1:19 encourages us: “Be quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to become angry.”

The 10 percent of evangelistic extroverts among us may confuse the concept of being quick to listen with passivity or silence. But evangelistic listening is one of the most vigorous and proactive activities you can engage in. It requires you to use all of your senses in new and insightful ways.

Listen with Your Eyes

Ever notice the people around you—the looks on their faces, the way they're walking, their eyes? It's called “the ministry of noticing other people”—picking up on hundreds of tiny nuances and minor details that speak volumes about what's happening inside of them. By paying special attention to messages sent by a person's eyes, nonverbal gestures, and overall posture, you can tune into a seeker's deep heart.

It's a ministry Steve Bowen, evangelism pastor at The Vineyard Church in Dayton, Ohio, practices often. Recently, while eating a quick lunch at a local Chinese restaurant with his wife, Bowen noticed a woman a few tables down from them. “Her eyes were sad, and her shoulders slumped as if she'd been carrying around the weight of the world,” he recalls. “I said a quick prayer, asking God to help me encourage her.”

A few moments later, Bowen flagged down a nearby waiter and asked him to put the woman's bill on his tab. On their way out of the restaurant, the couple stopped by the woman's table.

“You looked like you could use some encouragement today, so we bought your lunch,” Bowen said.

The woman responded through tears, “How in the world did you know?” Quickly, the Bowens gave her a card with The Vineyard's address and a phone number to call if she needed someone to really listen to her.

“Opportunities like this surround us all the time,” Steve says, “if we simply slow down and listen with our eyes.”

Speak Without Words

As Willow Creek Community church's director of evangelism, Gary Poole is a leader in the concept of seeker small groups—where unbelievers interested in exploring spiritual issues gather to discuss life's questions of death, truth, and God. In his experience, evangelistic listening can be infinitely more compelling than prepackaged gospel presentations.

“I usually spend the first four or five weeks of a group listening and encouraging participants to talk about their beliefs and questions,” he explains. “The more I listen, the more they want to know what I believe.”

When you reach out to someone, who does most of the talking? Surprising people by genuinely listening to them, Poole says, allows you to model the same brand of openhearted listening that you want them to use when considering the gospel.

See with Your Ears

Instead of using canned, prepackaged points to tell someone about Christ, let others be your guide to their unique emotional and spiritual world. Use your ears carefully, and words sparingly, to identify and meet their felt needs.

Watch for feelings. What is he happy, sad, afraid, or angry about? Strangely, these simple emotions offer a direct line to a person's soul. And feelings are inextricably attached to beliefs. People *feel* depressed because at

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER

some level they *believe* there is no hope. They *feel* worried because they have a nagging *belief* that something bad is about to happen.

Getting to the deep heart issues requires a combination of peace, self control, and reflective listening that encourages someone to explore the threatening areas of pain or mystery. And listening to someone enhances his or her sense of self-worth. The people who listen to us are the ones we move toward; when we are listened to, it makes us unfold and expand.

Showing someone that you're listening lets you connect with him or her on a feeling level. Demonstrate with your body language (nods, gestures, uncrossed arms, eye contact) and verbal expressions (groans, exclamations) that you genuinely care. And take time to put the thoughts and feelings they share with you into different words, mirroring their emotions and perspectives back to them.

The Holy Spirit works through us so much better when we slow down and listen. Often, putting aside our personal agendas, schedules, and self-consciousness in order to tune in to God's heart for another person is a sacrifice. But gradually those efforts begin to open hearts and awaken an irresistible hunger to find and know God.

Eugene Peterson's paraphrase of Romans 15:1–3 in *The Message* puts it this way: "Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter and not just do what is convenient for us. Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, 'How can I help?' That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out."

Share Your Story

When you've listened patiently and well to people, almost invariably they'll want to know your story. It's possible to be so "slow to speak" that you never get around to talking about what's really important. The risk of being rejected or labeled "annoying" looms large. Instead of retreating into silence or a safe, prepackaged formula, relax and be real. Share yourself.

Briefly tell your story—warts and all. Simple, honest sharing is attractive. Don't worry if you don't have answers for every question, or if someone doesn't agree with everything you say. When you've engaged with another person and listened well, you'll likely be surprised by the level of attention and interest they return in hearing about what makes you who you are.

Our culture is crying out for the life essentials of understanding, hope, and acceptance. Active listening—taking the time to listen with your eyes, see with your ears, and speak without words—forges that life-giving pathway to others.

—DAVID PING; © 2005. This content originally appeared in the March/April 2005 issue of *Outreach* magazine. For more ideas and information, visit outreachmagazine.com.

Discuss

1. When was the last time you noticed someone that seemed to be hurting? How did you respond?
2. Which of the above skills does our group demonstrate well? Which needs improvement?
3. Have I shared my story with the rest of my small group? Am I familiar with the stories of other individuals in the group?

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER



Self-Awareness in Listening

Understanding our stereotypes and prejudices can help us hear more accurately.

Luke 7:44–50

Listening well requires that we be aware of our attitudes in matters of race, class, gender, culture, age, religion, language, sexual orientation, level of education, marital status, disabilities, gender roles, political affiliation, and so on. All of us have some prejudices and stereotypes—views we assume are correct, yet have not taken opportunities to question. Often, we are not even aware of them. In addition to the differences named above, most of us possess life-inflicted wounds that may bias our thinking.

The Danger of Mis-Hearing

Jesus' dialogue with Simon in Luke 7 is a good example. Near the end, Jesus said, "Therefore, I tell you, her many sins are forgiven because she loved much." He then told the woman, "Your sins are forgiven." What the others at the table *heard* Jesus say was that *he* forgave her sins. They responded, "Who is this who even forgives sins?" Their question could be reworded, "Who does he think he is?" Their view of Jesus—what they expected from him—caused them to not hear him accurately. Jesus did not claim to forgive her sins. Rather, his words pointed to and affirmed the action of God.

This brief glimpse into Scripture demonstrates how we can mis-hear someone. When a person speaks, we bring our past experience of that person to the moment of listening. Sometimes we bring misconceptions we have about that particular person or others like them, anticipating what they might do and what we expect to hear and see from them. This can prevent us from clearly hearing what they say or seeing what they do.

Underlying the hearing of the Pharisees gathered at the table was an urge to find fault with Jesus. They, along with Simon, were eager to discredit him. We operate in ways very similar to the Pharisees when we listen without honest self-awareness—holding our views in absolute certainty, bearing attitudes and expectations that cannot be overcome by what the person we are hearing actually says. Humility is not in the house.

We also understand some of our views to be biblically supported. In these cases it does not seem like we hold prejudices, but rather have a view that is *right* according to our faith. In this we might resemble Simon and the Pharisees. They held certain interpretations of the Torah that Jesus challenged. To them, he was not being faithful. Because his interpretations differed from theirs, they had some difficulty listening to him, and misheard what he said.

Moving Beyond our Barriers

Our aim must be to determine what will become barriers to our listening and hearing well, and be able to attend to these barrier-causes. Some of our barriers involve a conviction that we are absolutely right in our understanding of certain theological views—especially ones that others see differently.

We can deal with these barriers by remaining open to growth in faith and understanding, assured that the Holy Spirit is not done with us yet. This stance only comes from appropriate humility and accurate self-awareness, which is grounded in a deep faith.

Listening is also impeded when we hold theological views so tightly that to hear a different view is threatening. Our ability to welcome, receive, and hear another person is threatened when we sense they may hold views that differ from our own. We may find ourselves holding onto the control of the conversation, directing it to other areas, or tuning out so that we do not hear. This is a way to avoid conflict in our listening role.

—EMMA J. JUSTES; excerpted from *Hearing Beyond the Words* (Abingdon Press, 2006). Used with permission.

Discuss

1. Do you agree that all people carry stereotypes and prejudices, whether aware of them or not?
2. Think back to a situation when someone did not hear you correctly. How did it feel? What was the cause? How were things resolved?
3. For what issues or debates do you hold an especially strong opinion?

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER



Cultivating a Listening Environment

Practical ways to incorporate active and reflective listening in your small group

Proverbs 18:2

The ability to actively listen to and care for other people is rarely found in a small-group setting. And yet it is a necessary skill, because the inability to listen to one another inhibits the development of a trusting environment. After all, what group member would be inclined to share personal concerns and difficulties knowing that no listening ears are truly attending to those concerns and difficulties?

Where to Start

Every small group should operate with a covenant—a written agreement stating the goals and purposes of the group during their time together. In addition to confidentiality and attendance expectations, group leaders can structure the covenant to help create a listening environment. Here are some examples:

- Each group member will participate; no member will dominate.
- One person will speak at a time, and everyone's contribution is valuable.
- No one will be called upon to speak without volunteering.
- Advice or criticism is not acceptable.

Most likely, the leader will need to remind the group of the covenant agreement from time to time. When a group member begins to violate the covenant, the leader should intercede. Don't let the pattern continue. Also, the word *briefly* is an important word to repeat during group discussion. When the leader allows a member to extend his or her thoughts too long, most people lose interest in listening. Be the example—set the pace and facilitate the discussion wisely.

Active Listening

Active listening demonstrates acceptance and is a basic way of showing love to another person. As a listening skill, it requires giving full attention to the speaker. Eye contact is essential, for it sends a strong message of being present with the person and interested in hearing his or her words, ideas, and concerns.

The process begins with the group leader, and body language is important. If the leader asks a question but then looks around the room, fiddles with the guidebook, or checks the clock during a group member's answer, the speaker will be sent a very clear message that the leader is not interested in what he or she has to say.

If the leader allows a dominant group member to interject an opinion or disagreement before the speaker has finished, the speaker will become discouraged and disinterested in sharing in the future.

Reflective Listening

Many small-group discussions are impersonal—they fail to answer questions like “So what?” and “What will I do differently?” Reflective listening can help group members encourage and challenge each other on a more personal level. When listening to another member's story, prayer request, or experience, silently ask the Holy Spirit for discernment. When the speaker is finished, train your mind to ask these types of reflective questions in order to process what you've heard:

- What did I hear? What did I feel while I was listening?
- What might God be showing me through this person?
- Is there something I want to speak back to this person, whether for encouragement or admonishment (when the time is right)?

Remember, a listening environment doesn't appear by itself; it must be cultivated. But as the art of listening develops over time, the group will grow spiritually.

—DIANA C. BENNETT; © 2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss

1. Does our group covenant support a listening environment?
2. What aspects of active listening does our group do well? Where can we improve?
3. Does our group allow time for reflection after someone speaks?

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER**Listening Leaders**

Why being a good listener really starts in your heart.

Acts 14:8–10

As the small-groups pastor in my church, I used to think that my lack of listening to people was due to either adult ADD or an extremely overactive leadership gift. I figured that some were gifted at listening, I wasn't, and therefore I could excuse it away.

But then God began to convict me about the errors intrinsic to that belief system. He showed me that I didn't listen to people because I didn't really care about them or love them. And even when I did love and care about a person, I loved and cared about myself more. Ouch!

As I worked to improve, I originally viewed listening as a discipline. I wanted to adopt the skill of listening into my spiritual growth. But the issue is much bigger than that—it deals with the very core of our hearts. If we don't really love or care about the people God has entrusted to us, there's not enough discipline in the world to help us become better listeners.

Listening Requires Genuine Care

That's when it hit me: the first step in listening is genuine care, concern, and love for the people God has entrusted to us. In other words, effective listening is just one of the byproducts that occur when we share God's heart for other people. No other technique or motivation will help you listen more effectively until you get your heart squared away.

So the first step in becoming a better listener is to lay a new foundation. Ask God daily to change your heart so that you share his love for others. In addition, ask God to remove your selfish tendencies and help you to put others first.

Listening Seeks Understanding

The second step to becoming a better listener involves the actual skill. At its core, listening is a search for understanding. That understanding allows us to truly celebrate a victory, mourn a loss, process or dialogue a question, digest a concern, and validate a hurt.

When someone shares a deep need, listening for understanding provides the starting place where we can discern what questions to ask, or how to pray for them. This understanding communicates value and affirmation—stuff we all need.

Listening Must Be Modeled

The last step in becoming a better listener is to model listening to your group. Most people don't naturally know how to do this, and you can see it within their marriages, their relationships at work, their children, or even within the group. By modeling listening, and pointing to its effectiveness, you begin to challenge the people in your group to practice it within every scope of their relationships.

Be honest in the modeling, and talk about the difficulties at times. This will help break down the “you've got it all together” myth.

Listening is a lifelong discipline because our hearts are “leaky.” We need to be filled with the Holy Spirit regularly to make sure we're loving people the way he wants us to. May the “listening leader” not be an oxymoron in our churches and small groups; may it be the natural outgrowth of our heart of love for the people we serve.

—STEVEN B. ROWE; © 2007 Christianity Today International. Originally appeared on Smallgroups.com.

Discuss

1. Do you agree that effective listening is based on a love for the people we are listening to? Why or why not?
2. How does the tendency to value ourselves more than others reveal itself in a small group?
3. In addition to prayer, how can our group continually move away from that tendency?

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER



Focused Mental Attention

Why concentration is vitally important to listening well

Matthew 13:14–15

Editor's note: This material was originally written to help pastors improve their listening skills while visiting church members in their homes. It has been adapted for small groups.

Understanding another person accurately requires me to devote all my mental energies to what that person is saying. That isn't easy, because as I listen I can easily fall into several habits that distract my attention away from the conversation. So I regularly remind myself of the following guidelines before and as I listen:

Defer Judgment

Being, as I am, in the business of teaching people right from wrong and truth from error, it's difficult sometimes to listen to people's stories without judging them. But when I start judging, I start thinking about what they should do to change, and I stop thinking about what they are telling me.

So it's vital for me to try and suspend my judgment, no matter what I'm inclined to believe about the person I am speaking with.

Preempt Preoccupations

Small-group leaders usually have dozens of things demanding their attention—jobs, spouses, children, hobbies, and so on. Unfinished business is their constant companion, and it's easy to be preoccupied.

So when you begin a group meeting, it's vital to focus on the importance of that personal encounter. You must consciously put aside your other concerns. Command yourself with something concrete. Tell yourself, "I will be totally present with these people during the time we have together." If you don't do something deliberate like that, your preoccupations may cause you to miss things.

Avoid Premature Solutions

It's a fact: group members often look to the group leader for answers. And group leaders too often feel obliged to provide them quickly and easily. Quick answers, however, can leave out critical factors and shut down further communication. Even when the quick answer is correct, it may be rejected because people don't feel their problems are taken seriously. No wonder: I cannot listen fully when I am engaged in mentally formulating answers.

So, leaders must make sure they've listened for a while and taken in sufficient information before they dare interject a solution or insight.

Absorb Accusations

Church leaders are convenient targets for other people's religious frustrations. I often find myself put on the spot, the brunt of accusations against God, Christianity, and the church.

In those situations, my first inclination is to defend the faith, because people are attacking things dear to me.

But even though apologetics may be in order in some group conversations, defensiveness never is. When I become defensive, I start mentally mustering arguments to unravel my opponent. At that point, I am no longer attending to the other person. On the other hand, if I keep listening *through* the attack, I usually am able to offer some help.

—DOUG SELF; copyright 1990 by Christianity Today International. Originally printed in *Mastering Pastoral Care* (Multnomah Publishers, 1990).

Discuss

1. Which of the above skills am I best at? In which skill do I need the most improvement?
2. Which of the above skills does our group demonstrate the best? In which skills does our group need the most improvement?
3. What are some ways to remain aware of these reminders when our group enters into a time of discussion or sharing?

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER



Good Questions Show Good Listening

Learn to understand people and help them understand themselves.

Matthew 16:13–16

Editor's note: This material was originally written to help pastors improve their listening skills while visiting church members in their homes. It has been adapted for small groups.

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 will both 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?" and "What did you most enjoy about your childhood church experience?"

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:

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER

- “When did you begin to feel this way?”
- “What experience has most influenced you to feel this way?”
- “Why do you think you responded that way to that experience?”
- “Who has been helpful to you in this situation?”
- “Where do you think all this is heading?”
- “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.

—DOUG SELF; copyright 1990 by Christianity Today International. Originally printed in *Mastering Pastoral Care* (Multnomah Publishers, 1990).

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?



What Are You Trying to Say?

A practical chart to help you keep track of body language in your small group

Matthew 6:22

EYES

GESTURE	WHAT IT CONVEYS	IF YOU'RE DOING IT
Avoiding Eye Contact	May mean she's shy. Or lying or trying to provoke you. May also be a nonverbal sign to cue someone to stop talking. May also be a cultural issue—in some cultures, avoiding eye contact is a sign of respect.	Unless you know of a cultural issue, always strive to maintain comfortable and gracious eye contact. Too much can make the listener feel under scrutiny, and too little may indicate a lack of interest on your part.
Darting Eyes	Usually perceived as a sign of lying or hiding the truth.	Don't. Make comfortable eye contact.
Rolling Eyes	Usually perceived as a sign of disrespect, condescension, disagreement, or frustration. Almost always an aggressive action.	Don't!
Staring At You	Could be intense concentration, or could be rude and aggressive.	Be sure to break your gaze at comfortable intervals, or when the listener breaks. You don't have to win the stare-down.
Staring Into Space	Could be intense concentration, or could indicate disagreement or disinterest. May be a "dissing" action or a nonverbal stop sign.	Don't. Train yourself to maintain comfortable eye contact.

FACE

Furrowing the Brow	May be a sign of thinking, disagreement, or questioning; or perhaps the listener can't hear or understand you.	Relax your face while talking. Clarify using words rather than gestures.
Frowning	May mean the listener is unhappy or uncomfortable with the discussion. Or it might just indicate concentration or trying to figure something out.	Relax while talking. Smile and/or nod while listening. Clarify using words rather than gestures. Explain why you are frowning.
Grimacing	Usually a sign of displeasure or discomfort. But it may just be a normal expression.	Relax your face and smile if appropriate. If something caught you off guard, explain your reaction.
Lip Biting	May feel confused, perplexed, or uncomfortable. Or may be trying to come up with an answer—real or phony.	Relax and smile. Admit your discomfort.
Lip Pursing	Pursing or twisting lips to the side may indicate thinking or an attempt to hold back an angry comment.	Relax and smile. Admit your discomfort.

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER

	GESTURE	WHAT IT CONVEYS	IF YOU'RE DOING IT
HEAD	Tilted Head	When gently tilted to either side, this indicates friendliness or receptivity. When lifted high, it may indicate aloofness, disagreement, or resistance to your authority.	Watch your head position. Tilt slightly right or left, and slightly forward, indicating your interest in what the person has to say.
ARMS AND HANDS	Shoulder Shrug	May signal resignation, uncertainty, or surrender.	Try to be more definitive in your communication.
	Squared Shoulders	Usually a sign of confidence and certainty, but may also be a sign of resistance.	Relax and smile. Don't use your body to force your point.
	Hunched Shoulders	May signal uncertainty or a cringing spirit.	Try to remain relaxed and confident. Remember that you are a child of God.
	Crossed Arms	May be a conscious or subconscious effort to put distance or an emotional barrier between the speaker and listener. May indicate rejection of the speaker or idea. Or may just be the most comfortable position.	Consciously relax your arms and lean forward slightly. Try for an open position with arms at your side or behind your back.
LEGS	Crossed Legs	May be a conscious or subconscious effort to put distance or an emotional barrier between the speaker and listener. May indicate rejection of the speaker or idea. Or may just be the most comfortable position.	Consciously relax your legs and lean forward slightly.
	Tapping Feet or Legs	Probably indicates nervousness at a conscious or subconscious level.	Try to keep your feet and legs still. Your tapping will make other participants nervous.
POSTURE	Angle	People tend to angle toward those they like or agree with and away from those they dislike or disagree with.	Be sure you aren't distancing yourself from the one to which you're speaking.
	Comfort Zone	Each culture has a comfort zone—the distance we place between ourselves. Pay attention to how the person responds and how close they are comfortable being.	Stay alert. If the other person backs up, you are too close; if they keep moving forward, they may want more closeness.
	Slouching	May indicate disrespect or a lack of interest. Or it may simply be an adapted position.	Stand or sit using good posture. Slouching can collapse the chest and make breathing more difficult, resulting in a feeling of nervousness.

BECOMING A GREAT LISTENER

—PAT J. SIKORA. Excerpted from *Why Didn't You Warn Me?*, by Pat J. Sikora; copyright 2007 Standard Publishing, www.StandardPub.com. Used with permission.

Discuss

1. How have you seen body language affect a group meeting, either positively or negatively?
2. Using the chart, what positive or helpful habits can you identify in your own use of body language?
3. Using the chart, what types of harmful or distracting habits can you identify in your body language? How can these be improved?



Further Exploration

Books and resources to connect small groups and families.

Smallgroups.com. Small-groups training resources from Christianity Today International:

- “Planning and Leading a Life-Changing Meeting” Practical Ministry Skills
- “Healthy Small Groups” Training Theme
- “Shepherding Others” Training Theme
- “Missional Evangelism” Current Issues Bible-Study Course

LeadershipJournal.net. This website offers practical advice and articles for church leaders.

Creating Community by *Andy Stanley and Bill Willits*. Stanley and Willits unveil the principles that have connected more than 8,000 people in small groups (Multnomah Publishers, 2004; ISBN 978-1590523962).

Hearing Beyond the Words by *Emma J. Justes*. This is a practical and compassionate book on listening skills for pastors (Abingdon Press, 2006; ISBN 978-0687494990).

Listening Ministry by *Susan K. Hedahl*. A highly practical book that presents a unique blend of theological reflection, new research, and suggested forms of education on listening (Fortress Press, 2001; ISBN 978-0800631749).

Why Didn't You Warn Me? by *Pat J. Sikora*. This focused guide trains the novice or experienced small-group leader to deal effectively with the obstacles of group life (Standard Publishign, 2007; ISBN 978-0784720752).