

Soft Skills for Ministry Leaders – *Listening*

Listening can be a difficult soft skill for ministry leaders. It is easy to see why. Our roles often put us in *talking* mode. We are expected to preach and teach, have answers and cast vision, and be ready to quickly diagnose and solve problems. Ministry leaders are often pressed for time and burdened with long to-do lists which make listening even more challenging.

Listening requires patience. It requires suspending judgment and being fully present to the one who is speaking. Listening *feels* very much like sitting and doing nothing. The urge to glance at your smart phone for the latest email is strong. The desire to hurry the conversation toward a “conclusion” is fueled by the worry that your to-do list is getting longer as you sit there. Bottom line: Listening is a soft skill that is hard for a lot of ministry leaders to practice.

However, think of the cost of not developing the skill of listening. We will make more bad decisions if we fail to listen. We will tend to view people not as brothers and sisters created in God’s image, but as instruments of our own goals. We will fly off the handle and say things we later regret. Slowly but surely, we will disrupt relationships and lose credibility if we fail to listen.

So let’s commit to being better listeners in the various leadership roles God has given us. Here are some principles and practices that will help you develop the soft skill of listening.

1. *Train yourself to view listening as part of your job description.* As I mentioned above, listening often feels like sitting and doing nothing. We tend to think of it as an activity that takes us away from our real work. But listening *is* real work. We need to change our way of thinking about listening. Yes, there are people who will talk forever if we let them, and every ministry leader must learn how to deal with such folks. But do not let the few abusers keep you from being the listener you need to be. The practice of listening is part of your ministry.

2. *Be fully present.* When Steve Jobs et al gave the world the smart phone, they made it much harder to be fully present when another person is talking to us. Undistracted face-to-face conversation is increasingly rare in our mobile device society. With that comes a loss of empathy and a general shallowness in how we interact with one another. The book to read on this subject is Reclaiming Conversation by Sherry Turkle. With much research to back her, Turkle demonstrates how even the visible presence of a mobile device during conversation greatly weakens communication and interpersonal engagement. I am not telling you to get rid of your devices (though I’ll be glad to share with you the virtues of the flip phone!). I am telling you to discipline yourself when listening to someone. Turn off the phone and remove it from view. Otherwise you will be tempted to glance at it every few seconds for the latest text or email, and then you will be distracted from listening to the human being right in front of you because you’re wondering what the person on the other end of the phone wants. We ministry leaders must train ourselves in the skill of being fully present to the person sitting in front of us.

3. *Let your assumptions and biases be challenged.* Proverbs 18:13 warns us, “If one gives an answer before he hears, it is his folly and shame” (ESV). One of the big impediments to listening is thinking we already understand everything there is to understand about the person or situation. All of us come to conversations with assumptions and biases. That is normal for alive, thinking people, and it is certainly normal for ministry leaders who are privy to a lot of insider information. But if we are not careful, what we already know (or *think* we already know) will act like earplugs, blocking us from hearing the perspectives of others. So avoid coming to a conclusion too quickly. Let your assumptions and biases be challenged through the process of listening. Maybe it turns out you were right, but often you will find out important things you did not know. You will understand how another person sees the issue and how it affects them. It is good for us to understand those things before we give advice or take action.

4. *Deal with sensitive matters face-to-face.* Text messages, email, and social media are good for transferring simple information. They are not good for communicating on complicated subjects, and they are absolutely terrible for conflict and emotionally-charged matters. For those you need face-to-face engagement. You need to be able to hear tone of voice and see body language. You need to make eye contact. You need to risk the potentially awkward situation of sitting down, looking at one another, and deeply listening. There is no substitute. Yes, it is time-consuming. No, it is not convenient. It is simply the right thing to do and much more effective in the long run.

5. *Listen to all parties.* Proverbs 18:17 counsels us, “The one who states his case first seems right, until the other comes and examines him.” Truly listening to one person is work. Truly listening to multiple people on a matter is *hard* work. But there is no substitute for doing this hard work. More times than I care to admit, I have taken what the first persuasive person had to say and ran with it only to find out later there was much more to the story. A good question for ministry leaders to ask themselves is, “Who are the relevant parties to this matter?” Those are the people we need to listen to.

6. *Practice reflective listening.* When engaged in conversation, do not assume you understand what another person is saying. Rephrase it back to them and ask, “Am I hearing you correctly?” On complicated or emotional issues, you will probably have to work through several cycles of reflective listening in order to understand accurately. The benefit will be fewer misunderstandings that cause trouble later.

7. *Get agreement on the next step.* Before a conversation ends, make sure there is agreement on what is going to happen next. The important thing is for both parties to the conversation to be in agreement about what action will be taken and who will initiate it. Otherwise, the parties will likely part with very different perceptions about what is going to happen next, planting the seeds for future misunderstanding and conflict. It may be as simple as saying, “Let’s talk more about this. I’ll call you next week, okay?” But make sure there is clear communication about the follow up to the conversation.

Like most ministry leaders, I have made plenty of mistakes that boiled down to being a poor listener. I am committed to getting better at this soft skill. You have permission to call me out when I don’t do it! Together, let’s raise the quality of listening that takes place in the ministries the Lord has given us. I believe our listening ears will honor Him and serve us well.