

Chapter 1

What Is Reflective Listening?

It is false to assume that if one can talk, he can communicate...

~ Reuel Howe, theologian and educator

The tongue can bring death or life; those who love to talk will reap the consequences.

~ Proverbs 18:21

In the fall of 1972, I was invited to attend a series of workshops at a local university. At that time, I was in my sixth year as an elementary teacher and I was also a junior high wrestling coach. Various topics were presented, but one fifteen-minute segment on reflective listening had a tremendous impact upon my life. The instructor encouraged us to learn the skill of reflective listening so that we could communicate more effectively with our students. My initial resistance to his presentation about this structured style of listening was prompted by my belief that I already was a good listener. In fact, I felt certain that I listened better than most people. *Why should I try to follow such a structured procedure?* I thought to myself. *After all, listening is listening. People speak and I listen.*

Throughout the workshop, the instructor patiently taught the skills necessary to reflect back to the speaker what the listener thinks he is hearing. At first, the reflective listening techniques seemed awkward and phony. However, as we practiced the various components of the skill, my resistance decreased and I made two interesting discoveries. First, it became quite evident that I was not the good listener I had thought I was. Second, it felt really good to have someone listen to me when I had an opportunity to speak.

During the final activity of the listening workshop, we worked in small groups to practice our newly learned skill. Each person was asked to relate a personal experience so another member of the group could practice listening reflectively. Fortunately, the woman assigned to listen to me was a guidance counselor who had prior experience with reflective skills. I presented my ongoing concern about not having an assistant wrestling coach. She skillfully listened as I expressed my frustrations with being the only adult in charge of a large group of junior high wrestlers and about having to attend practices or meets while ill because there was no one to assist me. I had approached both the head coach and the principal on several occasions to request an assistant, and each time I had been told that I was doing a fine job of handling the program alone. The compliments and reassurance felt good, however, only for a short time. The fact that my needs and fears were being ignored irritated me. As I described the details of my situation with this skilled listener, it amazed me that she was able to so perceptively pinpoint my feelings.

As the concerns I expressed during this brief listening exercise were reflected back to me, I became aware of just how much this coaching situation had been affecting my health. For the first time, I realized that a stomach ulcer I had suffered from for several months was actually the result of the stress and frustration caused by being solely responsible for the junior high wrestling program. The fact that it took someone skilled in reflective listening just fifteen minutes to help me realize this made a tremendous impact on me. Near the end of the listening experience, I determined that I could not continue to coach unless I had an assistant.

Immediately after the workshop, I went to the principal and informed him that I would resign from my position if he did not hire an assistant coach. Initially, he responded as he had in the past; however, this time I didn't give in. Respectfully, I told him that I had no choice but to resign if he could not find someone to help me within two weeks. Although he tried to persuade

me otherwise, I insisted, "I can't do it alone!" Three days later, I had an assistant coach. At that time, I began to realize how powerful the skill of reflective listening could be. I had been held captive by something I didn't know I had the power to change until someone used reflective listening to help set me free. The freedom I gained as a result of this experience inspired me to want to listen to others.

During the next several months, I struggled with listening reflectively. The old habits were hard to break. Occasionally, I remembered to listen; however, there were more times that I forgot. I began to wonder if I would ever become competent as a reflective listener.

Six months after that workshop, I attended a weekend retreat where I was again exposed to reflective listening skills. As a part of the final exercise, I was given the opportunity to be the "listener." The woman I listened to presented a situation in which her friend who was dying of cancer was in denial about her illness. She wanted to know how she could help her friend face the reality of her own death. As she spoke and I reflected, something very interesting took place right before my eyes. At one point, she stopped talking and, after what seemed like a long period of silence, looked up and announced that *she* was the one who was struggling with her friend's illness. Her words surprised everyone in the group: "You know what? I've stayed away from my friend because I didn't know what to say. I'm going to stop by on the way home to honestly tell her how I feel. I want to be there for her."

As the "speaker" in my first experience with reflective listening, I was encouraged to convey my concerns and feelings openly. Someone really listened to me and helped me understand my struggle. I felt validated, and it was so freeing! In my second experience, as the "listener" I saw that I had the power to offer understanding and validation to another person. It was exciting to help someone uncover the truth about herself and gain freedom. This experience

increased my determination to work harder to become adept at listening reflectively. I focused on listening to my family, my friends, my students and even to strangers. Over a period of time, with much practice and perseverance, I did become a better listener.

Since then, I have listened to hundreds of people as they have peeled off the layers of an issue or have dealt with a situation. I continue to be amazed by the fact that reflective listening is so effective in helping someone uncover issues that even he is not aware of. It is such a rewarding journey.

Ironically, though we live in a world of sophisticated communication systems and devices, most of our communication tends to be ineffective. "The more elaborate our means of communication, the less we communicate."¹ We often beat around the bush or talk at each other. A complaint frequently heard is that people "just don't listen." Quite frankly, "the wonder is not that communicating is as difficult as it is, but that it occurs as much as it does."²

We are frequently told by communication experts that we need to listen. Spiritual leaders (pastors, priests, rabbis) tell the people in their care to listen to each other. Psychologists and counselors encourage people to listen to one another. These reminders to listen are relevant and much needed, but there is one vital element missing: very few people actually teach others *how* to listen.

Only Hearing Words or Really Listening?

A lot of assumptions are made about listening—especially as it relates to what it is and how it is done. Dr. Tony Alessandra says, "Assuming that just because you can hear, you can listen, is like assuming that just because you can see, you can read." Perhaps the most common misconception we have is that most people are fairly good at listening. In reality, very few people are good listeners because they don't realize that listening is far more than hearing the

words that come from the other person.

Three different mental processes are involved in reflective listening. When we listen we are physically *hearing* the spoken words. At the same time we are also *thinking* about what the other person is saying. Along with hearing and thinking about what is being said, we are *formulating* our reflective response.

In essence, listening is hearing accurately what the other person is attempting to communicate. Two words are of special importance: the word “accurately” is important because listening effectively enables us to focus on the words and nonverbal actions of the speaker. This gives a clearer understanding of what the speaker is attempting to say. The second word of significance is “attempting.” A person is often blind to the feelings, emotions or real issues of his life. Our ability to reflect back to the speaker what we think he is saying creates a process by which the speaker can focus and convey back to us the real concerns of the situation. Henry David Thoreau said it so well, “It takes two to tell the truth—one to speak and another to hear.”

Because reflective listening is a multi-faceted process, there are three basic factors a good listener must fully understand. The first basic factor of reflective listening consists of setting aside our own needs, opinions, experiences, emotions and advice so that we can truly focus on the person we are listening to. It is very important to set aside self as we listen to another person. This is not easy to do because the issues that others talk with us about often prompt us to think of our own experiences.

The second basic factor of good listening is that we release ourselves from the responsibility of trying to have an answer for the person to whom we are listening. Most of the time, we will not have an answer for that person. The main reason we do not have the answer is that people tend to initially present issues that often are not the real problem.

The third basic factor of reflective listening is that when we listen to someone it does not mean that we have to agree with that person's ideas or opinions. If we approach listening with these three thoughts firmly in mind, the listening challenges we face will be easier to overcome.

Being understood and validated is one of the greatest needs we have. Ralph Nichols says it this way: "The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them." When we listen reflectively to someone, we gain an understanding of what he is trying to say through words and body language. As we reflect those feelings and thoughts back to him using the appropriate tone of voice, body posture and gestures, he will sense that he is understood. Listening reflectively to someone means that we are trying to understand what he is feeling, we accept that he has these feelings and stand by him as he works through an issue.

Qualities of Reflective Listening

There are four specific qualities of reflective listening:

- 1) Reflective listening is **reflective** because we reflect what we think the speaker is trying to say. It is impossible for us to get into another person's mind and know exactly what he is thinking; however, we can listen carefully and observe his body language as he speaks.
- 2) Reflective listening is **total** because we listen with our whole being. As a listener, we devote all of our attention to the speaker.
- 3) Reflective listening is **active** in that we are constantly adjusting to the speaker and concentrating on what he is saying and doing throughout the conversation. We actively follow and respond to the speaker.

4) Reflective listening is **productive** because it usually leads to positive results.

The ability to listen reflectively provides a win-win situation for both the speaker and the listener. The three main purposes and benefits of reflective listening are:

1) It provides the speaker with an opportunity to listen to himself. Many times a person's inner thoughts are deeply hidden or shrouded by strong emotions. It is not until he hears us repeat or reword what he has just said that he actually begins to get in touch with his thoughts and feelings.

2) It provides the speaker with a clearer understanding of his perception of the situation and also of the truth of that situation. By listening to someone and reflecting back to him what he says, we enable him to recognize if there are discrepancies between the two.

3) It provides the listener with a better understanding of what the speaker is trying to communicate. Who hasn't been misunderstood at one time or another? Not understanding the speaker's intended meaning, or making an assumption, can cause serious problems or hurts in our relationship with that person. Reflecting back to the speaker what we *think* he has said is an effective tool in minimizing misunderstandings; it gives the speaker an opportunity to clarify his words and their *intended* meaning.

Individuals in a casual conversation usually take turns sharing "air time" (talking more or less equally) as they interact. With reflective listening, however, the "air time" is not shared equally. Let's imagine that an ink pen symbolizes "air time." Whoever holds the pen has the right to speak. The objective of reflective listening is to insure that the speaker holds the pen for a longer period of time and more frequently than the listener. Too often we tend to grab the pen from the other person. However, when we apply reflective listening skills, we are carefully and

quickly returning the pen to the speaker, thus keeping the pen in his hand most of the time and preventing ourselves from controlling the conversation.

If in all our practice of life we could learn to listen....
If we could grasp what the other persons are saying
as they themselves understand what they are saying,
the major hostilities of life would disappear
for the simplest reason that misunderstanding would disappear.

~ Harry Overstreet

Not a Casual Conversation

Listening reflectively is different from a casual conversation because we purposefully shift from engaging in casual conversation to listening reflectively at a time when the other person has a strong need to talk, has an issue to resolve, or has an emotion to work through. As we sense the speaker's need to bare his heart or vent his feelings, the focus moves from our own needs and concerns to the needs and concerns of the speaker.

It is also important to listen reflectively before reacting to what the other person says. If we react before attempting to listen reflectively, we will surely open the door to tension and misunderstanding in our relationship with that individual. Conversely, choosing to listen reflectively will provide the opportunity to hear what the other person is attempting to say and will enable us to view the situation from his perspective. It gives us time to set aside our own emotions so that we are better able to focus on the speaker.

The apostle James reminds us to be "quick to listen, slow to speak, and slow to get angry" (James 1:19). When we speak too hastily and without listening to the other person, it is not uncommon for our agitation, frustration or anger toward that person to quickly escalate. Too

late, we realize our mistake and think, *If only I had listened first, it might not have come to this!*

The more we try to understand the other person's situation, the less misunderstanding and miscommunication may occur. There is also the decreased chance that anger or other negative emotions will creep in.

Disciplining ourselves to listen **first** will enable us to enjoy more positive relationships with our spouse, our children, our parents, our coworkers, our friends, and our neighbors. We may even find that listening reflectively can heal fractured relationships. By taking the time to listen to someone, not only are we helping that person work through an issue or express a joy, but we are also providing an opportunity for greater trust and rapport to develop. Charles Dickens said: "No one is useless in this world who lightens the burden of it for anyone else."

Something to think about...

Think about a relationship you are currently involved in which would benefit from the use of reflective listening. List the goals you have for improving your communication with that person. Think of several relationships that you would like to work on improving. Ask God to give you the patience and perseverance necessary to become a better listener.
