



INTERNATIONAL DAY OF LISTENING

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Be Bold! Listen for Common Ground

A Listening Guide by Sheila Bentley, Michael Purdy, and Graham Bodie

July 19: Preparing for a More Difficult Conversation Where You May Have Less in Common or May Disagree

Common Ground Listening

This activity can be used with pairs, small groups, or even a larger group. Participants should focus on what they have in common regarding a not-too-controversial topic. Participants could be members of the groups that participated on June 19 or completely new groups. The participants are getting together to address a mildly controversial topic, such as choosing a family vacation, setting a group goal, discussing improvements to the break room at work, or selecting a community project. Once the group has established common ground, move forward in discussing where the differences are and in finding a decision or solution that is agreeable to all.

First Steps:

1. **Identify the topic that you want to discuss.** Make this topic something that isn't too controversial but about which you may not be in complete agreement. Perhaps make it a conversation that you need to have in order to make a decision.
2. **Start with "why"**—why do you need to talk about this topic or make this decision. Make sure you agree on why you are having this conversation. If you find that you don't agree on the "why" see if you can narrow the topic to a decision that you can agree on as an important one that you can work towards agreement.
3. As you begin, **try to establish the relationship as the most important aspect of this conversation.** If maintaining each person's dignity and humanity are primary, then the path to common ground will be easier. People need to feel safe if they are to engage and come to the act of openly listening.
4. Next **seek to establish the areas where you have agreement.** The agenda will be to understand first—then discussion and perhaps disagreement will come later. The listeners are comfortable with themselves and present this aura while at first listening and later while giving feedback and responding. Avoid getting sidetracked by areas where you disagree.
5. **Maintain an attitude of listening to learn with a nonjudgmental presence.** Keep in mind the WAIT acronym—Why Am I Talking? If the answer is other than "to understand," keep listening.

Next Steps: Begin to explore areas where you may disagree.

- 1. Continue to be present, welcoming, respectful, and nonjudgmental** while listening to something with which you don't agree. Give measured and unbiased feedback (i.e., "What I hear" or "How I feel") and ask unbiased questions (e.g., "Can you tell me more about that" or "What leads you to believe . . .") to show that you are indeed listening and learning with a non-judgmental presence.
- 2. Begin to explore areas of disagreement.** State your position in an assertive, but non-aggressive manner. Own your position by saying, "I think . . ." not "You are wrong about . . .".
- 3. Listen deeply to really understand the other person's perspective about the areas where you might disagree.** Ask yourself why an intelligent, rational person would believe this way. Assume this person woke up this morning believing his or her beliefs, as did you. Continue to suspend judgment and assumptions that you might be making as you seek understanding. Only after you really understand someone's perspective can you really effectively disagree with it.
- 4. If things begin to get uncomfortable or too difficult, try taking a break,** especially so that your body can get out of the "fight or flight" mode. **When you reconvene the conversation, turn to wonder**—wonder how the person came to these conclusions, wonder what experience brought the person to this position, wonder why you are reacting the way you are. You don't have to agree with the person's position, but you should respect the person's right to feel and think as he or she does.
- 5. Have each person state what they would like to have happen to resolve the issue.** Don't require participation from everyone, but do encourage it. Go around the circle asking each person for their proposed resolution, and don't judge them immediately. Accept the resolution as at least plausible.
- 6. When you find areas where you disagree, explore these further.** How far apart are you? Is the difference significant? Is it about an area that matters a lot, or is it a less important aspect of the situation?
- 7. Explore ways that you could find additional common ground or could come closer to agreement about this topic.** Can you break the decision into smaller pieces where you can agree? Are there already aspects that you agree on? If not, is there a way to compromise in reaching a decision (i.e. split the difference)? Could you take turns choosing an option? (The other person chooses this time, and you choose next time.) Could you link this decision to another one where you could split the decisions: you make one decision, and the other person makes the other.
- 8. As you bring the conversation to a close, have each person state what they have agreed to do.** Make sure you all "heard" the same thing.
- 9. If you were not able to reach an agreement, schedule a future meeting to continue the process,** perhaps also inviting a neutral third party who could help negotiate an agreement.
- 10. If necessary, agree to disagree** and discuss how this topic will be addressed in the future. (i.e., Perhaps don't bring it up again.)

Examples of possible topics:

Family:

Deciding on where to go on vacation
Where to go out for dinner
Who should assume which household responsibilities

Work:

Planning a company party or workshop.
Choosing new office furniture.
Creating an employee reward system

Organization:

Selecting a charitable project for the year.
Identifying at least one strategic goal for the year.

Neighborhood:

Planning a community project.
Planning a neighborhood function.

Example Discussion (Family context):

Topic: Deciding on a family vacation.

Why: Why are we making the decision for a family vacation? Why do we want to go on vacation? Is it to relax, to do something fun, to explore a new area, to learn about a place or activity?

Relationship: Establish family relationships as the most important aspect of the conversation – each person could say one positive thing about each family member (e.g., “I like that Sally is so passionate about art.”)

Common Ground: What do we have in common?

Possible responses:

We all want this to be a fun experience.

We all want to spend some quality time together.

We all want to relax and come home refreshed.

We all enjoy different activities.

Non-Judgmentally Working Toward a Decision: If there are disagreements, how significant are they? Where do we want to go for family vacation this year? Are the mountains all that different than the coast? What elements of these two places are similar? What are the differences, and do they matter? If there is a possible compromise, what is it, and will each family member be okay with that decision? What are each member’s priorities, and how can those be appreciated and used to make a suitable decision? How is each person’s proposed solution “valid” – or what elements of each solution can the group appreciate?