

Leading with Vitality Council Reflection: Active Listening

How to use the Leading with Vitality Council Reflection: Share this document with the Council members prior to the Council meeting and add 15 minutes to the beginning of the agenda for shared reflection. Prior to the meeting, invite one member of the Council to lead the discussion. Here's a simple outline for how the shared reflection might go.

First, the reflection leader reads the scripture passage aloud. Second, the reflection leader highlights one idea from the reflection that the reflection leader found meaningful or challenging. Third, the reflection leader uses one or more of the reflection questions below to encourage discussion. When the discussion draws to a close, the reflection leader closes the time with the prayer using the prayer below or another prayer they create.

Scripture Reading

Matthew 11:15 (NRSV)

Let anyone with ears listen!

Active Listening

Listen my children and you shall hear. If only it was that easy. Depending on what translation of the Bible that you read, it is said the word 'listen' occurs in the Bible more than 330 times. That is a lot of listening!

There is, of course, a difference in hearing and listening, at least actively listening. Active listening requires some intentionality on our part. Studies show that we only remember about 25 to 50 percent of what is being said, so when you talk to your boss, colleagues, members, or spouse for 10 minutes, they typically retain less than half of the conversation.

Turn that stat around and it reveals that when you are receiving directions or being presented with information, you are not hearing the whole message either. You hope the important parts are captured in your 25-50 percent, but what if they are not?

Major corporations have discovered over the years that active listening is a vital skill that anyone who manages people should possess. How can you fix anything or be the best place of employment if you do not listen to your employees? The same concept can be translated to the church. How can we be a well-blended inclusive community if we do not hear what the community is saying?

In today's world, it feels as if we travel at the speed of light. We have so many ways to communicate, but we struggle to stay connected. One of my favorite Jimmy Buffet songs, "Everybody's on the Phone," from Take the Weather with You sums it up this way:

Everybody's on the phone
So connected and all alone
From the pizza boy to the socialite
We all salute the satellites
Let me text you with your master plan
You're loud and clear but I don't understand
I'm a digital explorer in analog roam
And everybody's on the phone

Whether it is on our phones, on Zoom, or in-person, we spend much of our time communicating, but are we listening? Here are some techniques to help you practice active listening:

1. **Pay Attention** – Give the speaker your undivided attention and acknowledge the message. Recognize that non-verbal communication also “speaks” loudly.
 - Look at the speaker directly.
 - Put aside distracting thoughts.
 - Do not mentally prepare a rebuttal!
 - Avoid being distracted by environmental factors. For example, side conversations.
 - “Listen” to the speaker’s body language.
2. **Show That You’re Listening** – Use your own body language and gestures to show that you are engaged.
 - Nod occasionally.
 - Smile and use other facial expressions.
 - Make sure that your posture is open and interested.
 - Encourage the speaker to continue with small verbal comments like yes, and “uh huh.”
3. **Provide Feedback** – Our personal filters, assumptions, judgments, and beliefs can distort what we hear. As a listener, your role is to understand what is being said. This may require you to reflect on what is being said and to ask questions.
 - Reflect on what has been said by paraphrasing. “What I’m hearing is...,” and “Sounds like you are saying...,” are great ways to reflect back.
 - Ask clarifying questions. “What do you mean when you say” “Is this what you mean?”
 - Summarize the speaker’s comments periodically.
4. **Defer Judgment** – Interrupting is a waste of time. It frustrates the speaker and limits full understanding of the message.
 - Allow the speaker to finish each point before asking questions.
 - Do not interrupt with counter arguments.
5. **Respond Appropriately** – Active listening is designed to encourage respect and understanding. You are gaining information and perspective. You add nothing by attacking the speaker or otherwise putting the speaker down.
 - Be candid, open, and honest in your response.
 - Assert your opinions respectfully.
 - Treat the other person in a way that you think they would want to be treated.

Jesus often told his audience to “Listen” to what he was saying. Now more than perhaps ever, we need to be reminded the same thing as we actively listen to each other.

Reflection by Pastor Chuck Miller

Questions for Reflection:

1. Describe how you feel when someone is truly listening to you?
2. How might the Council use active listening techniques to build a more effective meeting?

Prayer:

Hear us, O God, as we raise our thoughts, hopes, needs, and joys to you. Open our ears and hearts to hear the good news of your love and the call to respond with lives of love and service. Help us to hear the voices and stories of our siblings in Christ and inspire us to listen more completely to one another. Amen.