

Learning to Listen

John O'Brien & Connie Lyle O'Brien

*Listen with an intensity
that most people
save for talking.*

*-Lilly Tomlin's
"Edith Ann"*

What does it mean to listen?

People come to life when they make contact with someone who works actively and faithfully to understand what they want to say. When people communicate in unconventional ways, or when they have been rendered invisible by an environment that discounts the worth of their communication, the effects of listening can be profoundly energizing. Those who communicate without words, those who use words and symbols in unique ways, and those who communicate within the drama of their behavior call on their listeners' whole emotional, mental, and spiritual selves. They remind us that listening is much more than passing strings of words from mouth to ear. Listening is resonating in body, in imagination, and in spirit. Listening to people who live with the consequences of a lifetime of isolation and discrimination is often painful, frightening, and exciting.

Listening liberates energy A person's sense of direction grows stronger. The possibility of conflict with established rules, common practices, and fixed views of the person's possibilities increases. Blocked listening generates frustration. To want to understand and not to get the message can lead to a sense of impotence and anger.

As interest in person-centered planning grows, the refrain, "listen to the person," becomes almost too familiar. Being able to say how important it is to listen is not the same as listening actively and faithfully to people who are just finding their voice. To improve our ability to listen, it is important to examine three dimensions of our listening: where we listen from, what we listen for, and how we listen.

Where we listen from We listen best when we *stand with* people; close enough to smell and hear each other, to touch and be touched. Standing with a person means being willing to accommodate the person's preferences for communicating, and being willing to thoughtfully consider joining the person in taking action. Habit tempts us to stand over or stand away from people with disabilities. In many agencies, informal norms encourage staff to keep "them" under control to minimize liability or to maintain routines. We *stand over* people when we expect them to tell us their dreams at times and places and in terms that are comfortable for us. Much training promotes detachment and "objectivity". We *stand away* from people when we collect data to map their lives into our categories -whether that data accounts frequencies of target behaviors or visions of a desirable future. Frustration or conflict evokes habits of control or distance. These habits take us away from the question we most need to answer. "How can I show this

person that I want to join her; that I want to be on her side in a constructive way. Maybe I won't be able to help her do what she wants, but I want her to know that understanding what she wants matters to me."

What we listen for We listen best when we encourage people to find their voice. Individualism distorts our understanding of voice into a solo performance: one person clamoring to put himself first. A better understanding recognizes that voice serves participation and contribution. Voice grows in social context, as a person discovers what he wants to say, develops a way to communicate it, and knows that others care to hear and respond. Listening is not about granting wishes; it is a matter of attending to the details and dreams that disclose a person's identity and desires to participate and contribute. As people develop their voice, their sense of their individual place in their world grows more particular, more complex, and more strong. Sometimes a developing voice becomes shrill or cracks before a person can sound true notes; sometimes it isn't easy or pleasant to hear what a person has to express as they find their way through difficult or self-defeating situations. (For wonderful descriptions of the way people with developmental disabilities create lives with those who hear and confirm their voices, see Taylor, Bogdan, & Lutfiyya, 1995.)

How we listen We listen best when we listen with care. Care is not feeling pity. It is attending to the threads of meaning that emerge from thoughtful investigation of a person's biography, discerning expressions of competence, interest, concern, and passion in her responses to day-to-day experience, and creating invitations for considered discussion of her dreams. Care means acknowledging vulnerabilities, fears, disappointments, and failures and the ways a person understands these experiences and finds the courage to keep on. Care expresses an active interest in taking the person's point of view and seeing how her actions make sense to her, even when they seem discordant or opaque to others.

Slowed down and described this way, listening may seem like an activity for a few saints. What is hopeful is how many people have the gift of listening and how many people can discover and refine this gift when they allow people with developmental disabilities to be their teachers. What is challenging is to manage service organizations in such a way that their staff feel encouraged to listen and the people with disabilities who use them feel encouraged to find and develop their own voices.

How can agency managers promote listening?

Managers promote listening to people with disabilities when they build a culture of listening. Effective managers...

- ... themselves practice listening to people with disabilities, often as a member of one or more circles of support
- ... encourage a climate of listening among staff, beginning with their own practice of listening deeply and respectfully to their own staff

- ... challenge formal policies and informal practices that encourage staff to stand over or to stand away from the people they support and actively encourage staff to stand with the people they support
- ... strongly encourage organizational openness to the many different people who can make a positive contribution to people's future; this often means creatively negotiating conflicts between people with disabilities and members of their families or between staff who want to support a person and representatives of regulatory authorities
- ... increase organizational flexibility to use agency resources in supporting constructive responses to the dreams and aspirations of people with disabilities, in practice this has involved everything from allowing exceptions to policy to completely restructuring the agency and its programs

Listening requires the personal courage to be open and sensitive to situations that can be difficult and confusing. Leading an organization of listeners requires the wisdom to develop the capacity to take direction from the people the agency exists to serve. A culture of listening increases an agency's capacity to enable people to serve one another in a way that would meet the test that Robert K. Greenleaf (1977) set for leadership:

*Do those served
grow as persons;
do they,
while being served,
become healthier,
wiser, freer,
more autonomous,
more likely themselves
to become servants?*

References

- Greenleaf, R. (1977) *Servant leadership*. Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press.
- Taylor, S., Bogdan, R., & Lutfiyya, Z.M. (1995). *The varieties of community experience*. Baltimore, MD: Paul Brookes Publishers.