

Structured Listening Groups: A Facilitator's Guide

Source; Tim Dyer – The Johnmark Extension

Listening groups are a structured form of discussion. Their purpose is to promote genuine listening and understanding in times of tension or conflict around a specific issue. They are a suitable process for conflict categories 1, 2 and 3 but not in the higher categories of 4 and 5.

In order to use the process, the following is needed:

1. The process works best with two facilitators and around 6-10 participants (not including the facilitators).
2. Two sets of the names of each of the participants on individual pieces of paper in two separate containers (bowls or boxes)
3. A large table and chairs if possible so people can sit around a table in relatively close proximity.
4. Note paper and pens for each participant. Maybe water and glasses.

Listening Group Process

Begin with a welcome

Scripture Reading: Ideally give this out or present it so people can read it in unison (Often Eph 4:1-4 or another suitable passage).

Check-In: Facilitator opens the Listening Group with a form of the information sheet and then presents the starter question. (See below)

There is then time for Quiet Reflection and Journaling: 5 minutes maximum. This time is a listening time too. "Before you write, listen to yourself and hear what you think and feel about this topic / these questions".

ROUND ONE

Sharing and Listening:

1. The order of speaking will be determined by drawing names from the first container. Once names are drawn from the first container, they are not returned. The speaker shares his or her thoughts on the opening question to the rest of the Listening Group. Three minutes (Sometimes 4 or 5 but must be the same for everyone) per person for speaking.

Facilitator 1 to start the process, Facilitator 2 to draw the names and keep time (give a 30 sec indication and then call time).

2. Before the next speaker's name is drawn from the first container, a name will be drawn from the second container to identify a person who will briefly reflect back to the speaker what he/she understood the speaker to be saying. This should take approximately one minute and when the reflector is finished, this name is returned to the second container. (The reflector's name is put back into the second container so that everyone will continue to listen carefully as his/her name could be drawn again.) The speaker should then be able to comment briefly if they have something to add or correct. If the facilitator feels an important contribution is missed in the summary and comment by the speaker, they may add to the summary at this point.
3. A minute is given for participants to take notes around what they are learning or understanding about the issue. Just dot points to add to their first page. Taking notes while a speaker is speaking is discouraged. If people are taking notes, they cannot watch body language and be aware of facial expressions that may tell a great deal about the speaker's feelings. Also, good listening is a skill that hopefully will be carried over into everyday life and note taking during a normal everyday conversation is unlikely.
4. Then another speaker's name is drawn from the first container. This procedure continues until all in the group have been the speaker.

ROUND TWO

Sharing learning and observations: A time to share the insights, questions and learnings that have been gained from listening in round one. There is no respondent in this round. Again, this is not a time to try to convince someone to believe differently, but to speak of insights each person has received from someone in the group. Remember, no one can be speaker twice until everyone in the group has had an opportunity to speak. The facilitator and assistant facilitator may take part in the sharing time after allowing all participants who wish to speak to do so.

If there is time a more general discussion of some ideas can follow, as a dialogue, not debate. This is a time when participants might ask for clarification concerning something they did not understand or would like to hear more about. Participants are invited to contribute, they need not share more if they do not wish to.

Unison Reading: Put a closing scripture reading passage at the end of the session.

Listening Group Process Sheet

The goal of a listening group is for participants to develop understanding and insight into one another's beliefs and perspectives by listening carefully to both the ideas and the feelings that each holds concerning a topic or questions. It is a dialogue instead of a debate, with respect being shown for all points of view.

The intent is that the process will enable connection and understanding in a context where people often separate from and misunderstand each other.

Ground Rules for Listening Groups:

1. What is shared by others in the group is confidential to the group unless the entire group decides otherwise. What is shared by a person belongs to that person and may be shared by that person to others.
2. No one can be speaker twice until everyone in the group has contributed once.
3. Each person will take the responsibility for her/his own statements using "I" statements rather than "you or they" or "everyone believes" etc. Labelling and the use of descriptors which imply judgement on others should be carefully avoided. E.g. true (biblical, godly or faithful) Christians of course think this.... Implying others are false, unbiblical, ungodly or unfaithful.
4. When speaking, each person will remember to be respectful of other individuals and groups with whom they disagree.
5. Participants will seek to remain focused on the prompt question. If individuals begin to get off-topic, the facilitator will encourage moving back to the topic.
6. Everyone will be attentive to time when it comes to sharing, knowing that each person needs equal time. A facilitator will keep time.

Listening Groups, What They Are and What They Are Not:

- Listening Groups are not therapy or support groups. While personal impacts and insights are encouraged, the sharing of unresolved personal problems or issues are generally not a part of the discussion.
- They are not study groups; their primary aim is not education but listening.
- They are not debates.
- They are not action groups where decisions are made and implementation discussed.

- They are not traditional prayer groups although prayer may legitimately take place within the group.
- They are not primarily fellowship or social groups, although some community will result.

Listening Groups Are:

- They are a process aimed at deepening community through simple acts of gathering, focusing, reflecting, speaking, and listening.

Aimed at being a relationally transformative process where deeper understanding contributes to improved trust and collaboration.