

Listening Triads with speaker, listener, and observer.

During the 25 years doing Befriender training Listening Triads with speaker, listener, and observer became an important exercise. Howard Clinebell, a pastoral theologian who conducted two three-day workshops in different years in the 70's, introduced us to the exercise. I like it better than role-playing which I was never comfortable using.

Triads were more realistic for me since the speaker tells a story that is fresh in their mind or they could pick a story from the category chosen for the session, like an illness story, elderly story, family crisis, dying patient story, grief story, etc. Our two-hour training sessions had a presentation and discussion in the first hour and a practice session in the second hour based on the presentation. Triads were our most used training exercise during the practice session. Verbatim and practice responses were also used.

In Listening Triads listening was the main focus. The speaker started a story and the listener could only interrupt to give a summary of the story told up to that point. The listener could not ask questions or tell a story of their own or give suggestions. They had to stay with the story being told and only repeat a summary as they went along. The observer was a double-listener, listening to the story of the speaker and the summaries of the listener. After the speaker finished the observer shared where the listener was on target with the summary and where they missed part of the story.

Persons in the Triad rotated so all had the experience of being speaker, listening, and observer. This took time and there was no rush. We usually had four or five Listening Triads going at one time. After they started it was my task to answer any questions a Triad might have. When the groups were finished all were debriefed, speakers were asked, "What was it like being speaker? What was it like being listener? What was it like being observer?"

The speakers usually affirmed the value of having a listener that allowed them to tell their story in full. Listeners felt the constraint of

just being a listener. Being a listener only was not an easy assignment. They wanted to ask questions or offer some help during the story or do what is called, “leap frog” what was being said. Observers had the challenge in listening to both and offering helpful observations to the listener as to where they were catching what was being said and where they came up short.

I remember a time when I was doing the Triad exercise with a new class for the Home Maker Service. Mrs. Bell had me come down and participate in their orientation with a listening session. The Homemakers would be hearing the stories as well as doing the work they were assisted to do in a given home. Being a listener would be their role rather than giving advice.

I started with a demonstration Triad for all to watch and listen. This time the speaker told her own grief story in great detail and in a moving way. The listener did a good job of listening and repeating back from time to time what she had heard. The observer commented on both. During the debriefing time the listener complained she could not make suggestions or give advice or feel helpful. The speaker affirmed that being able to tell the story without the advice or extra comments was the most helpful. The importance of being the listener was affirmed.

The listener has an advantage in one respect. The speaker can only talk 125 words per minute on average while the listener has 400 to 600 words going in their head. The extra words help the listener sort out what is important in the story being told. The other side of the issue, the extra words can also serve as a distraction in staying with what is being told.

The discipline of story listening requires holding in check our own stories, telling a better story, leap-frogging with helps and answers, etc. The real test comes as the feelings become stronger in a story being told to not let the feelings interfere with our listening and staying with the story. As story listeners we receive the story, the meaning and the feelings as well. The latter can make listening more difficult, especially

when strong feelings accompanying the story connect with a similar story in the listener.

As stated in the Mary and Martha story, she has the better part and what she has cannot be taken away from her. She receives a blessing. The experience of being a listener who makes a difference makes a lasting impression on both the listener as well as the one telling the story. A mutual benefit is experienced in story listening. I believe Jesus acknowledges the same in Luke 10:43.

Shalom,

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