



Training in Three Crucial Conversational Skills

From Shut Tight

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Three skills are invaluable in any setting where people work and minister together.

“Start With Heart”

The skill of being able to “start with heart” refers to people considering what they really want and staying focused on achieving that goal. This involves better relationships, solutions, valuing others and being valued by them, and expressing love and consideration. Once emotions are strong, the stakes become higher, and opinions vary, people act in ways that seem designed to get the opposite reaction than the one desired.[1]

For instance, a mother and daughter both want a good relationship filled with understanding and mutual respect but find themselves yelling at each other and calling each other “irresponsible,” “unfair,” and “uncaring.” They storm off having achieved exactly the opposite of what both wanted. When a person has strong emotions—for instance, anger or hurt—due to something another says or does, starting with one’s heart allows one to pause and ask this question: “What do I want for myself, for others, and for this relationship?”[2] By pausing to ask and find the answer, people become open to change the way they see a situation and in how they will respond. Conversations are challenging when the outcome is important, and people differ on what the outcome should be when their emotions are strong. In those conversations, if people will begin with a heart evaluation and work on that first to recognize what they really want, they will have a better chance at engaging in the conversation in a way that brings clarity, trust, and mutual respect.

“Master Your Own Story”

“Master Your Own Story” is a process based on the concept that people cause their own emotions and therefore are responsible for and able to control their actions. Others do not make a person mad or cause any other emotion. Rather one’s own story, often triggered by something someone else says or does, provokes an emotion and therefore a resulting action. People directly influence their own emotions and problems. “Master Your Own Story” is a process that allows people to recognize their own part in causing their emotions and actions along what is called a “path to action.” The path to action begins with an experience that causes people to create a story. That story generates feelings, which lead to an action. The point where change is possible is in the story.

Having clarity about the facts as well as story and feelings is important to any dialogue.[3] By seeking more information, considering other possibilities, understanding another person’s story, one’s own story changes. Consequently, the emotions and actions change as well. This skill is extremely useful in many settings and begins to alter the way people look at their experiences. Individuals who have learned “Master Your Own Story” can help others see that their initial stories and feelings also might be

reevaluated. Engaging in these conversations adds clarity, builds trust, and demonstrates mutual respect.

Listening and Reflecting: “Let Me See if I Got It?”

“Let me see if I got it?” is a reference to a mirroring dialogue technique by Harville Hendrix, a clinical pastoral counselor recognized for his work with couples, much of which is focused on communication. The technique consists of the repetition of several questions: “Let me see if I got it?” “Did I get it?” “Is there more?” and “Let me see if I got it all?”[4] Each is followed by the listener repeating what was heard. The technique gives the listener a concrete task to accomplish in the conversation and communicates desire for clarity and understanding, sincere interest in the other person, and a clear concept of what the other person has to say. This is a simple-to-remember and easy-to-implement skill. This makes “Let me see if I got it?” a very useful tool for a discovery process.

As the first step, “Let me see if I got it?” provides a listener with a concrete task to accomplish in the conversation. Once the speaker has said what he or she wants to say, listeners ask to see if they properly and fully understood. The listener does this by repeating back to the speaker what was heard. By knowing that they are going to report back to the speaker, listeners often seek to listen more closely in order to hear and remember what the speaker expresses. This focuses the thoughts of listeners and helps them understand what they are to do. They might take notes or simply absorb the words and meaning carefully. In any case, they are working on their task of listening. In doing so, this means they are not interrupting or correcting, challenging, thinking of a response, or daydreaming. In this way, “Let me see if I got it?” sets the stage for the rest of a positive interaction.

The second question communicates desire for clarity and understanding. Having repeated back what they heard the speaker say, listeners ask, “Did I get it?” and make it clear that they are sincerely interested in hearing and understanding the other person. If the speaker says the listener did not get it right, the listener invites the speaker to repeat the message and goes through the process again until the speaker is able to say, “Yes, you got it.” This process expresses a desire for a clear negotiation of meaning by both parties.

“Is there more?” is the third question and communicates sincere interest in the other person. Having made it clear that they heard and understood what the speaker had to say, often listeners desire to respond or rebut what has been said. Instead, they ask this simple question: “Is there more?”—listening to whatever else the speaker has to say. Then they go back through the first two steps to ensure mutual understanding. By doing so, listeners demonstrate that they are more interested in hearing what the speaker has to say than in starting to talk themselves. It communicates sincerity.

“Let me see if I got it all?” is the fourth step. With it, listeners have the opportunity to communicate that they have a clear understanding of what the other person has to say. Once the speaker is able to respond with certainty that he or she has no more to say, the listener now seeks to summarize and repeat back everything the speaker has said from the beginning. While this may seem tedious, the speaker has the experience of being truly heard and understood. The experience creates clarity, builds

trust, and mutual respect. Also, having felt heard, the speaker has been prepared to listen and has received a good model for how to do so through the recent interaction with the listener.

Awareness of personality tendencies, relationship tools, and conflict management skills all contribute to significant insight into the challenges faced by members seeking to discover and address issues in their churches. In particular, boundary violations and abuse of power exist in churches and need to be understood. Triangles and conflict styles significantly impact the way people respond during conflict, and understanding them gives people the power to use them constructively. “Start With Heart,” “Master Your Own Story,” and “Listen and Reflect” are practical skills that will help people in any conversations they have.