

LISTENING AND DEMOCRACY

By Bill Caspary

The Heart Of Democracy

Listening brings democracy to life. When we pay attention to each other, we pick up observations about work problems as they develop, so we can intervene early and stay productive. People feel valued and respected when their ideas are heard, so co-op morale improves, and members are more motivated to participate. Listening avoids unnecessary conflicts that arise due to misunderstandings. And listening helps resolve real conflicts when there are genuine disagreements on co-op policy. Listening not only contributes to smooth functioning, but also to innovation; it encourages new ideas and helps us make good use of them. Listening not only makes democracy work; it infuses it with a climate of mutual regard, comfort, and pleasure in working together; it is at the heart of a well functioning co-op.

But don't we listen to each other as a matter of course? Often we are busy waiting our turn to speak, planning what we are going to say. While working out our reply, did we stop even hearing the other person's voice? Or if we continued to listen, was it only to find points to rebut? A consultant I know frequently asks members of a working group: "*How well do you hear the others in the group?*" Typically they all answer, "*I hear them well.*" Then the consultant asks them: "*How well are you heard by other members of the group.*" Typically they all answer, "*They don't really listen to me.*" Perhaps we do need to take a look at how we listen. We may find that listening is often not that easy.

Obstacles to Listening

Perhaps the feeling that we won't get the chance to speak our own piece makes us hurry past what the other person says. But that leaves them unheard, and less likely to listen to us. We get into a vicious circle. Or just listening makes us nervous – we're used to making things happen, not letting them unfold. There are also several things in our culture that aggravate these problems.

First, we are brought up in an *adversarial system*, stemming from capitalist competition. We learn it early as we compete for grades in school. We see it glamorized in courtroom dramas. It's hard to listen when discussion is understood as a contest, a win-lose game. Of course, some parts of the truth can emerge from a conflict of ideas, but a combination of listening and debating can give us the benefits of both, can provide both support and challenge.

Second, we are shaped by a *culture of hurry*. There is so much to get done and we are anxious to get on with it. Slow talk, silence, and just listening make us impatient and nervous. But haste makes waste. If we take time at first to listen and get the issues clear, allowing others to feel included, we'll lose less time later going down blind alleys.

Third, we live in a "*fix-it*" culture—the culture of American "know-how." As soon as a problem is broached we rush to find solutions. Again there is a virtue in our problem-solving skills, but if we move immediately to solutions, we fail to listen for what the problem really is. We fix what isn't broken, and neglect what needs fixing.

Fortunately, there are ways to begin building a new culture, one based on the skills of listening.

Listening Skills

One such skill is "*waiting for thoughts to unfold.*" Suppose a co-op member wants to change the work schedule, or propose a new marketing idea, or figure out why certain jobs are going more slowly than expected. Often the first thing that person says will be only an

introduction, a gambit, a bid for attention. Or the speaker may be groping to formulate an elusive idea. If we are off and running with replies to that first statement, we may miss the issue and leave the other person feeling misunderstood, disrespected, and frustrated. That person's valuable input will be lost. With encouragement and patience from a listener, however, people can be helped to arrive at the point they really want to make and we will all benefit.

People may also come at what's on their minds indirectly, in order to test the waters and see if they can risk getting to a sensitive issue. Or, they might ask a question, which hints at what is on their minds. Instead of answering immediately, we might ask what brought the question up, or what their own answer to it is. Often, there is much to be learned this way. If a member is angry, his first expressions may be blowing off steam. If we resist the temptation to react, he may move on to speak more calmly and informatively about what's bothering him. He may talk about specific incidents, to which his anger is a reaction, and this will help us understand where he is coming from. For all these reasons, it's worth putting our own responses on hold, clearing our minds, and devoting ourselves to just listening for a while.

A related technique is *to ask drawing-out questions*. Here we develop the habit of asking people to *"tell me more,"* or letting them know, *"I'm curious about that,"* or whatever springs naturally to our lips when we're genuinely interested. From such simple steps, very positive dialogues can result.

Acknowledging that listening is important, people often say "I understand," before making their own points. A skeptical look may appear on the other person's face, however, which seems to say, "Do you really understand?" We might say more fully, "I understand that the machine needs servicing." (or whatever the case may be). That way if we did understand, the other person is assured of it, and if we didn't get her point, she can rephrase it or explain it for us, or add more. "The machine is o.k. on normal loads, but overheats when we do those larger batches." *Learning to "paraphrase," to say back in our own words what we hear others saying is a useful skill.* Even if we don't actually speak the words, preparing in our minds to paraphrase focuses our attention on the speaker. At times a paraphrase may be superfluous or condescending, at other times very helpful. It's a judgment call, a matter of tact and experience.

Differences in culture and gender can make listening more difficult. *We need to be aware that other people have different styles of communication, different meanings for certain words, and different ways of handling conflict.* Even people of presumably similar backgrounds can have widely divergent temperaments. Severe misunderstandings can come, for example, from a clash of people devoted to detail and precision, with those devoted to speed and quantity of production. Each needs to learn to understand and be respectful of the other's very different approach. Then they can move ahead to finding an accommodation between them. If the other person's ideas are very different from our own, we may experience that as a rejection or attack, and it becomes very hard to listen. We need to learn to hear this as a statement of a different view, not a criticism of our own view. *To do this we can ask where the person is coming from, what their special perspective is that is different from ours.* Asking drawing out questions is helpful at these moments. We have to be careful, however, not to slip an implied criticism into the question, such as, "Don't you care about how much that will cost?"

Sometimes the other person really *is* blaming us. We feel impelled to defend ourselves. If we do react defensively, however, a futile and painful argument is likely to result. If we can manage to hold back for a while, we may begin to hear the specifics of what went wrong. It's easier to handle, *"It seemed to me that you did this,"* than *"you screwed up."* Even when people say the latter, we can "reframe" it in our minds as the former, and even paraphrase it back to them in the reframed form.

It also helps to look forward instead of back. What can be done to relieve this situation, rather than who did or said exactly what in the past? "He did, no she did," can be debated endlessly without resolution. "What can we do differently next time?" has answers. We may

also begin to hear that the other person is hurting and needs our support, whether or not we are to blame for that hurt. Hearing this feeling, our sympathy is drawn to the other person, easing our defensiveness.

Some of us, particularly men, listen for other people's ideas and overlook the feelings they are expressing. We may believe, implicitly or explicitly, that people have a rational and an irrational/emotional part, and that only the rational part is relevant to decisions about work and work life in the cooperative. *But feelings and ideas are not so easily separated. To fully understand a person's message we need to listen to both.* Feelings are often expressed indirectly through vocal quality and facial expression. So listening becomes a matter of "tuning in" to the other person with more than just one of our senses.

Training

Many organizations, including co-ops, hold organized training sessions to help members acquire these skills. Participants in listening workshops are asked, for example, to role-play people they've had trouble understanding—to try to get inside how they feel about and see the world. Other participants are asked to listen to the role player, make an effort to understand, and state those understandings for the speaker to confirm or correct. Other participants develop their observational skills by watching the interaction and noticing where understanding occurs or fails to occur. There are trainers who specialize in doing this work for democratic workplaces; some are mentioned in the resources section at the end of this article.

Conclusion: Getting to the Heart of Democratic Work

Cooperatives are often formed, at least in part, precisely to build a new culture. They give us a special opportunity to break the old dysfunctional habits, which we may have internalized without realizing it. To do this, however, cooperatives must give their members time to critically reflect on adversarial discussion, hurry up culture, and fix-it culture. They need to help us notice and point out to each other when we're not listening, and to give us the training and opportunity to acquire listening skills.

Discussion, itself, can be, in John Dewey's words, "*a cooperative undertaking in which both parties learn by giving the other a chance to express itself. . . . [People can] cooperate by giving differences a chance to show themselves because of the belief that the expression of difference is not only a right of the other persons but is a means of enriching one's own life experience.*" Listening can help our co-ops provide us a good livelihood and decent working conditions, while providing ethical goods and services to the public. But the democratic workplace can enrich our lives even further. Dewey concludes, "*The task of democracy is forever that of creation of a freer and more humane experience in which all share and to which all contribute.*" Democratic work life can have heart, and listening can be at the heart of democratic work.

Resources

Organizations:

The Public Conversations Project, 46 Kondazian St., Watertown, MA 02172.

Collaborative Initiative, 402 Gammon Pl., Suite 360

Madison WI 53719; ci@execpc.com; 608-833-7133

Center for Nonviolent Communication, P.O. Box 2662; Sherman, TX 75091-2662, cnvc@compuserve.com.

Study Circle Resource Center, PO Box 203, Pomfret, CT 06258; 860-928-2616; scrc@neca.com.

Books:

John Gastil (1993), *Democracy in Small Groups*, Philadelphia: New Society Publishers. (see esp. his final chapter on “*Small Group Exercises.*”)

Frances Moore Lappe and Martin Dubois (1994), *The Quickening of America*, esp., pp. 240-246, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass.

Mary Belenky, et al. (1996). *Women’s Ways of Knowing*.

Carl Rogers (1961), *On Becoming a Person*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin (Rogers ideas on listening have influenced nearly everyone writing on this topic).

Mary Jacksteit and Adrienne Kaufmann (1995), *Finding Common Ground in the Abortion Conflict*, Common Ground Network for Life and Choice, 1601 Connecticut Ave. N.W., Washington, DC: 20009 (this manual provides useful procedures for dialogue on any issue).