

Awkward or not...

## Summarizing is crucial listening skill

by Ron Claassen

Listening is the most critical skill in reconciling injustices and resolving problems.

Have you ever noticed how arguments get louder? The reason is that each side recognizes subconsciously that the other side is not listening to them and so they, again subconsciously, speak louder in hopes that the other side will finally listen. Real listening will redirect an argument in the direction of reconciling injustices or problem solving.

If you think back on your experiences, you can probably remember a time when, in the midst of working on a conflict, you or the other person said something like, "So that is what you meant," or, "Yes, you finally have heard my side."

Matthew 18 says, "...and if he listens, you have gained a brother." (I'm sure the same applies to our sisters; however, they might be more inclined to listen in the first place.) The context of this statement is a series of steps recommended for dealing with a situation where one has sinned against another. All of the steps focus on listening and don't even suggest the need to agree. And since the balance of the chapter focuses on forgiveness, it tells us that Jesus thought listening was a significant and critical step in the forgiveness process.

At first glance, it seems like this idea of listening is overrated. When I talk with someone who is very angry at another person, after listening to them and summarizing to be sure I heard them correctly, I often ask, "And have you heard what they are saying?" I usually get an immediate yes and then I ask, "So what are they saying?" While it usually takes at least 15 minutes to an hour to tell their own side, the summary of the other's side is usually completed in less than a minute. Usually it contains an offensive comment made by the other at some point and a categorical and often unreasonable-sounding demand. If they agree to mediation or ask for advice on how to approach the injustice/problem, I suggest listening to each other as a first step. (That is after making some agreement to work constructively to try to reconcile the injustices or solve the problems.)

What I observe, and experience personally, is that it is very hard to listen to something we don't agree with or that describes hurt caused by us. I think our preference, if having to listen at all, is to endure the noise and get on to the next step. However, real listening calls for us to try to restate in our own words, as much as possible, what the other has said in order to check it out with them to find out if we really caught the meaning of what they were trying to tell us. If this process is done with an attitude of really wanting to understand what the other has to say, it is welcomed and usually leads the speaker to wanting to share at an even deeper level. It is not uncommon, after a genuine summary, for the speaker to say, "Yes, and the reason I feel this is..." When we connect this way, I observe/experience it as a holy moment.

Many people say they can't see themselves doing this summary because, "It just isn't me." And I wouldn't argue with them that "it just isn't me" in situations of conflict. However, most of us do use this strategy on some occasions. If we have been told a telephone number or address, we think it is very natural to check and see if we heard it correctly. So we already do it in some important situations. I'm just suggesting we add some additional important situations in which we automatically do it. I certainly agree that if we did it all of the time, our friends would probably abandon us.

See 'Real Listening...' on page 2.

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## VORP helps family restore domestic tranquility after domestic violence incident

by Robert Van Cobb  
with Ron Claassen

This is not a typical case. VORP rarely works with a domestic violence case. VORP accepted this case because the victim requested it. The story was written by Robert Van Cobb, VORP mediator and member of Northwest Church. Some details have been changed to protect the identity of the participants.

This was a new experience for me, and I was glad that my wife was with me. I tend to be a "bottom line" sort of person and in this situation I soon became aware that this behavior would not be appropriate,

both because of the nature of the case and because of the culture of the participants.

The offense was domestic violence. I learned that an argument had taken place, that the wife had been injured, and that part of the intensity and behavior was the result of two diabetics who had not eaten all day and who had neglected to take their medication. As told by the wife, the husband had been working with a knife doing some carving when the argument started, and had not put it down. (She made it clear that he didn't go pick

up a knife after the argument started.) As he gestured with his hands (and the knife) during the argument his wife also gestured and the tips of three fingers were badly cut.

In our individual meeting with the husband we learned he was very sorry that the accident had occurred. He said the argument was unnecessary, but typical of their behavior when they neglected their health. He wished to be reconciled to his wife and desired VORP intervention.

During our meeting with the wife I confirmed that she had initiated the VORP process herself and without pressure.

She felt that the situation had gotten out of hand and wanted to put matters right. She said she did not intend to get the authorities involved in this matter. She had merely sought medical attention for her fingertips and the next thing she knew she was speaking to a police officer. He asked her a number of questions and she had attempted to answer them to the best of her ability but she acknowledged she was still in a confused state, having not yet eaten and having still not taken her medication.

See 'Domestic Violence...' on page 2.

# Domestic violence incident resolved through VORP mediation

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She said she hadn't intended that her husband be arrested but was advised that the matter was out of her hands. She hoped that the authorities would soon recognize that this was all a misunderstanding, but as matters progressed, she came to understand that it would be necessary to actively pursue clarification in this matter. She wanted to be reunited and reconciled with her husband and requested VORP intervention.

During the joint meeting there was much happiness among the three children of the household. They had not seen their father for several weeks and were accustomed to spending a great deal of time with him. There was happiness between the husband and wife as well. As the meeting opened the family requested that such a meeting should be opened with a prayer. We formed a circle. It was very meaningful for all of us. First each was allowed to speak as they felt led (they said things that affirmed each other and the need to work on this problem) and finally each was invited to pray orally if they wished.

There was some discussion as to whether the children should remain for the part of the meeting discussing the incident since they had not witnessed the incident. It was finally decided to excuse them initially in case the conversation might upset them. The wife and husband then in turn acknowledged the incident and expressed their regrets about the argument. The husband acknowledged his wrong and

expressed regret that the wife had been injured. The wife noted that she felt equally at fault for the argument, and felt that she had some part in the injury in that she had been gesturing and was not watching the knife.

During the discussion they both voiced concern about the situation in which they found themselves. Against their wishes, the husband was not allowed to visit the wife and chil-

dren, so instead of quickly dealing with the event, they were now enmeshed in a variety of court proceedings.

They seemed ready to discuss the future. We then discussed ideas and suggestions to prevent a recurrence of the conflict as well as ways of demonstrating their commitment to each other.

The husband announced he had already attended a session of anger management

counseling and was planning to continue. The wife was also willing to attend counseling. They also decided that one way of demonstrating their commitment to each other would be to eat correctly and to take their medication on schedule.

The VORP agreement was then completed and signed and a copy was provided for the court.

The extended family was aware of the meeting and supported the idea. The next evening I spoke with the offender's mother who advised me that our efforts seemed to have helped both the family and the court situation. She said that they all felt a renewed hope.

Thanks Robert!

"Blessed are the Peacemakers"

## Real listening focuses on speaker, not self

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The first time you try it you will probably feel awkward and fear that the other will think it is a ridiculous thing to do. However, if you try it, I am sure you will want to do it again because that person will not think it is ridiculous at all. They will appreciate that you want to hear their side. The scripture is reliable; you will gain a brother/sister/child/wife/husband/co-worker, etc.

The prerequisite is that you really want to or have decided it would be important for you to hear and really understand what the other is saying and how they are experiencing the injustice or problem. It is okay to listen even if you don't yet feel like you want to hear the other. If you wait for the feeling to be congruent with this decision, you may never do it.

Having made the decision to really listen, when the speaker pauses, say, with a question in your tone, "You said... (summarizing the

thoughts and feelings they have just expressed)." By saying, "You said..." or just summarizing without any lead-in at all, you leave the focus on their comments. If you have a long lead-in like, "What I thought I heard you say was..." you change the focus from them to you. In real listening, we want the focus to stay with the speaker so they can correct us or add more.

I have experienced connecting in this way and have observed people in very serious conflict take these first and very critical steps. I think we miss many opportunities to connect through listening. I know that in our Peacemaking Model, listening is a very important first step. When there is a mutual recognition that the injustices/violations have been recognized, people are open to consider how equity can be restored and what agreements are needed for a better future. For more information on the Peacemaking Model, visit our web site at: [www.vorp.org](http://www.vorp.org).

## VORP Volunteer Mediators Needed

VORP mediators learn and practice peace-making skills they can use in the home, workplace, and congregation.

The next VORP mediator trainings are scheduled on April 18 & 19; and May 29, June 5 & 12.

For details, call Julius or Victoria at 291-1120.

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