



## ***The Tap Root***

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### ***Listening, Suffering and Glory***

By Nick Howard, Psy.D.

These last issues have been emphasizing how we as Christian leaders are called to love, to build, and to disciple. If we are to bear lasting fruit, we must be sure we are improving in those areas. With that in mind, it is time to get more specific about how we love, build and disciple. Let me start with the most foundational skill we have to develop if we are to make a lasting difference with our lives. Without it, our interpersonal influence as a leader is severely limited.

As the title hints, it is the skill of listening that is foundational to bearing lasting fruit. Listening is the gateway to redemptive interpersonal influence. People must feel valued and understood before they will let you speak into their life.

Listening can be easy and yet can also be profoundly difficult, depending on the circumstances. Yet, if we can learn to listen well, especially when it is hardest, we have the greatest chance of making the biggest difference in people's lives, which over time can create stunning changes in the culture of any organization.

So, what is listening, at its essence? It is simply about being present to the person you are listening to, *as you work to enter their world*. It is seeking to understand where they are, first and foremost, and then as you do that well, you consider

#### ***Compelling Quotes***

"Empathy is key to retaining talent."  
Daniel Goleman in  
Primal Leadership

"The best leaders talk  
*with* people, not at them."  
Susan Scott in  
Fierce Conversations

"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor, because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."  
Ep. 3:19

"Therefore, consider carefully how you listen."  
Jesus, Luke 8:18

how might God be asking you to speak into their lives. Listening asks us to set aside our agendas, ignore distractions, and *simply be with* the person's heart as they're sharing. Perhaps already, the difficulty of listening well is already starting to pop up in your mind. Set aside our agendas? Ignore distractions? Let our hearts and souls be potentially disturbed by what they're saying, and yet stay focused on him or her? That can be immensely difficult. It takes a mature and whole heart to listen well.

Now may be a good time to introduce the concept of suffering. Suffering has a host of forms, and in this context it is more about stretching our souls, about going places emotionally that aren't pleasant for us, but that will bless the other person, and honor the Lord, (and somehow transform our souls in ways that couldn't have happened otherwise). As most of you know, the New Testament has a number of references to the role of suffering in service, with the ultimate point of reference of course being the suffering of Christ. Jesus simply coming from heaven, where life was good beyond measure, to enter our broken world riddled with sin and darkness, to *be with us*, is entering suffering. Then, for him to enter into people's lives at various levels, where there are countless hurts and defenses, is another kind of suffering. And ultimately, he bore the greatest suffering by taking on our sin, as a perfect sacrifice, where he laid down his life of his own accord. Phew. That is intense. What an amazing model for us to consider as we look at our lives and callings to lead and serve others.

Yet in God's economy, we never enter suffering simply for the sake of entering suffering. He is not a masochist. There is a higher goal, a greater anticipated reality that is pursued in the entering of suffering. Somehow, as Jesus entered our suffering, it paved the way for glory. As he says on the road to Damascus "Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?" (Luke 24:26). Later on Paul says, (as he does in other places as well) "...if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory" Rom 8:17. Wonderfully, there is a prize in God's economy, a way that in the goodness and generosity of his heart he rewards those who redemptively enter the suffering of others, (whether it is physically, mentally, or emotionally), with praise and glory and honor when we love others as he loves us. Amazing.

Empathizing, is going even further into listening, where we work to enter into the heart of what the person is saying. After listening with our hearts, we work to empathize by sharing a summary statement that captures both the cognitive component of what the person is sharing along with the emotional component of what the person is sharing—what they are thinking and feeling. Often a summary statement will include at the end of it something like "does that sound right?" or "does that make sense?" or an inflection that goes up at the end of the sentence, to convey that you may be wrong, and that the person sharing gets to decide if you are tracking or not. The summary statement is important because it lets the person know that you are tracking with what he or she is saying--that you are with them. Done well, it gives them permission and encouragement to go further into the heart of the issue they are exploring.

What happens when we listen and empathize well with a colleague, subordinate or friend? When we enter their worlds, and even their suffering? They feel valued. They feel cared about. Hope rises in their hearts. They may think: "Maybe this can work out.

Maybe there is a good solution here where I don't see it. Maybe I can grow through the safety of this relationship." By listening well and empathizing well, we are honoring someone's personhood; we are conveying they matter.

By developing this foundational skill, you have a chance to impact change I believe you could do no other way. Over time, and across relationships within an organization, there is a sense of hope and possibility for change that can't be created any other way than by our capacities to listen.

As we set aside our agendas and listen, as we ignore distractions, we create possibilities that didn't exist before the conversation started. At the very least, when we listen well, even if we have hard things to say in response to the person, when we have done our best to enter their world, and if their hearts are soft, they will appreciate how well you've listened. It may be good to ask yourself, and a few others you can trust to give you honest answers, "how well do I listen?" How well do I enter people's worlds?" The extent to which you can enter people's worlds will greatly impact your ability to lead and serve them. It may be fair to say that to the extent you are willing to enter suffering, you will be found pleasing, and experience glory and affirmation from the Ultimate Audience, your Creator. We will explore in further issues how we develop a heart that can listen well. Blessings on your leadership journey.