

Focused Listening in Dyads

Purpose: *To build community and relational trust and create an intentional practice around listening and speaking. This practice might be introduced to groups early as a foundational practice to build upon.*

In this practice, participants will take turns listening and speaking on a designated prompt for an agreed upon period of time. Each participant will have an equal time to speak. The speaking prompt is introduced by the facilitator before the dyad begins.

Instructions:

- Dyad Partner A will speak first to the prompt, while Partner B simply listens without interruption or questions. If the speaker finishes what they would like to say or share before the time is up, the dyad can simply sit in silence together.
- The facilitator indicates that time is up with a chime or hand signal.
- Then, Partner B speaks while Partner A simply listens without questions or interruptions.
- The facilitator indicates that time is up with a chime or hand signal.
- After Partner A & B have each had a chance to speak, this dyad is complete.

Note: If this is the first time a group has engaged in Focused Listening, you will want to select a very simple and low-risk prompt. You may wish to have participants try this practice again a second time with a new dyad partner and a new prompt. If you do so, have them note how they feel the second time around.

Focused Listening Guidelines:

- Each person is given equal time to talk. (The time may vary from 30 seconds to 5 minutes or more once a group has had considerable experience with the practice. For younger students you may want to start with 30 seconds, and for adults you can often begin with 2 minutes each.)
- The listener does not speak – to interpret, paraphrase, analyze, give advice, or break in with a personal story.
- Confidentiality is maintained. (This means not sharing what a dyad partner has said, and it also means not re-engaging a dyad partner about something they shared with you in a dyad.)
- The speaker is not to use the time in the dyad to criticize or complain about the listener or mutual acquaintances.
- Silence is honored: if the speaker finishes with their sharing before the time is up, the pair honors the silence until the end of the time.
- Note: The dyad partners can experiment with eye contact, finding what is most comfortable for each person. (The debrief at the end of the practice can be an opportunity to share that different cultures feel differently about eye contact.)

How to set up the focused listening dyads:

- Randomly count off so that everyone is included in a dyad. In the beginning stage of a group, it is best not to ask participants to find partners on their own, but to count off to

create random pairs. [Note: This will help participants to speak with people that they might not normally connect with.] If you have an odd number of participants, you can either ask a fellow facilitator to pair up with a participant, or you can partner with them yourself.

- Once a group has worked together and has developed relational-trust you can ask participants to simply find a partner.
- Let participants know that they are going to engage in a different kind of listening and speaking. It is not better or worse than any other kind of communication, but offers them another way to communicate
- Introduce a simple and clear speaking prompt, appropriate for the age of the participants and developmental stage of the group.
- Let participants know how long they will have to speak to the prompt.
- Ask participants to decide who is ready to begin.
- Ring a bell or chime or give a hand signal for Partner A to begin speaking.

Briefly debrief the Focused Listening practice:

This is a debrief about the experience of Focused Listening, and not about the content addressed re: the prompt. Ask for a few people to share a response to each of the following questions (ask the questions one at a time) :

- *What was it like to be the listener?* (take 3-4 replies)
- *What was it like to be the speaker?* (take 3-4 replies)

Note: It is helpful to validate the different experiences people have with this practice. For example, one person may feel very uncomfortable with simply listening/speaking without interruptions, while others may feel relieved. Ask people to share different kinds of experiences. For example, if one person shares that it feels unnatural not to comment during someone's sharing, ask if anyone else had a different experience.

Let participants know that this is a practice designed to help us grow our communication skills and to recognize where our growth edges are. Are we more comfortable listening or speaking? What is difficult for us and why? Explain that often in a group, dominant speakers get more air time, even though all group members have important ideas. This equity practice allows each person to have their time and voice valued.

This activity can also open up a rich conversation on communication and what benefits and challenges arise in different forms of communication such as open discussion, dialogue, debate, community circles, and brainstorming.

Note: You can read more about this in [*The Five Dimensions of Engaged Teaching: A Practical Guide for Educators*](#) by Laura Weaver and Mark Wilding (Solution Tree 2013)