

Report from the Board: Guidelines for Skillful Conversation

Trudy Hartt and Jean Moneyhon
LLLI Board of Directors
Leaven, Vol. 38 No. 3, June-July 2002 p. 50.

The LLLI Board of Directors works on big issues—funding, the budget, policies—important decisions for La Leche League. Drawn from LLL Leaders from all over the world, Board members speak different languages, have different interests, and different ways of understanding. Yet this diverse group must focus and work together to resolve complex issues.

Reaching for and discovering understanding are two of the most important ingredients in our work. We need to understand the issues and each other to succeed at renewal and to keep LLLI healthy and vital. To help us travel through the many stages and shades of understanding, we are using and developing these guidelines.

Guidelines for Skillful Conversation

- Listen and inquire for understanding
- Suspend judgment
- Use "I" statements
- Share your thinking
- Allow self and others to be inarticulate

Listen and Inquire for Understanding

Shhh...listen. Be aware of how you are listening. Listen to how you are thinking. Am I listening to you or am I listening to my response? Am I distracted by other concerns, interests, or needs? Am I fully "present"? Am I listening freely and with true interest to what you mean and what you are trying to help me see?

Inquire Many presuppositions can be helpful in allowing us to make sense of words, but not when they keep us from understanding something a little bit different or something completely new. Then I hear myself think "wrong!" "no!" "how can you think that?" At times like these, it's important to ask: "what do you mean?" "I'm not seeing this, can you help me?" and, yes, "how can you think that?" Inquiry is helpful any time we're hearing something we're not used to, when we're trying to avoid or resolve a conflict, problem-solve, or help a mother breastfeed.

Suspend Judgment

Suspending judgment doesn't mean giving up a point of view; it can mean not judging another person's idea before they have described it as fully as they can—waiting before deciding anything about it other than that it's worth listening to and understanding. This helps me listen and inquire for understanding.

Another kind of judgment means hanging up my point of view (suspending it) where I can see it from various sides and understand how it affects what I hear and think. Does my judgment focus a light that helps me understand you, or does it cast a shadow, putting your ideas in a dark place I don't want to go into?

One Conversation At a Time

This can refer to the more-than-one-person "side conversation" we all know is distracting, but sometimes get into. It can also refer to the inner conversations we tend to hold as we listen at the same time to the other person and our response to her, to what she is saying and the different opinion we already have.

Be Responsible for Your Own Participation

These guidelines are about what we do in a conversation, not what we want the other person to do. We are the only people whose thinking and actions we can control, maintain, or change. We are responsible for our participation—whether we participate verbally or by listening and thinking. We are responsible for what we say, how we listen, what we think. When we hold that responsibility with respect, we allow ourselves and others to be as creative and contributing as we can be.

Share Your Thinking

Share your thinking—truly—let others know how you got to an idea, especially if it's complex. Seeing how you got there can help everyone understand and work with it.

Assumptions are part of our thinking. What assumptions did I bring to this conversation? How are they affecting how I listen and what I am open to thinking? It helps to put assumptions into words, "on the table," so to speak. Sometimes, inquiring for understanding is inquiring to understand the other person's assumptions—so I can express myself in ways that don't bump up against (and get stopped or skewed by) them or that invite them to become part of what we are building together.

It can be more difficult to share a developing idea with others. But even a not-quite-developed idea can fit with another idea or be just what someone else needs to move her idea to the next step. And if we allow others to see our "fuzzy" logic, they might just help us clear it up. We are learning that simple, linear, if-then logic isn't always "right" for our needs; sometimes what appears like "fuzz" is actually the tips of jewels.

Allow Self and Others To Be Inarticulate

Most of us express ourselves fairly well most of the time. But when we try to say something new, say it in a new way, are being creative, or are looking for new ideas and solutions, we may not know how to talk about them. Our thoughts and words can stumble over each other. We can allow ourselves and others to be inarticulate. Others can always inquire for understanding. By allowing ourselves and others to struggle to express and explain, to reach for meaning and articulate it, we build capacity for learning together.

It's often hard to share our thinking in a group. When everyone is looking at us, waiting for our words to emerge, it can be hard to articulate. Sometimes, we are afraid to speak up, fearing we will look stupid or be misunderstood. By accepting inarticulateness, it's easier to speak up and it's easier to follow the trail of thought. When we allow the initial "fuzzy logic" of our ideas to surface, it is easier to understand our intentions. We can use the elements of each other's thoughts to build new shared ideas. On these shared ideas, we can build a structure to support our capacity for team learning and functioning.

Express and Welcome Divergent Views

By not expressing divergent views, we limit our own and others' thinking. Not welcoming divergent views silences creativity and truth—ours and others'. Great breakthroughs depend on embracing the possibility in what's different. What if the Founders had not expressed their (at the time) different ideas?

Expressing and welcoming different and divergent views in our group make everyone feel more comfortable. We feel safer, knowing we can be open and honest, even with "fuzzy" thoughts or with views that conflict. When we set aside our armor, and our expectations, we can trust in each other individually, thus building trust in the wisdom of our group, collectively.

Respect Silence

For a change of pace, though it is a challenge for some of us, we are learning to respect silence. Some of us think quickly; some have to look at an idea from many sides before we make it our own. Sometimes we just need to "hear ourselves think." Silence can be a space for people and ideas to "catch their breath." It is often a space from which creativity emerges.

Stick with Difficult-and-Important Issues

Some issues are difficult to work with; some conflicts are difficult to resolve. The more difficult an issue, the more tempting it can be to back away from it. Some difficult issues may not be important. Deciding what is both difficult and important, and having the courage to keep working are critical.

Learning the skills that help us to stay and work with the conversations we need to have—that's a difficult-and-important part of learning skillful conversation.

Respect Confidentiality

Some groups have specific definitions of confidentiality. For one it may be that nothing is discussed outside the group until a decision is reached; for others, it might be that while ideas can be talked about, they are not connected to people. Expecting confidentiality allows the development of trust. Respecting confidentiality allows participants in a conversation to feel free to use all the other guidelines for skillful conversation.

Using these conversation guidelines, the LLLI Board is building a new awareness and new behaviors into our discussions. We believe these guidelines are helping us evolve into a more collaborative and effective Board. We believe they can help all of us as we develop a more collaborative and effective La Leche League.