

From the Principal's Desk

# The Principal: Engagement, Empowerment, and Leadership

**L**istening is an effective tool of leadership. Great leaders are good listeners—they listen to those they serve and to those with whom they relate and interact. Such listening can provide insight in a number of areas: problems and possible solutions; personal needs and possible fulfillments; and growth and new ventures. Yet, few school principals know how to listen actively to the various populations they serve: students, teachers, parents, and the school constituency.

Most principals recognize that listening is important but are not able to use this skill intentionally to the advancement of their schools. Some listen without evaluating how well they are listening. Then there are those who fail to listen because they are not aware that this activity can significantly enhance their effectiveness.

Why is listening so neglected or minimized? Two basic reasons: (1) a failure to recognize listening as a form of communication, and (2) a lack of intentional education in the art of listening.<sup>1</sup>

Consider the first. Children in many cultures are taught that they must be

seen and not heard. In most cultures, the ability to speak and control speech is seen as a source of power. Purdy and Borisoff<sup>2</sup> suggest that people are taught to listen to the voice of authority—be it medical, legal, administrative, political or religious. As such, listening has come to be associated with passivity and weakness. The result? A tendency to trivialize listening and ignore its importance—not just in the classroom, but also in society in general, including business, industry, and government.

Second, lack of listening education has contributed to mistaken notions

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about listening. “Listening is the most used of the communication skills, yet it is rarely taught.”<sup>3</sup> Educators without training in listening often turn out to be poor listeners, and are thus unable to hear the problems that they are expected to tackle. They let society continue to perpetuate fallacies about listening.<sup>4</sup> Yet, effective leadership and perceptive listening cannot be separated.<sup>5</sup>

This article explores four essentials of the listening process: understanding listening, working out listening strategies, developing a model for successful listening, and ensuring appropriate outcomes for the learning process.

### Understanding Listening

*What is listening?* Listening is an important part of the communication process between two parties whereby information is exchanged, results are shared, and communication is established. When listening is not an active part of educational and relational processes, other skills such as speaking, reading, writing, problem-solving, and interpersonal relations suffer. As a process involving at least two parties, listening demands undivided attention and response between the speaker(s) and the listener(s). Distractions interfere with good listening and may result in a negative response and potentially disastrous consequences.

Listening is not just an ingredient in the communication process; it is also a response to a basic human need—the need to feel understood. From an academic and scientific perspective, listening requires making meaning out of sound, typically the spoken word. Wolvin and Coakley define listening as

the process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural and visual stimuli. These authors recognize the complexity of defining the listening process:

“Because listening is such a complex human behavior as well as a covert behavior it is difficult to investigate. Listening is in an exploratory state, thus conceptualizing the process of listening

sound that is directed toward him or her and pays attention to the speaker’s message.

**3. Organizing.** After receiving new information, the hearer needs to organize it. This requires integrating new information with old data that is already in the brain and sorting it into categories that make sense to the listener.

**4. Understanding.** Sorting of information into categories must lead to understanding—that is, assigning meaning to the information received, and pondering what action to take.

**5. Remembering** is the next step. The listener stores the new, understood information in his or her long-term memory.

**6. Responding** is the final step of the listening process. Steps 1 to 5 enable the listener to respond to the person who initiated the communication process. Being able to respond appropriately indicates that the listener was engaged in the conversation and understood the message.

### Listening Takes Effort

Listening is more difficult than speaking. To listen in a way that transforms conversations and relationships, a leader has to do the follow-



ing: continues to occupy the attention of listening scholars throughout the world.”<sup>6</sup>

### Listening: A Six-Step Process<sup>7</sup>

Graser has described listening as a six-step process<sup>8</sup>:

**1. Hearing.** Hearing is the first step to listening. A person begins to hear when his or her ears pick up sounds.

**2. Paying attention.** In this step, the hearer begins to concentrate on a

ing:<sup>9</sup>

- Actually listen. Do not multi-task. Focus on what the other person is saying.

- Repeat to confirm what was said. This shows that you are listening and communicates to the other person that he or she is being heard. Practice by trying this first with a child or friend.

- Ask questions to help you better understand what the other person is saying.

Aside from parents, educators are people's first professional role models for effective listening. Yet in the training of educators, the art of listening is rarely taught or emphasized.<sup>10</sup> If teachers and principals have had such training, they can model the various listening behaviors they want their staff to emulate, and in turn, transmit them to their students.

Education has not yet placed the same level of emphasis on listening skills as it does on speaking, reading, and writing. Listening continues to be the orphan member of language arts. Results of a recent survey of high school faculty on the importance of listening skills in the classroom by Campbell<sup>11</sup> revealed that 80 percent of the teachers believed that listening skills are equally important across the curriculum, but 75 percent said they devote less than 10 percent of instructional time to listening skills. If Adventist principals are to become leaders in listening and in teaching listening at all learning levels, they should be expected to undergo adequate training in the communication process, especially since integrated listening should be considered a core value in Adventist education.

The challenge for principals, unlike many other professionals, is that as leaders, they are expected to not only listen, but also model listening, teach it, evaluate it, and reward listening skills. In fact, the principal is faced with the formally mandated challenge of graduating students whose listening skills are strong enough to enter college/career and succeed in a society that places a premium on workers who are effective

listeners. To achieve this goal, principals must first obtain training to be effective listeners themselves and then be intentional about training others to engage in effective listening.

Principals must connect and listen to learn in the same setting. They cannot delegate this responsibility. This is a tall order, but with training and practice in the areas of listening skills, knowledge, and attitude, the challenge can become an opportunity for success.

professional location that you experience.

7. Promote campus policies that include deliberately teaching listening skills.

8. Connect with organizations that campaign for the teaching of listening skills in schools.

9. Reinforce Bible reading and memorization of stories and verses that highlight listening.

### A Listening Project

Here is a story of how the principal of an Adventist elementary school developed a model listening project whose goal was to enhance listening literacy and interpersonal relationships among her teachers and students.

#### • Launching the project.

The principal launched the project by first sharing the plan with faculty and staff, and then with students, engaging their interest and soliciting their cooperation. The program challenged the entire faculty and staff to be aware that listening is a crucial component in all aspects of education, social, and professional success

and therefore both teachers and students must master this skill.<sup>12</sup>

Swanson observed that few pre-service or in-service teacher-training programs incorporate listening into their programs.<sup>13</sup> He points out that although teachers must be effective listeners, they cannot practice what they have not been taught. According to Lee and Hatesohl, while formal training is readily available to improve writing and speaking skills, it is still difficult to find training programs to sharpen listening skills.<sup>14</sup>

Hence, in order to provide this training to her school personnel, the

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### Listening Strategies

Principals can improve their listening skills by following the strategies listed below:

1. Create a culture that values effective listening.
2. Acquire listening training, and provide professional development in this area for your school faculty and staff.
3. Set listening goals for yourself and your institution.
4. Reward exemplary listeners on regularly scheduled awards days.
5. Set aside a day to emphasize and celebrate listening.
6. Launch a listening campaign or tour after each promotion or change in

principal adopted a professional up-grading program called *The Power of Listening for Educators*<sup>15</sup> and brought in a consultant to make a presentation.

• **Listening training.** The listening project's success was ensured by the positive support from faculty and staff for implementing a school-wide listening initiative to enhance literacy and relationships. In addition, teachers acknowledged greater awareness of their role, as classroom leaders, to be better listeners in their communication and interaction with students, and then to help their students to become better listeners.

Capitalizing on the teachers' enthusiasm for the project, the principal seized the opportunity to make listening a core value in the school curriculum. This required modifications in the

daily instructional plan and interaction protocol. Before implementing these changes, the principal shared her vision with the student body, school board, and constituency. This helped sensitize the school community to the need for an increased appreciation for listening in daily communication and instruction. The expertise of the consultant and the creativity of the teachers motivated the students to participate in the project.

• **Training for students.** The principal and teachers collaborated in creating a model that would expand the language-arts program from the usual reading, writing, spelling, and comprehension to include listening. Strategies to teach listening included activities such as read-aloud, pair-and-share notes, and planned discussions to enhance students' listening skills. As Turner<sup>16</sup> affirms, learning to listen and

to observe purposefully are trainable skills that can be acquired and improved through directed, structured practice over time.

Using a two-pronged approach to improve the literacy and the relational listening practice of students, the school embarked on a listening-enrichment initiative that facilitated student and teacher engagement in listening through an expanded language-arts initiative. Each day, the teachers emphasized listening through varied literacy and communication activities, primarily reading, speaking, and writing. Some listening activities were integrated in the instructional process and across the curriculum, while others were intentionally planned and scheduled to facilitate whole-school interac-



tion and involvement.

The principal's commitment to ensure listening training for both teachers and students was driven by her belief that while teaching listening skills is important, it is the example of the principal and teachers that has the most influence on students.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, throughout the project, the principal not only tried to model active listening by asking questions, but also emphasized Jesus' teaching and listening model. In His leadership style, Jesus modeled patience and relationship building by listening and connecting to those whom He taught.<sup>18</sup>

Examples of how listening was incorporated in the daily curriculum included (1) starting each day with a school-wide assembly when listening practice was incorporated with the devotions and silent independent reading<sup>19</sup>; (2) teachers and students reading silently a book of their choice, using Trelease's Sustained Silent Reading strategy<sup>20</sup>; (3) listening to someone pray and read aloud an inspirational or Bible story; and (4) scheduling an afternoon session of DEAR (Drop Everything And Read) and listening.

Empowered in homeroom classrooms, teachers had the flexibility to be creative and to utilize any format that helped students make appropriate reading and/or listening connections to classroom instruction themes. The schedule allotted specific time of quiet/silence for students to read, listen, reflect, and acquire knowledge.

In addition, a school-wide listening and writing initiative was implemented in preparation for "I Love to Listen

Day," in mid-May. Throughout the year, the students participated in a variety of activities related to the theme of listening. Teachers and students chose their class or individual projects from among a variety of genres such as poetry writing, art, and other forms of personal reflection. In a special assembly on Listening Day, selected students from every grade (K-8) were given the opportunity to share—to read aloud or tell about and display their work. Each

way for students to demonstrate their skills and understanding.

In observing the 8th graders and their teachers at work on the project, the principal employed active listening skills to evaluate the listening behavior of the students and their teacher. The principal made regular visits to observe the activity's progress, each time taking an interest in individual students and asking questions, making eye contact, and repeating her responses to achieve full understanding of what was being said and /or done.

### Outcomes

As a result of this initiative, the teachers succeeded in engaging their students and empowering them to delve into the project using their own creativity. Independently and in collaborative groups, the 8th graders created, designed, and produced PowerPoint and movie presentations to capture and communicate their understanding of the concept of listening. Each one was proud to submit and showcase his or her finished product.

One student had the opportunity to describe his project to a news reporter. Barrington Salmon, in his

2011 article in the *Washington Informer*, "Resolve Conflicts Through Active Listening,"<sup>22</sup> reported that the student spoke excitedly of his listening project—a video presentation using a mix of audio and video, and pictures. The reporter added that the student "said his life has changed significantly since he began *listening* to the advice his principal offered."

As a result of the program, the principal and staff were able to evaluate how well the goal had been achieved. In celebration of the students' overall lis-

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year since then, students' work has received special recognition and has even been featured in external publications such as the Columbia Union *Visitor* and *Creative Communications*.<sup>21</sup>

• **Assessing the project.** The final listening project took place at the end of the school year at a special listening assembly, when the listening consultant and designer of the "I Love to Listen Day" gave an interesting presentation based on six listening principles. At the conclusion, the consultant challenged the principal to have the students design an electronic presentation based on those principles. This opened the

tening achievement, the school and the students received two special rewards. First, the results of the ITBS standardized test revealed that during four years,<sup>23</sup> the students had achieved consistent improvement in all the areas of language arts, with the 8th grade performing up to 10th-grade equivalent level. Second, the best 8th-grade electronic listening projects received recognition at graduation time. The winners received monetary rewards and a certificate of “Exemplary Listener” from the Listening First Foundation.

### Conclusion

It is distressing to discover that although teachers recognize that listening is important, relatively little instructional time is devoted to listening skills.<sup>24</sup> But the Adventist school project described in this article demonstrates that with a listening principal and teachers who are sensitized, equipped, and empowered to model and instruct good listening skills, students can be motivated to learn and demonstrate their listening skills inside and outside the classroom setting.

Adventist educators can become leaders in listening education and train leaders who will listen, if we are intentional about including listening as part of the curriculum from kindergarten on, and provide resources for incorporating a listening syllabi and activities in every Adventist school. ☞



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