

Most of the time when I'm working with leaders and board members who are preparing to meet with a donor or prospective donor, their biggest question is "what should I say?"

Here's what I always tell them, and I wish more people knew:

When meeting with donors, don't worry so much about what to say. Instead, focus on what you want to ask.



There's a life story sitting right in front of you, and that story is central to why they care about your work.

We have been taught that fundraising is about getting our message across, inspiring people with metrics, sharing compelling stories about our work, and crafting the perfect ask.

But what if fundraising is actually more about listening generously to people.

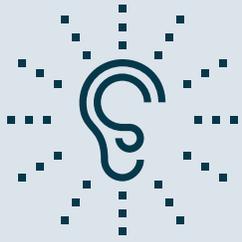
Listening for what they care about and why your mission speaks to them.

Listening for what they are worried or angry about and how they want to try and change those things.

Yes, of course there will come a time when you need to talk about how they can take action through their giving —

but what might happen if we learned to listen longer and more generously?

HERE'S WHAT I KNOW



Listening is the key to building relationships.

Relationships matter because it is through relationships that we create change.

Relationships are how we facilitate transformative gifts — gifts that fuel change.



Change happens when people care.

People care when they are in relationship with you and your mission.

People care more about what your goals and needs are when they feel that you care about them.

Not as check writers, but as whole people.



Listening is more than being quiet while the other person speaks until you can say what you want to say.

We all have an immense capacity to listen but too often find it uncomfortable.

Generous listening requires openness — not just of the ears, but of one's whole body and being.

Generous listening is listening with the body — with all the senses, taking in all in.

Donors are not ATMs.

– KIM KLEIN

Generous listening is not easy.

To do it deeply, one must overcome biases, prejudices, fears, preconceptions, assumptions, and stereotypes.

To listen generously is to pay attention.

To listen is to love

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen.

– RACHEL NAOMI REMEN

What are you listening for?



Accuracy

Did you correctly hear what they said?



Emotions

How did they feel about what they said?



Wants, Needs and Values

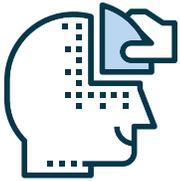
Why does what they said matter to them?

Generous listeners

ASK GREAT QUESTIONS

Central to being a generous listener is being a great question-asker.

What makes a great question?



Good questions are often **simple**—not in that they're easy to answer, but that they ask the respondent to focus on only one topic at a time



Good questions are often **open-ended**, meaning they defy yes-or-no responses and encourage long, free-form answers.



Good questions have a **purpose behind them**, they help you advance gathering information or understanding the situation or person

“People think of questioning as simple, but when done right, it’s a very sophisticated high-level form of thinking.”

- DAN ROTHSTEIN, THE RIGHT QUESTION INSTITUTE

“Ask questions the other person will enjoy answering.”

- DALE CARNEGIE



Good questions can inspire **great answers** because they often encourage the respondent to consider a topic more deeply – and open a door for you to share what you know about the topic

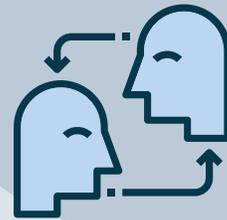


Good questions are **free of bias and judgement** and center genuine curiosity

ALWAYS REMEMBER

People enjoy conversations *in which* they talk the most.

“Questions elicit answers in their likeness. Answers mirror the questions they rise, or fall, to meet.



So while a simple question can be precisely what's needed to drive to the heart of the matter, it's hard to meet a simplistic question with anything but a simplistic answer. It's hard to transcend a combative question.

But it's hard to resist a generous question.”

- KRISTA TIPPETT

How to ask **BETTER QUESTIONS**

Shift from why to what

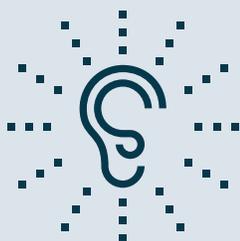
Shifting from “why” questions to “what questions gets you better responses and richer conversation.

⊗ Instead of: “Why does that matter to you?”

✓ Say: “What about that gift was meaningful?”

⊗ Instead of: “Why do you support us?”

✓ Say: “What about our mission speaks to you?”



Use the power of silence

People usually have more to share and say than they first offer. By pausing and allowing silence after someone finishes talking,

Use the power of **MICRO FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS**

Small prompts and questions bring out a surprising large amount of additional sharing and information.

Try these:

- ✓ Tell me more
- ✓ How so?
- ✓ What else?
- ✓ What do you mean by
- ✓ How'd that happen?
- ✓ Then what?
- ✓ What happened next?

Facts or feelings

Toggling between fact-based and feeling-based questions will lead you to understand your donors more holistically.

FACT-BASED

How did you first learn about our organization?

Have you heard about our plans to fix x?

What is important to you when you give a gift?

What other nonprofits do you support?

FEELING-BASED

What about our work first spoke to you?

How do you feel about our plans to x?

How has an organization made you feel special as a donor in the past?

What is your process for deciding which nonprofits to support?

Grow your **CURIOSITY**

In order to listen generously, you have to be genuinely interested and curious about the person you are listening to.

That means being open, curious, and non-judgmental. Hearing with compassion and the most generous interpretation of what is being shared.

Generous listening is listening with the body — with all the senses, taking it all in.

Genuine curiosity is the hallmark of great listener

- ✓ Remember — listening does not mean agreeing. It simply keeps a space open for connection, a space to exchange, to hear and be heard.
- ✓ Acknowledge that we all make up stories about people. Ask yourself > What's the story I think I'm going to hear versus what are they sharing?
- ✓ Breathe, slow down, and truly pay attention. Be radically present to the person in front of you.
- ✓ Deeply believe that people want to help and that people are generous.

Generous listening is not easy.

To do it deeply, one must overcome biases, prejudices, fears, preconceptions, assumptions, and stereotypes.

**“Be curious,
not
judgmental.”**

– WALT WHITMAN

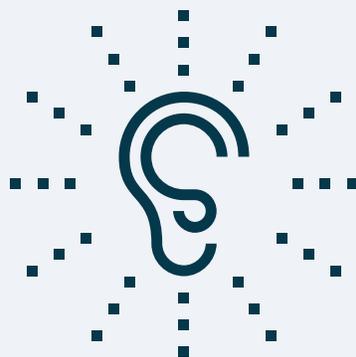
Bringing it
ALL TOGETHER

We all have an immense capacity to listen generously.

You can grow your listening muscles.

Generous listening requires practice, persistence, effort, and most importantly the intention to become a good listener.

I wonder what you'll hear when you start listening more deeply?



Listen

By Mary Oliver

Everyday
I see or hear
something
that more or less
kills me
with delight,
that leaves me
like a needle
in the haystack
of light.
It was what I was born for —
to look, to listen,
to lose myself
inside this soft world —
to instruct myself
over and over
in joy,
and acclamation.
Nor am I talking
about the exceptional,
the fearful, the dreadful,
the very extravagant —
but of the ordinary,
the common, the very drab,
the daily presentations.
Oh, good scholar,
I say to myself,
how can you help
but grow wise
with such teachings
as these —
the untrimmable light
of the world,
the ocean's shine,
the prayers that are made
out of grass?

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The Varga Group is a management consulting firm specializing in capital campaigns, fundraising training, retreat facilitation, board development and leadership coaching. Since 2013, we've worked with over 100 higher education institutions, independent schools and nonprofits to grow their fundraising, train their board, coach their leaders and successfully navigate their capital and comprehensive campaigns.

We have helped our clients raise more than \$100M. Our team is based in Portland, Oregon and we work with clients nationwide.

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