

Listening as Generosity

By [Cori Wittman](#)

How many of us think about generosity in the context of financial giving? Acts of service? Do we measure ourselves either by how much we *give* or how much we *do*?

What if we measured our generosity today not by how much we gave or how much we did, but by how much we *listened*?

This question was triggered by a TED Radio Hour episode a while back entitled "[The Act of Listening](#)" which stated that "listening is an act of generosity and a source of discovery." The quote stuck with me, as it seemed to be a rather peculiar leap. Listening is generous? Isn't listening just, well, listening?

The more I explored the idea, the more it got under my skin. One, because I realized that I don't actually listen as much as I would like to think I do. Two, because it revealed that my frame of reference for generosity was far too narrow.

In many ways, I believe listening is the foundation of generosity. It's what makes generosity truly valuable to the receiver. And it's something I want to be better at.

On the most basic level, it takes listening to understand and respond to what is truly needed. Listening is what keeps us from donating items to organizations that, despite the giver's best intentions, aren't meeting an actual need and can't be used.

It also takes listening to connect in a meaningful way, which I believe differentiates generosity from habitual giving, whether for tax purposes, tithing or because we just feel like we should. This form of giving – in which the giver and receiver share a meaningful connection – is where I believe generosity shines brightest. Connection gives both sides the opportunity to be generous. One shares an invitation into a larger story as the other shares time, resources, expertise to help those stories continue to unfold. Both are givers; both are receivers. But it starts with *listening*.

Let us be quick to listen, slow to speak... and more meaningful in our generosity.

Guiding Principles: Difficult Conversations

By [Tanner Ehmke](#)

Communication can be difficult, but it can be even trickier for family businesses navigating the complexities of family politics.

Jim Whitehurst, author of the book [The Open Organization](#), writes in The Harvard Business Review that creating a feedback loop and a culture of open dialogue helps businesses have difficult conversations. In his article, [Create a Culture Where Difficult Conversations Aren't so Hard](#), Whitehurst notes business leaders can role model three behaviors to create a safe environment where everyone feels comfortable having difficult conversations: Show appreciation, open up, and be inclusive early and often.

Show appreciation. A great way to start a feedback loop, Whitehurst says, is to begin by recognizing the good work someone has done.

"That's how you can begin to establish trusting relationships that are strong enough to withstand any constructive criticism that might come along," he writes.

Mark Lynch, who farms in Texas, western Oklahoma and western Kansas, stresses that with his 18 full-time employees and up to 35 seasonal employees, recognition is crucial for establishing and building relationships.

"You have to surround yourself with good people who have a passion, regardless of their responsibilities," Mark points out in the [Ag Progress June Dispatch](#). "I'm very fortunate to work with individuals that have been with me for 25 to 30 years."

Open up. Whitehurst stresses that leaders need to lead by example and open up to hear what people are saying. While opening yourself up makes you vulnerable, Whitehurst reminds leaders that you're demonstrating to others how to process constructive criticism without taking it personally.

Stan Reiss of Southwest Family Farms in Plains, Kansas, stresses in the [April Dispatch](#) that opening up and showing emotion has been an important aspect to the success of his family's multi-generational farm over the years.

"Emotion can help us with decisions," Stan notes. "The most critical thing in life is how you handle people and how they respond back to you."

Adds Whitehurst on the importance of listening: "If someone is convinced you're not listening to them, what makes you think they'll listen to anything you have to say to them?"



Be inclusive early and often. Getting people from all over the organization involved as soon as possible in your decision-making is crucial to building a trusting environment where people are more engaged, Whitehurst writes.

Danny Klinefelter, an economist at Texas A&M and founder of [The Executive Program for Agricultural Producers](#), echoes that it's imperative that farm leaders teach a culture of learning. Engaging employees in problem-solving and analysis helps create a culture of learning, he says.

"One of the best management practices is what I call autopsies," notes Klinefelter in the [January Dispatch](#). "Everyone from the CEO to the successor to the management team periodically sits down and reviews their business plan with questions: Were there things we could or should have done differently even if it was successful? Were we lucky or do we have a process we can repeat? What additional information do we need? The whole idea is to get that information shared between people and get it implemented as quickly as possible."

"And, you have to have buy-in from everyone instead of the top group just telling everyone down the line," Danny says of team inclusion on decision-making. "The whole purpose is, 'What did we learn?'"

From Feedback to Feedforward

By [Davon Cook](#)

To conclude my series on human relations and talent development topics, let's consider when and how you provide feedback to your employees.

Before discussing the process of feedback, look at the purpose of feedback and the word itself. The [Managertools.com](#) podcast reminded me the purpose is to influence behavior going forward. It is not to prove that someone made a mistake, or to litigate a dispute of the past. You are providing information so that employees can be more effective in the future. You can use an example from the past to explain or make the information specific, but the focus is on the future. Because of its forward-looking focus, I am adopting the word "feedforward".

How do you practically provide feedforward? First, ask if the person is willing to discuss performance and receive some suggestions. If the answer is "No, not right now," respect that this is not a good time but follow up again soon. You'll be more effective if the recipient is in a receptive frame of mind.

Second, be timely in providing feedforward. I have worked with clients to build annual or semi-annual performance review processes, but don't wait for that to roll around. Your tractor's GPS doesn't wait until you're a row off to correct itself. It is continually making adjustments to stay on course. Why would you wait to adjust someone's behavior until a predetermined session? Talk about the situation soon after it occurs, with wisdom to wait until emotion has passed if needed.

Finally, structure your communication using three steps:

1. Make an **observation** about actions you have seen take place. If you have specific examples, use them. It is easier for the person receiving the feedforward to understand how to apply your advice if examples are given.
2. Describe the **impact** of the actions—the impact on you, on others, on the person doing it, on the company.
3. Make a **suggestion** of what he/she should do more or less of.

Many managers struggle with having frank conversations about performance with employees. In many cases, your team appreciates knowing where they stand and values you investing time in them. Take advantage of the opportunity to provide timely feedforward. Everyone will benefit.

The Heart of the Matter (Proverbs 27:19)

By [Dr. Bill Long](#)

A few months ago I discussed Proverbs 4:23: "Guard your heart more than anything else," and I mentioned the importance of taking care of or tending our hearts, focusing especially on the choices we make and the company we keep. The verse for today also mentions the heart, but it does so from a different angle. In a word, it stresses that the heart is the connecting tissue, the essential link, between people.

Proverbs 27:19 says, in two translations: "As water reflects the face, so the heart of man reflects man" or "Just as water reflects the face, so one human heart reflects another." When we think of our hearts, we think of the core or essence of ourselves, our true commitments, our loves, our passions, our fears, our most basic identity. Yet, as Proverbs teaches us, the heart is more than simply our own inner compass. It reflects, like water reflects our image, the common "face" of humans. Our heart "reflects" another's.

The point is that if we seek to understand another person – in family, in business, in domestic or international affairs – we really are seeking a heart that is not very different from our own. It would be too much to claim that everyone is driven by the same motivations or lured by the same rewards, but we are on good ground for believing that there is something so important in the hearts of humans that is shared with each other that it is worth our effort to discover that "something."

The heart of the matter then, is not only that the heart matters, and that it matters a lot, but that it allows us to form an understanding of another, and it is in fact "reflected" in them. Thus, Proverbs teaches that we see ourselves in the world of faces and hearts—even as we sometimes think that others' hearts are quite different from ours.

