



## RELATIONAL LEADERSHIP™

# *Listening well: inviting others to share their stories*

Stories are powerful. Stories help us feel seen, and give us a sense of being known. Listening to a colleague's story can transform your relationship, allowing you to move from, *"I know what she does"* to *"I understand what she cares about."*

As humans, we are hardwired for connection, and many of us are struggling with current isolation and distancing mandates. We find ourselves even more distanced by the contrasts in our day-to-day experiences. While many hardships of the COVID-19 pandemic are universal, others are unfolding in markedly different ways. Some healthcare providers are confronting life-threatening crises on a daily basis. Others are sidelined because of clinic closures. Individuals are grappling with financial, social, and emotional challenges in different ways and to different degrees. Because of these differences, it's essential that we bear witness to the experience of others. Listening with an open mind and heart can strengthen connections when we need them most.

While inviting stories from others requires focus and attention, it can still be done when time is short. We have developed some practical strategies that you can apply immediately. Our goal is to encourage bi-directional communication and compassionate listening; and we encourage you to be creative with these tips. We hope they will help you engage with your team members and community in a different way.

## GUIDING PRINCIPLES

### STAY CURIOUS

Remember that your role is to be a listener. Nothing else. Listen to stories as stories. Your goal is not to "fix" or "solve" but to hold space, be present, and bear witness.

When you are fully engaged in someone else's world, you put yourself in their position. You see what they see. Ask questions with a sense of curiosity. Be sure to allow for silence, to let the storyteller formulate their thoughts.

### OBSERVE HOW YOU FEEL

Notice the feelings and thoughts that the story brings up for you. Consider how sharing those responses may offer insight into the storyteller's feelings, concerns, and needs.

Find appropriate moments to reflect and share. For example, you might respond to a storyteller's description of a painful isolation experience by saying, "It sounds like you have been lonely." The storyteller may agree, or choose to edit or disagree with your observation.

Either way, your reflections help the storyteller clarify feelings and gain new insights. This is especially important if what you are hearing is resilience. As narrators of our own life story, we don't always recognize our sources of courage.

# PRACTICAL TIPS FOR INVITING STORIES

## CHALLENGE A NARRATIVE

Question an assumption or cultural narrative you have heard, and ask whether (or how) it differs from the storyteller's understanding.

This allows the storyteller to reflect on their own experiences and then articulate their perspective.

Examples:

"I've heard reports that many people in your area are experiencing \_\_\_\_\_. How has it been for you?"

"I've found \_\_\_\_\_ to be true. Is that something you've experienced?"

"People have been saying that \_\_\_\_\_ is our most urgent need. What's your perspective?"

## RESPONDING TO FEARS & THE UNKNOWN

Sharing personal stories can bring up fear, anxiety, and stress. When someone is in the middle of the story you might hear: "I just feel so overwhelmed," or some other indication of temporary hopelessness.

In these moments, try asking about a more distant circumstance in which they felt similarly hopeless. What did they do to get through it? The question can help them remember their own resilience.

Examples:

"Have you felt like this before? What did you do then?"

"Tell me about another time you felt overwhelmed. How did you overcome it? What helped?"

"It sounds like you've hit a wall. How have you approached this in the past?"

## A FINAL THOUGHT

Life stories are wonderfully complicated and big. Sometimes the kindest gift we can offer as listeners is the invitation of where to begin — a foothold for the storyteller to start remembering the experience out loud.

Our suggestions are intended to help others explain small but important moments, providing a quick snapshot of their lived experience. Though they may be brief, these story opportunities, in turn, create and foster psychological safety, connection, and a sense of agency.

**THANKS to** Matt Lewis for his contributions to this article. Matt is a member of PCP's national training team, and his expertise includes narrative, leadership, trauma, war, American culture, and personal identity.

Relational Leadership™ is a model of shared leadership focused on developing relational skills at the individual level and across teams. It is grounded in the premise that all team members should grow and develop as leaders, working together interdependently towards a common vision. Leadership is viewed not as a position but as a role, with different individuals taking the lead or following based on context and circumstance.