

Validation: A Relational Skill I Lacked

Validating another's concern with empathic listening is an essential skill for pastors.

Rod Casey

My relational deficit caused harm

Assuming there's a continuum of relational damage one does to another in conflict, the harm I caused leaned mild to moderate. Nevertheless, I had a problem. It's embarrassing to admit. My problem wasn't outside the box scandalous. It wouldn't compete with "Mars Hill" leadership abuse. But it was hurtful to those who worked with me. My family relationships were negatively affected by my deficit. It created distance between us and certainly hindered mission initiative. I didn't see it. I didn't know it. I couldn't fix it on my own. I had a blind spot. It was frustrating for me to not be able to fix what was infuriating to others about me.

I failed to validate the hurt I caused

Let me explain using an illustration. Let's say Geoff voices his disappointment that the service time change means he is going to have to leave before the final praise song set to get to work on time. A spiritual pathway for him is corporate singing and he loves the way the worship band connects him to God.

"I'm really upset Pastor Rod that the second service is now starting at 11 am, instead of 10:30," he tells me. "I must be at my weekend job at 12:30, and it takes me 25 minutes to get there! As a result, I don't get to experience the whole service. You're hurting my spiritual life."

My response might have been something like this, "I hear you Geoff, but we can't have the kids in the second service left unsupervised. The leadership agreed the inconvenience for our children's ministry staff and volunteers necessitated a service time adjustment. It's not all about you Geoff. Besides, you can catch the rest of the service online through our livestream." True enough, but that response created harm for Geoff and lowered his trust in me as a shepherd.

Here's what more is happening in that response that I don't like admitting, "Look Geoff, you shouldn't feel that way. And if you take the time to understand what our intentions are and the good the service time change is getting done, you won't. Besides, I've put up with a lot from you over the years. From walking through your divorce to helping you pay your electric bill. Who are you to question me? You have no idea how hard it is to be a leader in this church."

The listening script

My journey from defensiveness to empathic awareness when experiencing others disappointment with me began during a painful staff evaluation. Systemic dysfunctions and leadership failures surfaced, and the situation empowered those I supervised to insist that I see what they'd been saying... "we don't *feel* heard." While the process had flaws, correction was needed. The evaluation process insisted that I hear from staff and volunteers I led regarding their "not feeling heard" and I was made to finally listen. While the focus of this evaluation process was explicitly organizational, I'm confident in retrospect this character deficit implicitly limited my shepherding of congregational attendees as well, as the Geoff dialogue illustrates.

As I sat with this board-initiated discipline, I was graced with an afternoon conversation from an unexpected consultant, Karen, our family life pastor. Karen is a student of child development principles. She was kind to point out that it would be reasonable for me to lack skills I had not experienced, particularly during my adolescent years. My father was sick with the illness that took his life during my sophomore year of college and my mom was understandably overwhelmed with his care and her invalid mother who lived with us as well. Our ministry family were hard workers and thick skinned, not much room for hurt feelings in our already overwhelmed parsonage. The following are some of the notes I made in my journal as she shared prompts with me regarding better listening:¹

What I hear you saying Geoff is (restatement)... Did I get it? Is there more?

I'm sure that is hard for you, Geoff. Sounds like you're feeling angry because you are sad that a meaningful part of your spiritual life is being impacted by our decision. Is that right?

Here's some additional prompts that I may have employed to validate Geoff's disappointments with the decision I represented:

If I were experiencing that Geoff, I wouldn't like it either.

I can see how that was hurtful to you.

Sounds like you place a high value on... is that right?

What is the most important thing you want me to remember from everything you've said?

In the remaining disciplinary meetings with staff members, I began having my journal with me and clumsily employing prompts from this list. I took notes on their reflections, sincerely taking time to digest what they were describing. It's not an overstatement to say this was new for me.

When I reflect on my reactions to the disappointment others had with me in earlier years of ministry (or more precisely, the decisions my role represented), I recall being internally anxious, irritated that we were huddling to complain of our injuries instead of evaluating our missteps and calling plays to execute our game plan. Candidly, here's the essence of my internal dialogue during those perceived confrontations, "What can I say with integrity that will satisfy their disappointment? How can we not have to have another meeting like this?" In my desire to not have to experience their disappointment with me, they experienced me as defensive and their concerns unacknowledged. I see things more clearly now and sincerely regret the unnecessary pain I contributed to.

¹ These are additional prompts that Karen shared with me that day. However, they are prompts intended for clarification/correction and therefore beyond the scope of this article's purpose.

What was it that you needed from me?

I'm taking in what you're saying and asking God to use your pain to teach me.

I can't do that, but what I can do is...

I'm struggling, I don't think I can talk about that right now. I'll need to think about that.

Have you considered other narratives of why you might have experienced me like you did?

What is it that you wanted me to do that I didn't?

What would that have sounded like?

When I _____, what is it that you heard/saw me communicating?

What do you think God's perspective is on this situation?

How is that consistent with what you know of my wiring/personality?

With a new awareness of how my anxiety manifested impatience which in turn prioritized the mission over the men and women fulfilling it, with Karen's listening prompts I now possessed a listening tool of questions to help me slow my roll and increase the chances of others *feeling heard*. But my journey in empathic listening was just getting started.

Conflict at home

The next chapter of my failure to listen journey happened over the course of eighteen months. I have a summary of five humdingers (not just tiffs) with my wife where at the height of our arguing she said, "You are defensive. You're not hearing me. It's a problem and you need to deal with it." Then she added, "I'm not going anywhere. I love you. And you're too valuable to not get to the root of it."

Here's an example of one of those at home conflicts. "I'm hesitant to ask," she began. "But would you be willing to read a book on improving our marriage?" "**When have I ever been unwilling to work on our relationship!**" I feigned a question with an exclamation point full of indignation. And off to the races we were doing our familiar dance of me feeling inadequate and her insecure with my aggressive rationale. When we were able to eventually regulate, I was able to hear her hesitancy in asking was related to her own reservations about further exploring the consequences of growing up in her dysfunctional family and those dynamics were affecting our intimacy in marriage. My issues were secondary to her fears about engaging the material, but just as problematic. How much internal and relational conflict will we navigate if we take this risk of investing in strengthening our marriage? This was a legitimate question realized as we did the hard work required in the resource "reconnect: insights and tools for cultivating meaningful connection in your marriage." (Steve Call, Reconnect Institute, 2019).

Attachment awareness

From this marriage resource and others like it, I've been helped by greater awareness of my avoidant attachment response. Exploring with Karen how I naturally coped with having sincere and well intentioned, though too busy parents helped me in cultivating this relational skill of better listening. Avoiders learn early on that no one is coming to rescue them in times of distress. The "be with me" and help me regulate my emotions was missing in ways now known to be essential in child and adolescent development.

One example of learning I was on my own to figure things out was when I was called down publicly during a Sunday morning service. "I would have enjoyed that last special song a lot more if my youngest son hadn't been over here on the side goofing off," my pastor father said pointing my direction from his pulpit perch with a crowd of congregants growing wide-eyed as they listened nervously. "But I guarantee you, I'll take care of it when I get home, and I trust the rest of you parents will do the same," he concluded authoritatively before moving on to collect the offering.

"You better come home with me." And "put a book in your backside," were two of the comments I recall supportive church members making as I made my way out of the building and across the parking lot to the parsonage that afternoon.

We didn't speak as my father led me to the bedroom at the end of the long hallway. He simply took off his black belt and gave me the corporal punishment common for that generation. I was 14 years old when this happened.

The point of recounting this episode of my life to illustrate how I learned to cope alone when distressed is what happened next. "What did your father say to you as you walked down the hall to join the family for Sunday lunch?" my professional counselor asked me during a retelling.

"He didn't say anything," I said naively.

"Let me try again," said Lanny. "What did you HEAR your dad saying to you?"

"Oh, that's easy," I retorted. "He said, 'You know what to do, now do it!' That's what I HEARD him say."

"And did you?"

"Did I what?"

"Know what to do?" Lanny asked rhetorically. "Do you expect fourteen-year-old teenagers to know what to do in public spaces when surrounded by their peers with cute girls among them?"

Because I was compliant and spiritually motivated, "wise beyond his years" was a phrase I heard adults say of me growing up. "Knowing what to do" was an expectation I implicitly adopted for myself even when I didn't. In retrospect I see how this was fuel for my educational pursuits and drive for mastering theological and practical ministry topics. The other part that harmed others is that when I didn't know what to do, I failed to admit it (or more precisely, even know I could) and participated in allowing others allowing me to be as responsible as my father (and me) expected.

As I'm fond of saying, none of the above is intended as an excuse but as an explanation. The harm implicit unknowing does relationally isn't minimized by explanations. However, reflection and understanding are ingredients for empathy, forgiveness, and ultimately changed behavior. And coming to grips with how I interpreted the interaction with my dad in the incident cited above was another step in my journey towards embracing the skill of validation.

Journaling 4 questions

Getting to the shiny bottom of my can of worms regarding my inability to validate without defending my actions came in the form of four questions. They are these questions:

1. *What am I feeling?*
2. *When have I felt this before?*
3. *What have I come to (mis)believe about myself as a result of what I've experienced?*
4. *What would Jesus say to me about what I've come to believe?*

These questions were suggested to me after that fifth humdinger I mentioned earlier. Like the other times, when my wife attempted to express her disappointment in my failing to do

something I'd agreed to or reacting without letting her finish, I was once again quick to tell her why she wouldn't feel that way. If only she only would hear my intentions and how I wasn't capable of the hurt she was saying I caused the conflict could be avoided. Or, so I foolishly rationalized.

Having these four questions in hand, I awoke at 4am three mornings in a row. Or better said, the Lord woke me up and I sat responsively in my brown lazy boy leather chair with pen and notebook beside me. On the third day, transformation emerged and my recovery from being a disappointment without being defensive began.

What was I feeling? Embarrassed. Or more specifically, shame. Shame is that sense that something is wrong with me. I should know better. I'm not that bad.

When had I felt it before? When had I not felt it? Riding the basketball bench in high school. Struggling with weight since junior high school. Never popular, though always respected. Hearing "we like you, but no" from the music department as a college freshman. Getting into theological grad school on academic probation. And, vocationally sitting in the second chair as an associate pastor sensing my gifting and capacity didn't fit lead pastor criteria.

What had I come to believe about myself? Put simply, I was average. I was a second or third team player. I believed I was more tolerated than wanted. If I contributed, I could stay, if I didn't... and the way I contributed was by knowing what to do.

What would Jesus say to me about what I'd come to believe? I learned the answer to this question in Sunday School. I needed and need an experience to help me live the good gift that I am because of the good gift He is to me.

Of course, my wife Julie was super kind and patient and validated my irrational, but heartfelt human vulnerability. She listened empathetically as I expressed my new awareness that my motivation to talk her out of her disappointment with me was because I implicitly and irrationally feared that she regretted marrying me and that deep in my bones was my fear of being left alone. Alone as I had felt that day walking down the long hallway of that parsonage the Sunday my dad punished me without a word.

Responding differently

Revisiting the 'Geoff and the service time change' example above, here's how I'd want to respond instead given how I've grown in my empathic awareness. "I hear you saying ... (restatement). Did I get it? (wait) Is there more? (pause) Ugh! I can see how that's hard for you. I'm sad our decision caught you off guard. I regret we didn't consider how this would affect you. I know that wasn't easy to share. I can see why you would be feeling that way. As you are processing, how can we best support you? What's the most important thing you want me to take away from our conversation? Would you be willing to hear from me now as to why we did what we did?"

As to Julie asking me if I'd be willing to work through a marriage resource together, I'm hoping the acquisition of this new awareness I previously lacked would translate into, "Hmm. Tell me

more.” And when I found myself feeling emotionally embarrassed or my good intentions threatened that I’d pause to reach for my journal, find the pages with the listening prompts Karen provided on that first afternoon I heard them, and “seek first to understand, then to be understood.” (Stephen Covey, *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, 1989).

Even if my reaction was as defensive as before, “When have I ever been unwilling!” I think I’m better equipped to respond calmly to her justified offense with, “Wow, I’m sorry. Can we start over?”

In the comments above, you can hear me offering support, not solutions. Before this journey of enhanced empathic listening began, I misbelieved validation was affirmation. I thought wrongly that if I affirmed the way they experienced me, that I was agreeing with their conclusions or doing them a disservice by not sharing my side. I now see more at work here. I’m motivated by a positive flesh pattern to be thought well of to avoid shame. They get to express their disappointment with me. I can validate that I wouldn’t like it either if I had experienced what they did from me, regardless of my intentions. Once they *feel heard*, I can ask if they’d be willing to hear from me. If so, the prompts that are included in the footnote above may be helpful for considering next steps in our missional endeavors.

I am growing in my surrender to my own humanity. I’m agreeing with the priest who counseled the young wannabe Notre Dame football player in my favorite movie, *Rudy*. "Son, in thirty-five years of religious study, I've come up with only two hard, incontrovertible facts: there is a God, and I'm not Him." While I care deeply about being a person of integrity, I am inadequate to do so without relational injury. I am now better equipped to repair the ruptures without causing further harm.

The words of Jesus on the cross have been a help to me as I’m navigating other’s disappointments with expectations (reasonable or not) they have of me that I cause. “Father, forgive them. They don’t know not what they do.” Here’s my humble paraphrase, “Father, forgive us. We don’t know what the hooey we’re doing.” Lord, have mercy. Give us the grace to admit it when we don’t know what we’re doing and the help to know what to do.

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