

## CHAPTER 4



# How to Read a Group



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**Unlocking**  
*the*  
**MAGIC**  
*of*  
**Facilitation**



Unlocking the Magic of Facilitation:  
11 Key Concepts You Didn't Know You Didn't Know  
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# How to Read a Group

*“Listen and be led.”*

*- L.M. Heroux*

When Sam first started performing stand-up comedy, someone gave him a piece of advice: good comedians aren't the ones who know how to talk the best, but the ones who know how to listen. Sam had no idea what to do with this advice until almost a year later when he started facilitating group discussions. The best comedians and the best facilitators, in this case, have an important thing in common: they know how to read and respond to a group. And to do that, we have to know how to listen.



Let's start with the listening, then get into how it helps with the reading.

## READING A GROUP MEANS LEARNING HOW TO LISTEN

You may be thinking, “Are they going to tell me I need to be an *active listener*? [commence eye roll]” because so often any conversation about listening turns into a conversation about active listening (or the often blurry distinction between “listening” and “hearing”). If your eyes are rolling, you can safely return them to a non-rolled position. While active listening is wonderful, what we're talking about here is less nuanced and even more important: great facilitators spend more time listening than talking.

And, for the sake of this chapter, that's it. To read a group, the first step is to listen more and talk less.

Now, don't get too far ahead of us. While it's easy in theory, not talking is—for some of us more than others—a near-impossible task in practice. Nerves, good intentions, and fear of quiet can equally demolish any chance we have of listening more than talking. There are several things you can do to improve your odds of listening.

During Sam's undergraduate experience as an orientation leader, his mentor Kelly came up with a mnemonic W.H.A.L.E. for facilitators to use while leading group discussions. Used after a facilitator asked a question of the group, the goal of W.H.A.L.E. (which stood for, if Sam's memory serves him, Wait, Hesitate, Ask [again], Listen, then Explain) was to prevent facilitators from answering their own questions, and subsequently dominating the discussion they were there to lead. You'll notice the first two steps in the

W.H.A.L.E. acronym are “Wait” and “Hesitate.” That’s right: two parts of the five-part solution were *don’t do anything*.

Being silent and letting yourself pause as people think about questions or where they need to go next is a risk. It can feel intimidating, uncomfortable, and vulnerable. Sometimes a group will laugh awkwardly, look around at each other, or just stare you down. Every second can feel like an hour, and you might have a voice inside your head yelling the answer to the question you just asked, begging you to fill the void. Resist that urge, and you have a shot at reading your group.

If you are like us, and find it difficult to listen to silence, and vomit words all over your participants (ALL OF THE WORDS), here are a few pointers that will help:

**1. Develop a system that works for you.** What is something that can keep you from clouding the air with words? For Sam, the acronym W.H.A.L.E. helped immeasurably in the beginning. He would ask a question, then in his head recite “Wait...Hesitate...” and usually by then someone else would have broken the silence. Maybe counting works for you. Maybe you know all the words to Poe’s “The Raven” and you want recite those. Whatever. Just have something you can run through in your mind to quiet the urge to talk out loud.

**2. Trust the system.** This might be the only time you’ll ever see us type these words, being folks who generally don’t trust—and are actively working to subvert—systems of control. But in this case, it’s a benevolent system; this is not The Matrix. When you’re in a situation where you feel like it’s your responsibility to talk, a second of listening feels like an hour. It’s easy to throw it all away

and just ramble. Hell, we still do it. Try not to. Trust the system, Neo (take the blue pill).

**3. Allow others to crumble first.** There aren't many laws when it comes to groups of human beings, but there is one that has never failed us: if you don't talk, someone else will. Sometimes you have to wait a seemingly excruciatingly long time (like two, or maybe even three whole seconds), but someone else *will* crumble first if you allow them to. The more you experience this happening, the more fun it becomes. Biting our tongues through awkward silences has actually become one of our favorite things—an enjoyable discomfort, like a *Fear Factor* challenge (only in that case, it would probably involve biting some other thing's tongue).

**4. Just stop talking for a bit.** Like we said before, there isn't anything philosophical or fancy about this version of “learning how to listen.” Just use your ears more, and other people will feel more compelled to use their mouths.

When we were discussing this subject, Meg shared she has never regretted being too silent during a training she was facilitating. On the other hand, there have been a boat load of times she's walked away from a training thinking, “Mhmm, I did too much talking there,” and that motivates her to keep quiet next time. Share the airtime.

## NOW THAT YOU'RE LISTENING: READ THE GROUP

Consider for a moment the experience of someone reading a pop-up book to you. There is so much more to a pop-



up book than just the words on the page—there are movements, visuals, and the tone of the narrator. And there are also the words on the page. All of these elements blend together to tell you a more vibrant, more complete story. Now imagine the pop-up book is also a choose-your-own-adventure style book, where at different stages you, as the listener, are prompted to alter the story itself.

Reading a group of people is like having a choose-your-own-adventure pop-up book read to you. Every element—from the words on the page to the tone of the narrator—is important, and if you listen to each, you will get the most complete story of your group. Let's clarify how these elements apply to reading a group, starting with the most obvious.

## THE WORDS ON THE PAGE

There is much more to a pop-up book than the words, but the words are still important. Similarly important are the actual words you get from your group. This is square one of reading a group: directly asking people how they feel about something, then listening to them when they tell you.

There are two parts here, and it's crucial we do both of them: the asking and the listening. If you've ever been to a comedy show, you've no doubt experienced a comedian directly asking a group how they're feeling ("How's everyone doing tonight?"). And if you're lucky, you've experienced a great comedian who actually listens to the response, instead of just moving on with whatever they planned to say next ("Whoa—I heard that groan in the front row. Sounded like someone got punched in the gut by the cold outside."). If a group knows you're actually listening, they'll be more likely to speak up.

While facilitating a training, we can do the same thing. We can ask questions like “How is everyone feeling about...” or “Show of hands if...” or “Nod if...” or (Sam’s personal favorite) “Snaps if...” (because he was a bad snapper as a kid, but is now awesome at it, and clearly over-proud). The words your participants use when they give you answers, when they tell you how they are feeling, or what they are struggling with, are the first cue to use when reading them as a group.

Here are some ways you can get more words on the page:

**1. Entry surveys.** If possible, have the group fill out a little survey before your training to get a sense of their wants, experiences, dispositions, and identities. This is part of what we call “front loading.” Demographic data of the group are words on the page. Questions they have for you before the training starts are words on the page.

**2. Ask the group check-in questions throughout the workshop.** Ask them what they think about things. Ask them how they feel. Ask them to rephrase points you made, or someone else in the room made. Ask them to reflect back on the first half of a workshop aloud. Process the process. Ask them whatever you need to know—just, you know, shut up once you do (see above section).

We love index card check-ins. You can pass out index cards and use them to check in with the group whenever you need to know what they’re thinking, but you’re not sure they will say it aloud. For example, we use them after intense activities to give participants a chance to write down how they are feeling, then we will read them at random and allow other participants to nod or snap if they’re feeling similarly. Index cards are a low-risk, in-

the-moment, anonymous way to get more words on the page.

**3. Use responses to questions and activities as launching points for discussions.** Nothing will tell you more about where someone is on a subject than their responses to your discussion questions. A great prompt to see if someone understands something is “Recap what we just talked about in your own words.” And after someone answers a question, you can present what they said to the rest of the group (e.g., “Did anyone else have that same thought?”) to get a sense of where they are with the material being discussed.

## THE MOVING PARTS: EXAMINING BODY LANGUAGE AND ENERGY

Just like the structures that come out of the pop-up book as you turn the page, examining the moving parts of your group can add to your impressions of the story. When we think of moving parts, we think primarily of body language and energy.

### *Body Language*

The way people are sitting, where they’re looking, and what they’re doing with their hands are all important parts of the story. Body language is the sum total of all the non-verbal cues you can discern from a person or group. Reading body language is nuanced, and we are not going to get too into the depth of it here, but Google “Body Language TED Talks” or find a good book if you want to learn more. For our purposes, here are a few non-verbal cues we look out for:

**1. Crossing arms and legs** might mean someone is feel-



ing threatened, or needs to put up their guard. In a training, this might be because they are feeling targeted, or just uncomfortable with the subject.

**2. Physically turning away** from someone, whether it's another member of the group or you as the facilitator, might indicate someone is attempting to disengage from that person.

**3. No eye contact**, or staring off into the distance, might mean that someone is bored, but it also could mean someone is processing. Processing is good. Bored is less good.

**4. Phone usage** can feel like a personal affront, like an intentional way to ignore what you are saying. When someone isn't paying attention to you and is instead more interested in what is happening in their lap or on their little screen, it can be hard not to feel like they are checked out.

For all of the above, the best way to understand what's going on is to set clear intentions in the beginning of a training (e.g., "We expect everyone to engage in the discussion"), and then check in with the participants if you sense their body language is telling you something otherwise. Occasionally, you'll be misreading a person's nonverbal cues, and a verbal check-in can clarify what you're seeing. Cell phone use, for example, use can be more compulsive than purposeful at times, in which case you're best off not to take it personally.

### *Energy*

Energy is about movement as much as it is about a lack of movement. If you turned a page of a pop-up book, and noth-

ing poked out, you'd be quick to notice there was a problem, and tug at the right part of the page to fix it. Low energy in a group, while sometimes less obvious, can also be shifted with the right tug.

When a group is energized, it doesn't necessarily mean that they are dancing around and laughing (though if that's the energy you accomplish in your trainings, count us in). An energized group is engaged in the material, attentive to whomever is speaking, and actively learning from the training. In reading the energy of a group, there are a couple of things to keep in mind: (1) How long are you going to be together? (2) What were they doing before the trainings and what will be happening after?

If you're working with a group for longer than an hour, you need to be sensitive to their attention spans. Even with less than an hour you can quickly lose people, but with longer trainings it will be more and more important to make intentional decisions to positively influence the energy of the group. With long trainings, managing the energy of the group can be as important to accomplishing the goals as knowing the material you are discussing.

And what the group was doing before you were together, and what they're doing after, can be just as important to their energy as the actual training you are in together. If they just came from a draining, exhausting, or boring experience, keep that in mind. If it's early in the morning and people are just getting caffeine in their bodies, keep that in mind. Or if it's the end of the day on Friday, and people are excited to be done with their week, keep that in mind.

Beyond that, energy can be a hard thing to explain. For us, knowing the energy of a group is sometimes simply a feeling in our gut that says "These people are *into this*" or "These

people are *about to pass out*.” Other times, you can tell the energy is low by the tone in participants’ voices (if everyone is starting to sound flat) or a lack of effort in transitioning from one activity to the next (everyone groans as they stand up, or turn a page).

If you’re noticing the group’s energy is low, hope is not lost.

A few tips for recharging your group’s batteries:

**1. Take a break and encourage people to get up, walk around, and stretch.** If your training is a long one (several hours plus), take 15 minutes. If it’s a short training, take five. If you’ve ever been falling asleep in a class and knew if you just stood up and stretched how much more awake you’d be, you’ll understand how helpful it can be.

**2. Rearrange the room and the people in it.** Switching the configuration of the room can create new energy: swap the seating arrangement (e.g., if you were in a classroom style, change it to an open circle, or small pods) and ask participants to sit by someone new.

**3. Change the type of interaction you’re using to engage your group.** If you’ve been lecturing a lot, move to facilitating a conversation, or teaching a topic where there can be more back and forth between you and the group. Put people in small groups or in pairs to get everyone participating.

**4. Consider bringing movement into the training itself.** For example, instead of asking if people agree or disagree, have them show you: make a values statement and have the participants stand up and organize themselves on a spectrum from strongly agree to strongly disagree.



## TONE AND QUALITY OF VOICE: THE MESSAGE BEHIND THE WORDS

How someone says something can be as important as what they're saying. One of our favorite examples of this is the famous "I never said she stole my money" inflections. This sentence can be emphasized to mean seven different things, by changing which word is **emphasized**:

**I** never said she stole my money.

*[someone else may have]*

I **never** said she stole my money.

*[I didn't say it and how dare you accuse me of doing so]*

I never **said** she stole my money.

*[but she tots did]*

I never said **she** stole my money.

*[but someone else did, and that person is a jerk]*

I never said she **stole** my money.

*[I gave it to her, just, not, entirely willingly]*

I never said she stole **my** money.

*[but she stole someone's, and for that she's a jerk]*

I never said she stole my **money**.

*[she stole my heart. I gave her the money. I <3 jerks.]*

In facilitation, try to pay as much attention to the how as the what. And, as always, if you're unsure of what someone is trying to convey with their tone, check in. Find your own style of checking in and figure out what feels natural to you.

The best "checking in" advice we can give here is to name what you observe (e.g., "So I heard you say that she stole your money...") and then explain why you're circling back to it ("...but how you said it made me feel unclear about why you

wanted to share that with us. Can you tell me a bit more?"). It never hurts to ask someone to rephrase something before you react, to make sure you're reacting to what they actually want you to be reacting to.

## CHOOSE THEIR OWN ADVENTURE

If you've never read a choose your own adventure book, the premise is simple. At different points in the story, the author gives the reader the ability to decide where it'll go next ("Turn to page 13 if you get this reference; turn to page 89 if you want to see Sam and Meg stop using this analogy"). In reading a group during a workshop, it's great if you can create opportunities where they have the ability to choose where the story goes next. Nothing will tell you what a group wants more than giving them control over where the training goes next.

The simplest way to achieve this is by asking. You could take a vote ("Raise your hand if you want to spend 5 more minutes on this") or ask for submissions ("What should we talk about for these last 5 minutes?"). Asking where the group wants go to is also a helpful component of frontloading, if you have the chance to hear from the group before they form.

Another way to let them choose their own adventure is to listen when they're trying to tell you they already have. If folks keep asking questions about a certain subject, they're choosing their own adventure. Cover that subject. If nobody seems engaged by whatever you're talking about, ditto. If someone seems triggered, angry, or confused, that likely warrants switching to a different page and addressing those concerns.

Remember, facilitation isn't about plotting out a course

and etching it in stone, but about letting the winds and currents nudge you around on your journey toward a common goal.





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