Observations on Enabling Candidates to “Grow”

Adapted from Parent-Effectiveness Training by Kermit Roisen

As a team member you have a responsibility to communicate genuine acceptance and genuine humanness. (LOVE). “I like you as you are”. “I am of the same family with same problems, weakness and make-up that you have.”

Do not communicate the feeling that you are there to help someone less fortunate than yourself, or that you are there to straighten them out or to think for them.

Each candidate contains within herself all the necessary elements and capacity to develop into a ‘whole’ person, beautiful in her own way. It is our God given responsibility to enable them to develop. Acceptance enables people to actualize their own potential. It fosters grown and helps bring about constructive change. When a person feels she is truly accepted, she is freed to move from where she is and to think of how she wants to change.

We communicate acceptance by ‘body language’ i.e. by gestures, postures, facial expressions and other physical actions. We also communicate acceptance by ‘vocal language’. This happen when our conversation is more about them than about ourselves; when we seek to find out where they are from, what they do, what their family is like, what they like to do, etc.

This is relatively easy until conversation turns to other things such as politics or religious beliefs. Here we tend to become ‘polemic', that is, ‘evangelistic’ in the bed sense of the word. We often fall into patterns of imposing our values, our conclusions and our points of view on others in such ways that they are ‘cowed’ and withdrawn or become angry and resentful. At this point the façade of acceptance falls away as they become aware that you want them to think, feel and act just like you do. They may resist, turning you off or even arguing strongly against you.

Dr. Thomas Gordon has drawn up a list that he calls the 12 Road Blocks to Communication. Some of them apply to the experiences of a Cursillo weekend. They can serve to alert us to the kind of talk that will turn off or ‘close-up’ the candidates. He speaks of four other ways of responding that do let people talk if they want to even encourage the reluctant ones to begin talking. Have you ever heard a team member say, ‘We have this gal that we just can’t get to say anything’? The most effective tool for enabling such people to talk out freely is called Active Listening.

Active listening takes place when the receiver of a message works hard to understand exactly what the sender is trying to say. The Sender has thoughts, feelings or needs that he wants to express in order to get his needs met. He encodes them into a verbal message. The listener (receiver) attempts to decode the message and carefully verifies the accuracy of the decoding. The receiver tries to express his understanding of the sender’s words in his own words and feeds it back for the sender’s verification. The receiver does not send a message of his own such as an evaluation, opinion, advice, logic, analyses or questions. He feeds back only what he feels the sender’s message meant – nothing more or less.

Some of the advantages of active listening as listed below:

* Active listening helps people free themselves of troublesome feelings as they are encouraged to express them openly. It helps them to become less afraid of negative feelings or of feelings that are different from those they believe they should.
* Active listening facilitates clear thinking by the candidate as she tried to make you understand what she is thinking and feeling. Clear thinking on the part of the candidate about herself, about God and the team’s witness to Jesus can enable her to draw her own conclusions, make her own decision and her own commitments. In the process she finds solutions to her problems and needs through Jesus. This probably will not happen if we try to do her thinking for her or force her to conclusions or commitments. Consider yourself as a ‘sounding board’. Let the candidate ‘talk it out’. Active listening ‘keeps the BALL with the candidate’. It leaves the responsibility for decision and commitment with them.
* Active listening promotes a relationship of warmth between candidate and team member. The experience of being heard and understood by another person is so satisfying, that it invariably makes the sender feel warm toward the listener. The sender feels closeness, caring and love.
* Active listening will make the candidate more open to your witness. As you listen to her she will open to listen to you. As the weekend unrolls she will ask you what you think and you can accept her invitation. Be careful in the early part of the weekend to listen more than you share even if they invite your opinion. They may want to hide, to let you carry the ball and many of them will be adroit at avoiding involvement.