

LISTENING PROJECT

What is it?

The Listening Project is an organizing tool for nonviolent social change, especially useful in communities where conflict and disempowerment weakens efforts toward community development, justice, peace or protecting the environment.

Listening Projects use trained volunteers to conduct one-on-one interview that address local and sometimes national or international issues. Interviewers take time to build trust and understanding so that people interviewed can go deeper into their fears, hurts, hopes, needs, feelings and ideas.

As citizens begin to understand that their feelings, opinions and actions can matter, they respond in dynamic ways. Some offer creative ideas and solutions. Some take the next step to action or leadership. Thus the Listening Project can be an important step toward individual and community empowerment.

When we truly listen to people, no matter how different they are from us, we increase communication and mutual understanding. This can be the foundation of an effective, heart-centered community organizing process.

Very Simply: How a Listening Project Works . . .

The heart of any **Listening Project** is trained volunteers from an organized group going out into a community to listen to (interview) individuals. These volunteers use active listening in their interviews because they really want to hear what other people truly think and feel about community issues (which may include regional, national or global issues).

The Listeners of course have their own ideas but they aren't going to force their ideas on anybody. They think the best way to solve community problems is for people to try to understand each other. And they want to provide an environment where all sides can explore the issues and consider new ideas and solutions. This helps reduce conflict that often hampers positive change. It can also empower people to work together to find practical solutions that will be good for the community as a whole. Of course anybody can all by themselves take up this basic idea about listening, and have their own private "listening project."

Listening Project with the capital letters, however, is different:

A Listening Project happens when

- an organization or coalition
- working to achieve community based goals
- commits to listening, nonviolence & grassroots empowerment
- then plans and carries out a Project
- based on community interviews and active listening
- that builds trust, strengthens relationships and produces results that the organization, coalition or community applies to long-range goals.

That's the Listening Project in simplest terms. Now we'll spell it out.

An organization or coalition...

This is important because a Listening Project is a big undertaking that requires organizational skills and resources. It is often beneficial for an organization to broaden community support and involvement in the Listening Project by forming coalitions and partnerships with other organizations. Sometimes an individual, acting as a **community facilitator**, takes the lead in listening and developing the organization or coalition that will conduct the Listening Project.

working to achieve community based goals...

Your Listening Project goals should help you achieve one or more of your organizational goals. Your organization should have clear goals that are easily understood by your community and by members and supporters of your organization. These goals should also be community based – they should in some way be related to the needs and concerns of the affected community. Sometimes the initial goal for a Listening Project is simply to listen to the community to find potential allies and to hear grassroots ideas, concerns and solutions that help your organization establish clear community based goals.

commits to listening, nonviolence & grassroots empowerment...

This approach to social action is built on helping organizations strengthen grassroots participation and leadership. It accomplishes this by building and strengthening relationships through active listening that increases understanding, trust, and mutual respect -- with both friend and adversary. We work to build community awareness and participation, to find common ground, and to create community based solutions. We also seek to remedy injustice and achieve our goals by building bridges rather than demonizing and “running over” our opponents.

then plan and carry out a Project...

The *Project* is a group effort that includes developing your organizational capacity to conduct the project, planning , goal-setting, preparing the interview questions, conducting the training, etc. (all of which must happen before the Listening) and follow-up organizing after the Listening, with new plans, goals and strategies based on the findings of the Listening Project interviews. Project interviews generally take 2 to 6 months to complete. Time needed for follow-up organizing varies, depending on long and short-term goals.

based on community interviews and active listening...

Following an intensive weekend of training, two-person teams of trained volunteer listeners – one listener and one recorder -- conduct interviews with individuals, using pre-developed questions. These questions help focus the interview on community issues and your organizations' goals but they do not limit the interview. Interview questions are generally open ended, non-threatening and they stimulate people to look into issues more deeply. Thus interviewers ask follow-up questions that help the interviewee open up and explore their deeper feelings, including new ideas and solutions. (Interviews are generally conducted at people's homes or in a place where they can feel relatively safe. Each interview lasts about one hour).

designed to build trust, strengthen relationships...

Active listening builds trust so that the person being interviewed can be less defensive and more open to exploring new ideas, feelings and solutions. As trust occurs, a positive relationship can develop between the interviewer and the interviewee. This relationship is a vital step in the direction of improved community relationships that can foster community based solutions and action. Active listening is also an empowering process in that helps people understand that their voice and actions matter.

and produce results the group can use in working toward their long-term goals.

Through the Listening interviews, your organization can get a better understanding of the community and how you can more effectively work on or change your goals. You can identify new resources and find potential allies and new grassroots leadership. Some people interviewed may experience personal change of heart and mind. Thus, new people are likely to step forward to contribute to your efforts. The results of your community interviews can also be used to educate yourselves and the public and focus community attention. The LP itself doesn't automatically accomplish any group's long-term goals, like "Reduce crime and drugs in our neighborhood." But a good follow-up organizing plan takes advantage of Listening Project results to help reach those goals.

From Rural Southern Voice for Peace; 1036 Hannah Branch Rd., Burnsville, NC 28714
828-675-5933; e-mail: info@listeningproject.info