

Encouragement

The Unexpected Power of Building Others Up

Three Principles of and Three Guidelines for Encouragement

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Three Principles of and Three Guidelines for Encouragement

By Dr. Larry Crabb and Dr. Dan Allender
(adapted from the book *Encouragement*)

If we remind ourselves to remain alert for opportunities, and if we respond with door openers to possible messages hidden beneath words, then we will encounter situations that beg for encouragement. There are so few real listeners that when we do incline our ear to others, we will stumble regularly into people who need encouragement.

But sensitive listening creates an imposing problem. Suppose someone reacts to a door opener by actually opening the door. What are encouragers to do when someone drops his layer and reveals his struggles?

One sincere Christian man who enrolled in a course on encouragement put it this way: "I'm a little scared to go around opening doors. What would I do if someone laid something heavy on me like 'My marriage is falling apart' or 'My kid is on drugs' or 'I have a sexual problem.' I wouldn't have the faintest idea what to say. I'm afraid I'd do more harm than good. I don't know what to say when someone tells me he's a little depressed, let alone something big."

The concern is understandable, and it is one reason why people close more doors than they open. When we prompt someone to shed her layer and share an aspect of her life that was formerly hidden, what do we do next? The difficult part of surgery may not be cutting into the body. Although skill is required to make the incision without disfiguring or endangering the patient, the central work of surgery begins once the problem is uncovered. The surgeon's ability is most needed when the diseased organ lies exposed before him. In keeping with this analogy, our

greatest need as encouragers is to know what to do when the verbal incision has been made and a need lies exposed before us.

Having used some examples of encouraging words in the previous chapter, I must state again that we do not learn to encourage by memorizing a list of phrases. There is no such list, at least none worth memorizing. Encouragement is not a technique based on selecting certain words; it is an attitude, a view of others as valuable with a commitment to treat them accordingly.

Encouragement does, however, require words. Therefore it is necessary to face the problem of choosing the right words to say. It may be helpful to approach the problem by defining a few *principles of encouragement*. If, as we speak to hurting people, we keep these principles in our minds and endeavor to speak consistently with them, our words will very likely have the power to encourage.

Principle 1: The Essence of Encouragement Is Exposure Without Rejection

The central function of a layer is to protect. To come out from behind a layer means losing protection. The exposed person is in line to experience some form of rejection. Indifference, criticism, irritation, impatience, sarcasm, withdrawal, and disapproval are but a few of the many ways to reject someone as less than valuable. At the core of our beings we all fear rejection, whatever form it takes.

It is true that Christians are fully accepted by God because of Jesus' shed blood. For us, there is now no condemnation. But somehow we fail to grasp that God's acceptance makes anyone else's rejection no more devastating than a misplaced dollar would be to a millionaire. We foolishly believe that other people's acceptance represents a legitimate measure of our

value. We fear the rejection of people and therefore hide from them.

With this understanding of people's fear, we can see that the strength of encouragement lies in its communication of acceptance to an exposed person. My wife often sees me standing behind a pulpit or seminar podium teaching others how to live for Christ; but she also has the opportunity to watch how I handle the frustration of a broken lawn mower or the trial of a heavy schedule. Better than anyone else, she knows how imperfectly I live what I preach. I am exposed in her presence — and accepted. I am exposed and accepted — and therefore encouraged.

When a staff member's poor attitude demands a corrective response, the senior pastor may need to speak words of admonition. As the staff member listens to an explanation of his error, he is exposed. He may continue to retreat behind layers of defensiveness, apology, or arrogance, but still, in some measure, he stands exposed. Whenever a person's weaknesses are visible to himself and another, there is opportunity for profound encouragement — or discouragement.

To provide encouragement, the pastor should take pains to convey confidence in the staff member's potential to change. And he should allow freedom for him to wrestle with the rebuke: "Let's talk this over next week after we both can spend time in prayer." If the rebuke is direct and gentle rather than vague or brutal, then the admonition may encourage.

If, however, the pastor's words reflect disgust, disappointment, impatience, or irritation, then no encouragement will occur. Encouragement depends fundamentally on accepting a person whose needs and faults lie exposed.

Sometimes encouragement may involve an almost comically trivial exposure. During a recent trip I discovered, much to my

dismay, that the shower in my motel room was broken. I heard a maid bustling about in the hallway and mentioned my dilemma to her. With a sincere nod, she promised to report the matter to maintenance.

Several hours later, as I was returning to my room after addressing a conference, I chanced to walk by the same maid. She stopped folding towels long enough to look up and say, “I told the desk about your shower. If it isn’t fixed by now, I think you should change rooms.”

Her words, I noticed, generated a bit of warmth in me. I had exposed a need to her — hardly a significant one but still a need — and she had heard me. She had taken my problem seriously. Thinking back, I realized that I had expected her to do nothing, to react to my stated need with indifference. Instead, she cared. Exposure with acceptance, even at this level, is encouraging.

Principle 2: Understanding Is Sometimes Better Than Advice

When people make known a concern, most of us immediately feel pressure. “What do I say now? How can I help? I don’t know what to tell him he should do.” The pressure is *self-imposed*. We take it upon ourselves to solve the other person’s problems, and then we feel the pressure of figuring out a solution.

Our mistake is to assume that the person who shares a problem is really asking us for a solution. A wife complaining to her husband about job tensions is rarely requesting that he come up with alternative employment possibilities or improved coping strategies. Rather, she is simply asking to be understood and accepted. “I hurt. Do you care?”

Yet husbands (and wives, when the situation is reversed) inevitably respond with “Maybe you ought to look for a better job.” Then they feel puzzled and confused when their attempt

to help is met with an angry retort: “Sure, jobs are a dime a dozen. I’ll just go right out and get myself a new one.”

Lost people need direction. Blind people need enlightening. Stubborn people need prodding. Clear instruction on how to handle life’s problems is obviously necessary. But people are not only lost, blind, and stubborn; they are also scared. And scared people need patient, accepting understanding. Christians must grasp the apparently elusive truth that advice without understanding is not helpful. It is in fact a form of rejection.

Quick advice communicates disrespect and disinterest. The words *spoken* may be “I think that you should. . . .” The words *heard* may be “Your problem is simple. But you’re too stupid to figure out a solution. So I’ll tell you what to do.”

The job of the encourager is to provide understanding and acceptance. Direct advice based on biblical teaching is a necessary part of helping someone who does not know what to do. But the unique work of encouragement is preparing people to take good advice more willingly by opening them up through acceptance. Encouragers do not need to feel the pressure of applying specific remedies to every problem. Perhaps another brother or sister in Christ, more experienced and knowledgeable in the Scriptures, should be called in to provide clear direction. The encourager must see the rich value of providing understanding.

Quiet listening, sensitive probing, clarifying inquiry, discerning restatement are a few ways to promote and convey understanding. These verbal strategies are discussed in depth in our book *Encouragement*. But in them all, the message of the encourager is “I hear you, I want to hear more from you, and I believe you are a valuable human being.”

Principle 3: The More Precise the Understanding, the More Encouraging the Words

Encouragers must not only (1) provide for exposure without rejection and (2) seek to sensitively understand whatever a person may be saying, but (3) they must also speak words that promote awareness of a person's value. To do so, encouragers need to understand precisely what it is that makes a person valuable.

The Bible teaches that people are unique. We bear the image of God. Whatever else that image may encompass, it certainly includes the fact that people are capable of (1) entering into relationships of love and (2) engaging in activities with meaning. We are designed for relationship and meaningful activity. God had fellowship with Adam and Eve, and he assigned important work for them to do.

Because we are created, finite beings, we are dependent upon our infinite Creator for the resources we need to live full, whole lives. We therefore *need* relationship and we *need* meaning; we require both love and purpose. Or, in terms I have used in other books, people need *security* and *significance*. The security of enjoying a love that cannot be lost and the significance of pursuing activities with eternal consequence are available only through relationship to Christ.

The essential fear that is locked deep in the core of fallen people is the fear of insecurity (rejection) and insignificance (loss of value). If encouragers clearly understand that these two deep longings lie beneath people's layers of self-sufficiency, their words may reflect a greater understanding of people's fears.

Encouraging words identify the desire for relationship, penetrating beneath whatever layers are presented. A recently divorced woman told me that she knew God would see her

through the unwelcome adjustment to single living. I sensed that her confidence was more contrived than genuine and, remembering how fervently people long for relationship, simply remarked, “Feeling lonely?”

She burst into tears and poured out her heart, expressing terrible fears that life would never be joyful again. Still reminding myself that she needed relationship, I simply listened, providing her with at least one person who accepted and cared about her. I then prayed with her and asked the Lord to bring a deep sense of his presence into her life.

Words that encourage take into account both the need for relationship and the need for meaning. All of us want to know we matter. We long to make an impact. It is difficult to leave a church fellowship after many years of active involvement and find that the gap created by our absence is quickly and painlessly filled. God designed us with the intention that we make a difference in our world. When we are aware of making a positive impact, we feel good.

It follows that an excellent way to encourage people is to let them know of the difference they have made in other people’s lives, ours included. Statements like “Your smile really cheers me up” or “The way you treat your kids has been a super example for me to follow” or “The consistency of your life has helped me believe that the Christian life can really work” can be most encouraging.

Encouragers will be sensitive to ways in which they can pick up on the basic needs and say something that can bring hope to a person who otherwise might despair of ever experiencing the security and significance available in Christ. A precise understanding of people’s needs can assist the encourager to be more encouraging.

As encouragers, we must also know the power of our words and use that force to build up our Christian brothers and sisters. We must use our words carefully. From the book of Proverbs emerge the following principles that provide wisdom to guide us as we speak.

Guideline 1: Be Slow to Speak (Proverbs 12:18; 13:3; 17:27 – 28; 29:20)

Researchers have found that human beings can listen at least three times faster than they can talk. This suggests that we can daydream, plan our week's menu, hum a favorite tune, and still "listen" to our neighbor's chatter. If we could hear what others are thinking as we talk to them, it might be disconcerting: "I'll listen long enough to get an idea of what you are saying, then I'll begin to plan my response." That is not listening. The writer of Proverbs says, "To answer before listening, that is folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13). As encouragers we must be slow to speak so that we can concentrate on what others are saying. Then our words will fit the concerns that the others have expressed.

Guideline 2: Be Sensitive in Your Speech

An encourager's response must be well-tuned and suited both to the circumstances and the personality of the one speaking. After preaching at a country church, I received an invitation to dine with a respected but somewhat intimidating deacon and his family. Listening to him expound on the need for an iron hand in ruling the church and the home, I noticed that all of us in the room felt thoroughly threatened by him because he always spoke harshly and seemed to regard everyone else as wrong.

After dinner, the deacon's four-year-old granddaughter was helping to clear the table when she stumbled. She dropped

several pieces of the “Sunday china.” I was seized with terror, expecting a verbal guillotine to fall on the child’s neck. But to my amazement, the old gentleman quickly reached over to stroke the little girl’s hair and soothed her muffled cry. He responded with sensitivity to a frightened child. A harsh word would have turned her into a pool of tears; instead, his timing and touch averted a catastrophe.

The lesson in this incident is that encouragers are sensitive. Encouragers ask themselves questions like “What words will be most effective in touching this person?” and “What does the situation demand of me to help this person grow in Christ?”

Sensitivity requires real awareness of situations and a basic knowledge of how people typically feel in different circumstances. Before I respond to someone who has failed in a task, I must remind myself that the task is less important than the person. My verbal response must reflect thoughtful concern for the person who has failed. Only then will negative feedback about performance qualify as constructive criticism. If I don’t exercise this sensitivity, my comments will be destructive.

Guideline 3: Be Gentle in Your Speech (Proverbs 15:1, 4; 26:21)

Clanging words are motivated by something other than love. The air is full of such noise. Many words are spoken to demonstrate competency, to exhibit success, to control others, or to enhance a reputation. I remember listening to a family conversation that more closely resembled a volleyball game than good communication. The subject was travel, and each participant took great pleasure in sharing his or her experiences. For some reason I fell to counting the number of times the subject was bounced back and forth before one person asked another to elaborate on what was just said. I stopped counting at twenty-six. Their words were like slaps at a ball; there was no interest in what the other person was saying. Kind words show

involvement and concern. Selfish words clamor for the spotlight; they interrupt rather than facilitate conversation.

Gentle words, it should be said, are not necessarily softly spoken. Rather, they are words *seasoned with grace*. Gentle words may resemble the soft, firm touch of the shepherd's crook guiding the sheep down the safest path. Gentle words may convince us that there is no need to keep our layers on, thereby freeing us to express the concerns that are troubling us or the joys that are filling us. The measure of gentleness is less a matter of tone than of motive.

We recently spent time with friends whom we had not seen for a number of months. During a weeklong sailing trip, we talked at some length about our growth in Christ. We laughed, we were serious, and we enjoyed one another's company. At the end of the week, I realized the time had refreshed my spirit. Words were spoken that caused me to reflect on my relationship with the Lord, on his love for me, and on the high calling of service for him. Our conversation was filled with mutual love and interest. The words were gentle. Gentle words result in the softening of layers, enabling us to look honestly at ourselves and appreciatively at Christ.

Encouragers, therefore, will enter into even superficial conversations with an eye toward speaking gently, aware of the context and the person. They want their words to break down layers through kind, involved interaction. Every Christian can speak gently. More must do so.

Perhaps the major obstacle to becoming an encourager is the universal and natural appetite for self-satisfaction. Even the most saintly man or woman will fall back into old patterns of self-centered living. It takes real work to speak *slowly, sensitively, and gently* in the context of the principles of encouragement.

Encouragement

The Unexpected Power of Building Others Up

By Dr. Larry Crabb & Dr. Dan Allender

Encouragement is more than a compliment or a pat on the back. It's a skill that can be mastered by anyone. This book will show you how.

Part one deals with understanding encouragement, and part two explores the process of encouragement, including such practical how-tos as developing a careful selection of encouraging words; cultivating active listening skills; using biblical fellowship to move beyond superficial smiles and shallow greetings; and recognizing subtle opportunities for encouragement.

Without the encouragement of a caring community, biblical truth taught in church tends to just thicken people's defense layers. But authenticity, freedom, and greater love for God and others are the fruit of encouragement, and evidence of the tremendous power God invests in individuals who practice it.

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