

When in Doubt, Aim for the Heart

Ten Principles for Moving Towards Others

1. In *all* your conversations—whether for five minutes or fifty-five minutes—always seek to aim for the heart.¹
 1. Do you **move conversations one step deeper**?
 2. Do you **move towards others** and **know them well enough to pray with them**?
 3. Do you listen? What do you listen for?
 - Are you always scanning for the work of the Spirit? (**The person reflects God.**)
 - Do you pick up on troubles? (**The person suffers.**)
 - What if the person is confessing sin? (**The person sins.**)
 4. Another way to summarize in a few words what we are doing? **Listen until you are moved.**
2. Are you **personal**?
3. Do you **follow up**? Think of what you do as following up—keeping track of the person’s story.
4. Who are we? Brother, sister, friend, becoming a friend, sinner, strong in weakness, shepherd, guide. **Think “we”** and walk alongside as a friend.
5. When in doubt, **edit yourself**.
6. In your desire to know the person, are you mingling your conversation with words of **encouragement** and **comfort**?
7. **Be slow to give advice.** Advice is “speed-counseling”. Something may emerge out of Scripture, but what makes it advice is that it is a narrow application of that Scripture. Advice tends to not be strong on listening, and certainly isn’t strong on compassion. Advice is simply waiting to identify the problem, and once it identifies the problem it is off and running on a possible solution. For the advice-giver, compassion is just extra time that impedes efficiency. It doesn’t tend to be personal; it isn’t moved by what the other person has to say. There tends to be a lack of entering into the other person’s world and seeing it through their eyes. Rather, advice says “This is what I would do in your situation.” It tends to put the relationship at risk a bit, because when you start receiving from another person, especially a close friend, it suddenly feels as if the relationship has taken a hierarchical turn. The person giving the advice is the expert, who’s speaking down to the student who’s intended to receive the advice. Advice does not say “That’s a great question. Tell me what you’re thinking. I know you’ve thought about this. You wouldn’t ask the question if you weren’t thinking about these things.” This is a theological concept. “You have been thinking about this, and you have the Spirit of Christ in you.” Simply put, first ask “What have you done?” and then “What are you thinking about doing?” When in doubt, move in a collegial direction and speak ‘we’.
8. **Consider your own heart and life story.** Can you make the connection between the details of your daily life and your relationship with the Lord? Your daily life—your work and relationships—gives you an accurate read on your relationship with Jesus.



1. How are your best relationships? Your worst relationships?
 2. How are your spiritual disciplines?
 3. How are you growing in your battle with sin? **Can you identify sin in your own life?**
 4. Do you **ask for help**? Are you needy? I would like to give you a homework assignment for this coming week. Ask someone to pray for you on the spot!
 5. Do you encourage other people to do things you don't do?
 6. How are you growing in the way you turn to Jesus in the midst of suffering and hardship? In Hosea 7:14 the Lord accuses the Israelites in this way: "They do not cry to me from the heart, but they wail upon their beds..."
 7. What are your weaknesses or common mistakes in everyday conversation? David Powlison offers a helpful illustration here. All of us tend to be either "door" people or "hinge" people. Half of us are really good at creating doorways. "Door" people tend to be really good at loving and knowing the other person, but they don't know how to turn the doorknob. They know tons of things and they really care, but they don't know where to go. The questions they ask don't have a direction. They tend to gravitate towards community group leadership. The other half of us are really good with "hinges." There are no doors, no curiosity for greater context, no real reason to want to listen. They see right and wrong, they see some of the choice points, etc., but the talk doesn't build on the right foundation. They tend to be the pastors and seminarians in the church. If you are a "door" person then it would be worthwhile to take what you know and process it. There is a discipline to organizing what you hear and see, and to set goals. If you are a "hinge" person, it might be worthwhile as a discipline in your conversation to bracket what you are going to say. "Let me make sure I know this person first." "What is one thing (as opposed to ten action steps) that this person should get hold of?"
9. What are you hearing? What should you follow?
1. Follow the events and, even more, the interpretation and impact of the events. "What was that like for you?" Rather than trying to be a fly on the wall, try and to look at life through their window.
 2. Follow the strongest emotions.
 3. Follow the relationships, especially the hard ones.
 4. Follow repeated words or key images and metaphors.
 5. Follow references to Jesus. Are there references? Does the person sound like a Christian?
 6. Follow what is perplexing, confusing, or inconsistent.
 7. Remember, ethical assessments are not the same as pastoral ministry. When you've got someone firmly planted in a moral category, it's best to ask one more question!
10. Do you **notice small steps**? Do you **recommend and agree on small steps**?

¹ Bolded words indicate the most important concepts in this material. This material is taken, with some minor alterations, from a course entitled "Helping Relationships" taught by Dr. Ed Welch and presented by the CCEF School of Biblical Counseling (www.ccef.org) and Westminster Theological Seminary.

