

ARE YOU REALLY LISTENING?

Effective 360 degree listening and questioning skills can remove communication barriers, and increase your bottom line results.

By Tricia Reardon

This might appear to be a big statement, particularly increasing results! However poor communication does lead to a range of workplace troubles that impact directly on the bottom line. These include lowered productivity and morale, misunderstanding and conflict, legal issues, wasted resources and even lost sales. Yet, communication barriers are easily broken down with the right approach, sound questioning techniques that unearth real issues and willingness to actively listen. Listening is often viewed as a 'soft' management skill, but it is a critical skill that can bring accord and cooperation across a business. It is also a skill that can be learned.

Listening and questioning are 360-degree activities applicable to all levels of business and life. It takes hard work to actively listen, and often more energy than talking. Active listening is listening with a purpose - it involves total concentration on the speaker and interpreting the information being received. Unfortunately, many people interpret information by making a preconceived judgement about what is being said whilst it is being said. Listening with empathy and understanding requires the listener to discover what the person speaking really means by putting aside personal thoughts and completely taking on the speaker's viewpoint - a difficult undertaking if you have strong views or a tendency to dominate. The rewards however, are well worth the effort.

Putting Judgements Aside

In Stephen Covey's highly acclaimed book *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, empathetic listening is regarded as the key to making deposits in an 'Emotional Bank Account' - a term that refers to the amount of trust that is built up in a relationship. The higher the reserve in this bank account, the stronger and more resilient is the relationship. Empathetic listening though is an interesting concept, as it requires the listener to put him/herself in the shoes of the person speaking without making an evaluation. Herein lies the conundrum... a manager's role is to evaluate. Managers therefore must recognise that to make a judgement, they need to suspend judgement. And this is not just true for managers. Whether you are listening to a subordinate, a peer, manager or customer, listening empathetically is critical to understanding what that person is really saying, which in turn enables you to decide the best response or course of action.

Empathetic Listening Can Increase Sales

Sales people who practise empathetic listening with customers can often increase the opportunity for additional sales. Take for example, a customer who wants to buy paint at a hardware store. A sales person can simply take that at face value and sell the customer a tin of paint. However, if the sales person asks what the customer is painting and then listens empathetically to the customer, it is likely that the sales person will begin to see many opportunities for additional product sales by 'mentally' joining the customer on the painting task to be undertaken. How that sales person can make the customer's painting experience easier with the right products and accessories will depend on the sales person having empathy. The customer sensing the empathy will trust the sales person and in most instances will take the advice given.

This simple scenario is reflected at so many levels within organisations, not just in a sales forum. Listening to staff and customers builds knowledge, which in turn paves the way for effective decision-making.

The True Value of Listening

Whilst listening requires time and effort, the rewards that come are manifold. Truly understanding what others are saying allows opportunities to arise that will improve efficiencies, productivity, morale, and sales.



We all know from personal experience that when someone is truly listening to us, there is a sense of being understood - that what you have to say is important and that the person who is listening does care. This is one of the most effective forms of flattery... when someone gives us his/her fullest attention. Trust is also being developed, which in turn encourages more open and relaxed dialogue. This type of exchange leads to a greater degree of information being imparted, enabling the listener to capture far



“building long - standing partnerships”

more than just surface words. It builds bridges between people and allows for greater harmony.

However, it is not enough just to hear what is being said. There are also two other basic steps in good communication... responding and taking action. Listening carefully requires response... seeking clarification where necessary with appropriate questions and summarising what it is you have understood.

Just as important though, is acting upon what has been heard. Failure to act on issues that have been raised only undermines the communication process. And a promise to act must always be delivered.

When the advantages of truly listening are so obvious, why is it though that communication still breaks down? Perhaps the answer lies in our own prejudices and preconceived ideas... or

may be it has something to do with the pace at which we work. Truly listening to someone and to understand his/her perspective takes effort, and it takes time. We have to be free of distraction; to concentrate solely on the speaker; to resist the temptation to finish sentences or interject with our own thoughts; to push aside emotion; to look directly at the person; to be patient; and to ask questions for clarification of meaning. These are not as easy as they sound. It can also be a painful and threatening experience to hear the truth. However, to gain the benefit of sound relationships, listening is a skill well worth the effort to acquire.

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