

Successful Supervisor Part 12

Your Listening Hat

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

I once had a manager who was highly analytical. He was a whiz with numbers and data, but he had a weakness when it came to fully hearing people when they were talking to him. I think it was because his brain was capable of thinking at about 10 times the rate that people were able to talk, so there was a lot of available time for him to multitask while he was “listening” to people. I found it kind of frustrating for a while, but I found a way to vastly improve his ability to absorb what I needed him to hear.

Most of the time, the communication between us was like normal banter, and he could pick up the majority of my messages anyway through observing my body language. I will write about this skill in a future article. However, sometimes I would have a really important point that I needed him to absorb fully. I would stop talking for a few moments (silence has a way of grabbing a listener’s attention) then I would say, “Now Mark, I need you to put on your ‘Listening Hat’ for the next 30 seconds.” He would nod and give me his full attention while I communicated the important message.

I have studied the quality-of-life surveys of hundreds of companies over the past couple decades. It is part of my contracting process when I do leadership consulting in an organization. Invariably the number one or number two complaint that people in the organization have is poor communication. It is always there near the top of employee concerns.

Of all the communication skills human beings have, we are weakest at listening. The reason is simple; we can process information so much faster than people can talk, so we use the extra processing time to figure out what we are going to say next. In fact, the majority of our mental capacity while we are ostensibly listening is really focused on getting ready to speak. Therefore, we miss some details that the other person is trying to communicate. Oh we get the gist of the information and easily make assumptions about the details. These assumptions are sometimes off base, so we get a distorted view of what the communication was all about.

The crime is that we all feel like we have listened well and have absorbed the full detail of what was being sent our way. This is the most significant cause of

miscommunication between people, and we are all guilty of doing it. Probably the best listeners on the planet are people who are mentally or physically challenged so that they are forced to concentrate on what is being said to them to the exclusion of all outside thoughts or distractions. How ironic that people who are severely challenged actually listen better than the rest of us who have our full faculties.

Is there no way out of this conundrum? Thankfully there is. We can all put on an imaginary “Listening Hat” during certain critical conversations, and that practice will allow us to absorb the maximum data when it really counts the most. The hat is simply a mental image or screening device that allows us to pay “normal listening attention” to most conversations but significantly deepen our listening when it is important. The obvious question is how do we know when it is important?

For a small fraction of the conversations we have in a day, we are dealing with a person who is in a state of high emotion. It may be anything from elation, after he won the lottery, to grief at the loss of his brother. It may be pride at being the first person in the class to solve a complex equation or rage after someone broke into his car. Whenever the other person is having a peak emotional experience, it is a trigger point to put on your “Listening Hat.” The reason this is important is because you cannot sustain the kind of energy required to listen with maximum intensity all the time.

We know that the human body is capable of performing at amazing levels during an emergency due to the release of adrenaline. That is why a person arriving on the scene of a car that rolled onto a person has the capacity to actually lift the car while others pull out the victim. Under normal circumstances the hero would never be able to lift a car, yet with enough adrenaline, he was able to do it. If you injected that much adrenalin in his blood stream all day long, he would soon die because the human body is just not capable of that level of stimulation.

Once we know it is time to put on our “Listening Hat,” how do we physically ramp up our ability to listen effectively? We need to go into a much deeper level of listening using three steps as follows:

1. Following or attending the conversation

This means the listener is not multitasking by looking at his cell phone, fiddling with his shoelace, typing a text, or cleaning his nails. Rather he is making good eye contact and showing visible signs of actually hearing the other person. But hearing is not just listening well, so we need to do more.

2. Listening at a deeper level

This means absorbing the information with enough intensity to block out all mental or physical distractions. It means actually thinking about the content and how it fits into the context of the message while paying attention to the body language, especially the facial expressions that signal emotions. In this step you actually visualize every part of the message with enough clarity to perform the third step.

3. Engage in some conversation that indicates your understanding

Think about the content and phrase a question or comment that comes from the heart while showing respect. Here are some ideas of what types of responses might be appropriate depending on the conversation:

- Clarify what the other person wants me to know
- Help me understand the underlying feelings of the other person
- Probe for any potential hidden meanings that may not have been expressed yet
- Make sure we have covered the full breadth of the issue
- Get to the heart of the matter
- Move the conversation forward in a productive way
- Help the person move beyond the venting stage

Doing these three steps will ensure you have listened at a much deeper level than you normally do, and it verifies you understood the other person well enough to verbalize his or her points accurately. You don't need to go to this extent of heightened listening all the time, because that level of effort would not be possible in every conversation, but for the few really important conversations, the extra effort pays off in better understanding.

Some precautions or flavoring

There are some precautions when using this technique. Do not be too quick to interject comments or questions of your own. Often if you just pause and listen to the silence for a second or two, the other person will open up more and get deeper into the issues. If you interrupt the flow too much, it can be annoying to the other person. You can tell if this happens by watching the body language carefully.

Try to avoid just parroting back the information given by the other person. This technique, often called "reflective listening," can seem phony or clumsy to the other person if overdone and defeat the entire purpose of your deep listening. Don't try to assume how a person may be feeling.

The ability to focus on the true message is critical to understanding what people are trying to convey. Supervisors often operate in a noisy area, such as a shop floor, with numerous visual or auditory distractions. It may be advantageous to get to a less noisy

area for serious conversations, but be alert that some people will clam up if brought into an office area. Make sure the other person feels safe in every way when sharing feelings with you.

The whole idea is to fully understand rather than just hear the other person. You cannot possibly build trust with people if you do not understand what they are trying to convey to you.

For supervisors and other leaders, the art of deep listening significantly improves your effectiveness because you are getting the full message when things are not working correctly. It takes practice to master listening skills. The more you practice the more second nature it becomes, and your ability to understand others will be significantly enhanced. The major technique here is to remember to put on your “Listening Hat” when someone in an emotional state wants to talk to you.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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