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Personnel Pointers

Conquering Communication Conundrums: The Art of Listening by Libby Maurer

"No man ever listened himself out of a job." —Calvin Coolidge

Learning to listen actively when your spouse or partner is speaking isn't the only application where listening skills are important for effective communication. Being a good listener also applies to interpersonal communication in the workplace.

Recall a past conversation with someone who seemed very attentive and responded with verbal and non-verbal cues that confirmed he/she processed and understood what you said. These are all traits a good listener possesses. Likewise, you might recall a time in which you were conversing with someone who was not a good listener. Maybe he/she was not making eye contact, changing the subject, interrupting you in mid-sentence, or acting generally uninterested. How did that make you feel? Were you frustrated and confused about why your message wasn't being processed by the other person?

HEARING VS. LISTENING

No matter what your position in your company, listening is a critical element of interpersonal communication. The first consideration when studying the art of listening is that there is a distinct difference between "hearing" and "listening." For example, hearing is a physical ability while listening is an acquired skill. The difference between hearing and listening can be stated this way: Hearing is the reception of sound, listening is the attachment of meaning to the sound. Hearing is passive, listening is active. Understanding the difference between hearing and listening is an important prerequisite for listening effectively.

WHY EMPLOYERS (SHOULD) LOVE LISTENERS

Employers, listen up. Good listening skills really do translate to the workplace. Here's why: Studies such as the 1991 United States Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identified listening as an essential foundation skill for those entering the workforce (http://careerplanning.about.com/cs/miscskills/a/listening_skill.htm). Studies also suggest that an employee with sharp listening skills is far more productive than his/her listening-impaired co-worker. The ability to listen carefully will allow employees to:

- Better understand assignments and what is expected of them.

- Build rapport with their co-workers, bosses and clients (which leads to longevity).
- Show support.
- Work better in a team-based environment.
- Resolve problems and conflicts with customers, co-workers and bosses.
- Answer questions.

There is no question about it; in terms of productivity and efficiency, the employee who listens well will benefit the company in the long run by performing better in a team, demonstrating leadership qualities and establishing superior work relationships with clients and management.

LISTENING FOR SUCCESS

Now that you've considered the importance of listening in the workplace, just how do you go about improving your skills? The following tips will help you listen well.

They will also demonstrate to the speaker that you are actively engaged. Remember that while you may be able to listen while staring at the floor, doing so may imply that you are not.

- Maintain eye contact.
- Don't interrupt the speaker.
- Sit still.
- Nod your head.
- Lean toward the speaker.
- Repeat instructions and ask appropriate questions when the speaker has finished.

A good listener knows that being attentive to what the speaker doesn't say is as important as being attentive to what he does say. Look for non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and posture to get the full gist of what the speaker is telling you.

FOLLOW THE GOLDEN RULE

Finally, do unto others as you would have them do unto you. The effective listener is always focused on the other person. Be the kind of listener you want others to be when you are talking. Ask "How would I want others to listen to me?" That's the key to being an effective listener.

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