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Listen to Cultivate Culture

By Kerry Elam



When was the last time you truly listened to what the other person was saying? Many times we are consumed with getting our point across; we forget to simply listen before responding. How many times do you get off subject because of interjections of each person relating to the other? We all want to relate to each other as it is human nature. Yet we all want to be fully listened to as well. Taking the time to listen sparks creativity and boosts esteem. Imagine interacting with peers that were motivated and inspired to do the best each and every day. As Henry Ford said, "If there is any one secret of success, it lies in the ability to get the other person's point of view and see things from his angle as well as your own." Many times, it is not about being right, yet taking the time to allow both parties to actually be heard.

This article explores various ways to enhance listening and communication

to cultivate a strong and steady culture that leads towards a common goal.

Active listening

The way to become a better listener is to practice active listening. This is where you make a conscious effort to hear not only the words that another person is saying but, more importantly, try to understand the complete message being sent. In order to do this you must pay attention to the other person very carefully. You cannot allow yourself to become distracted by whatever else may be going on around you, or by forming counter arguments that you'll make when the other person stops speaking. Nor can you allow yourself to get bored, and lose focus on what the other person is saying. All of these contribute to a lack of listening and understanding. To become an active listener practice ensuring you hear the other person and that the other person knows you are hearing what they say by:

- Focused attention: Give the

speaker your full attention and acknowledge the message both verbally and non-verbally. Checking e-mail or texts during a conversation is a sure way to make the speaker feel less than important. Put away the phone and be attentive.

- Show listening: Use body language, such as smiling, nodding and subtle words such as "yes" and "I understand" to allow the speaker to feel comfortable in sharing ideas.
- Give feedback: Ensure that the speaker feels as though you understand what is being said. For instance, paraphrasing or asking clarifying questions.
- Save judgment: Allow the speaker to portray their message without interrupting as it may frustrate and derail what was being said. The speaker may not want to continue if there is a feeling you are not in agreement before they have even finished communicating.
- Be responsive: There is nothing

worse than radio silence when you have poured your heart and soul out and the listener says nothing. Even if you do not agree, be mindful and assert your opinions gracefully. Treat the other person in a way that you think he or she would want to be treated.

Summarize conversations

Now that we have looked at active listening, the next part of listening is to summarize to ensure complete understanding and avoid miscommunications. Far too often, conflict arises from lack of understanding the full picture. We are quick to make assumptions to make decisions. In a conversation where information is exchanged, conclude with a summary statement. Summarizing will not only ensure accurate follow-through, it will help to ensure both parties are on the same page. Use statements such as:

- What I am hearing is
- Sounds like you are saying

- What do you mean when you say
- Is this what you mean

Ask questions

The questioning process enables us to become more interested in what the person is saying. And when we listen to someone respond to our question, we may see the situation more clearly or have awareness or better yet the person we are communicating with might come to their own resolution. Questions encourage others to continue forward. For example, Columbus could have asked himself, "Is there a sea route to India?"

Now there is an art to asking questions by taking the learner mindset versus the judge. Focus on learning with questions to foster new possibilities:

- What can we do about this?
- What possibilities does this open up?
- How can we stay on track?
- What can we learn from this?

On the other hand, judging questions are ones that are reactive and focus on the past. Be careful not to ask:

- Why is this failure?
- Whose fault is this?
- Why can't you get this right?

Questions are powerful tools that can either hinder or catapult forward movement. As Albert Einstein said, "It

is not that I'm so smart. But I stay with the questions much longer." He was constantly asking why questions. Take a moment to ask why. Below is a list of potential questions from the book by Michael J. Marquardt, *Leading With Questions*:

- Can that be done in any other way?
- What resources have we never used?
- What do we expect to happen if we do that?
- What other options do we have?
- What happens if ... ?

Empathize

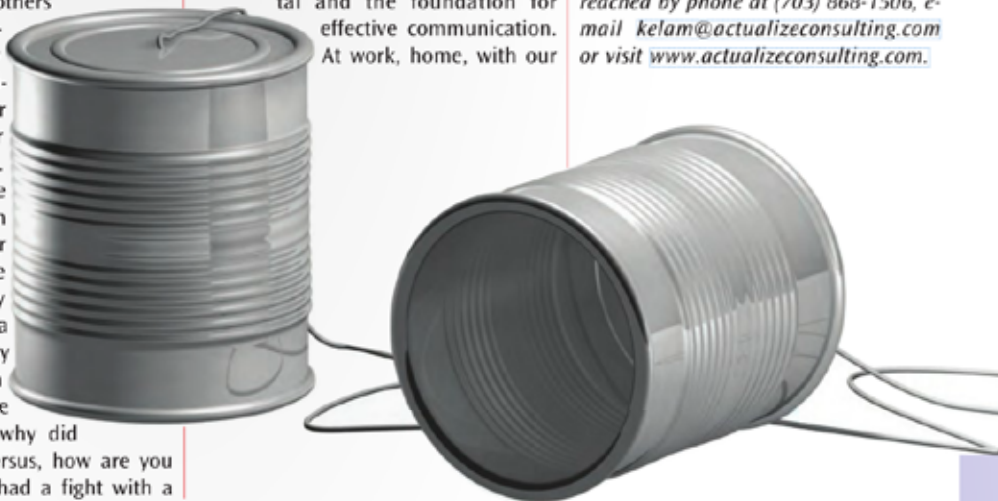
Empathetic listening is similar to active listening with more of a focus on trying to understand the others feelings and emotions of what they are trying to communicate. You never know what another is going through. What is the true "root" of the problem or behavior? For example, someone on your team may not be focused on a big deliverable today and typically is on point. Many times, we will push and say why did you not do this? Versus, how are you today? Maybe they had a fight with a

loved one or found out someone close to them passed away, or their toilet over flooded with major damage this morning. Empathy is challenging as we are also facing our own daily struggles and conflict. Yet if we could slow down and take a moment to empathize before we judge in our relationships, they would go more smoothly. This takes patience and practice. Carl Rogers summarized eloquently, "Empathy is a special way of coming to know another and ourselves, a kind of attuning and understanding. When empathy is extended, it satisfies our needs and wish for intimacy, it rescues us from our feelings of aloneness."

In conclusion, listening is instrumental and the foundation for effective communication. At work, home, with our

significant other, our kids, it is necessary to building trust. With trust, come enhanced relationships to build a stable culture for continued success not only in the work place, but in our personal lives. As we are engaging in all aspects of life, that transfers into our workplaces. Take time to listen each and every day and see how much smoother interactions transpire.

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