

Listening - The Most Important Leadership Skill

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Over the course of the last fifteen years, I have come to believe that listening is the most important leadership skill that a person can acquire. People in my seminars often ask, why is listening so important? Allow me to suggest several reasons and then you can consider whether they seem sensible to you.

Listening enhances communication

First, listening is the key to effectively communicating with other people. When we actually listen to understand what people are trying to communicate we become more aware of their beliefs, concerns, challenges and expectations. Simply hearing what the other person is saying is not enough, we need to listen to their ideas and read their body language to try and understand what they are feeling as well as what they are thinking. As we listen more intently, we gain a deeper appreciation of where they are coming from and what matters most to them.

Listening encourages and empowers people

At the same time, when we listen attentively we are signalling that we recognize them as individuals who merit our undivided attention. Quite simply, one of the best ways to encourage and empower others is to listen to them in an open and supportive way. In doing so, we indicate that we respect them as individuals and are interested in the professional work that they are doing.

Listening enhances personal trust

Another benefit that accrues from listening in a conscientious and thoughtful way is that by doing so we can build personal trust with that person. As we take an interest in the concerns of others, as well as their needs and expectations, we can more fully relate to them. Of course, we cannot build a trusting relationship with every person we meet; however, with professional colleagues and close friends, when we listen intently we increase personal trust, which, in turn, increases the likelihood that they will want to cooperate and collaborate with us in the future.

Listening facilitates group trust

As noted above, listening for understanding is an important skill in one-on-one situations; but it is also very important in group and team settings. Effective listening is particularly important when people are bringing an issue to the group that they are deeply concerned about. In such situations, taking the time to listen with an open mind, asking clarifying questions and truly seeking to understand the problem at hand can affirm the right of people to bring their concerns to the group and increase their confidence that the group will try to address their problem in a collaborative and supportive manner.

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Experience has shown that allowing people to express their beliefs, describe their concerns, and, in tense situations, vent their true feelings, can go a long way to solving such issues. The alternative situation in which people are cut off from expressing their ideas too quickly and group members demonstrate that they are not willing to listen often results in increased negative feelings, a loss of self-efficacy and unresolved anger within the group. Again, listening for understanding is important in one-on-one situations as well as in group settings.

Listening facilitates collaboration

A final reason for the importance of listening for understanding is that by doing so leaders can come to understand the strengths, concerns and needs of their colleagues and better appreciate how different people contribute to the overall performance of the organization. In fact, the higher a formal leader sits within an organization, the more important it is that he or she demonstrates effective listening skills. Moreover, taking the time to listen to colleagues at different levels allows a leader to appreciate how things are going on a day-to-day basis and provides ongoing feedback on how people at different levels are contributing to meeting the shared vision of the organization. Over time, taking the time to listen enhances trust within the organization and increases the commitment to collaboration that is such an important feature of schools and centres.

How well do you listen?

If you feel that you are a very effective listener, you may wish to go on to another topic. However, the people in my classes have reported that completing the Effective Listening Questionnaire has provided them with several suggestions on how to enhance their listening skills. Hence, you may wish to take a few minutes to complete the questionnaire and then score it based on the document entitled: Scoring and Personal Reflections on the Effective Listening Questionnaire.