

Learn how to listen effectively to enhance employee relationships

By Madelyn Burley-Allen

Listening is probably the most essential component of being a successful supervisor. Why? Because the one attribute most often stated about a well-liked boss is, “She really listens to me.” That’s especially important when your employee has a gripe.

Consider the following exchange between Bill and his supervisor, Dave:

Bill: “Dave, I’m really discouraged about the way things have been going on the job. It just never goes the way I expect it to. And, it seems like you’re never around anymore.”

Dave: “Sounds as though you’ve been doing quite a bit of thinking about this. Go ahead.”

Bill: “Well, we are a week behind in production, and our supplies are not coming in on time. I feel swamped and unable to catch up. And, when I have tried to find you lately to see about getting some extra help down there, you are not available.”

Dave: “Seems that you feel cut off from any support from me.”

Dave’s comments demonstrate not only that he is listening to what Bill has to say but that he cares about what Bill has to say. That kind of listening is learned; it doesn’t happen automatically for most people. On average, people are only about 35 percent efficient as listeners. But by improving your listening skills, you can reduce the chances for misunderstandings, conflict, poor decision-making or a crisis because a problem wasn’t identified in time.

Listening can be divided into three levels characterized by certain behaviors that affect listening efficiency. These levels are not sharply distinct; they’re general categories into which people fall, and they may overlap or interchange, depending on what is happening. When people move from Level 3, “the least effective,” to Level 1, “the most effective,” they increase their potential to understand and retain what is said.

Level 1 listeners look for an area of interest in the speaker’s message; they view it as an opportunity to gather new and useful information. They’re also aware of their personal biases and attitudes and are better able to avoid making automatic judgments about the speaker and avoid being influenced by emotionally charged words. They strive to see things from another’s point of view and avoid advocating a position. This listening behavior allows them to tap into their higher creative intelligence. Level 1 listeners also try to anticipate the speaker’s next statement, to mentally summarize the stated message, question or evaluate what was said and to consciously notice nonverbal cues. Their overall focus is to listen with understanding and respect.

Level 2 listeners mainly listen to words and the content of what is being said, but they fail to understand the speaker. They forget that words don’t communicate; it’s the meaning and the understanding of words that creates effective communication. For example, Level 2 listeners zero in on words, but many times, they miss the intent because they neglect to pay attention to what is being expressed nonverbally through tone of voice, body posture, gestures, facial expression and eye movement. As a result, Level 2 listeners hear what the speaker says but make little effort to understand the speaker’s intent. Obviously, this may lead to misunderstanding, incorrect actions, loss of time and a variety of negative

feelings. In addition, because the listener appears to be listening by nodding his head in agreement and not asking clarifying questions, the speaker may be lulled into a false sense of being listened to and understood.

At Level 3, people tune out the speaker; they're either daydreaming, forming rebuttals, faking attention or are more interested in talking than listening. Once someone is finding fault, being judgmental or closed off, breakdowns in relationships and poor decision-making occur and the speaker or listener is more likely to move into the flight-or-fight mode.

To improve your listening skills, try to practice the following guidelines on a daily basis:

- Be attentive. Create a positive atmosphere through your nonverbal behavior by maintaining eye contact, an open relaxed posture, a friendly facial expression and a pleasant tone of voice. When you're alert, attentive and relaxed, others feel more important and more secure.
- Be interested in the speaker's needs and demonstrate your understanding and respect.
- Show a caring attitude. Allow the speaker to bounce ideas and feelings off of you while assuming a nonjudgmental, non-criticizing manner. And, don't ask a lot of questions right away, which can make someone feel as if he's being "grilled."
- Reflect back what you think the other person is feeling. Summarize what others say to make sure you understand what they're saying.
- Don't let the other person "hook you." This can happen when you get personally involved and usually results in anger and hurt feelings or motivates you to jump to conclusions and be judgmental.
- Use verbal cues. Acknowledge a speaker's statements using brief expressions such as, "Hmm," "Uh-huh," "I see," "Right" or "Interesting." Encourage the speaker to reveal more by saying, "Tell me about it," "Let's discuss it," "I'd like to hear what you're thinking" or "I'd be interested in what you have to say."

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