



Leadership LISTENING for Success

I am repeatedly asked one question: What do I see as the most important competency or skill that people need to develop? The answer is easy — listening skills.

It seems odd that listening, a skill that is often viewed as simple, can be so easily underutilized or overlooked. Even worse than not listening is false listening — where it appears that someone is listening, but in reality they are not. Why then is listening such a key to success? And why is not listening an invitation for unnecessary problems?

It is so easy to be distracted, to multi-task, that sometimes we don't fully hear what we're being told. Vital information can get lost, which can push back timelines, make for poor decisions and add strain to relationships — all for the want of listening.

There is a funny balance between getting the work done and having time to engage others around us. The ironic part is, if we make the effort to listen when we have the chance, we can actually be much more efficient. Information flows well, people feel valued and heard, expectations can be clarified, decisions can be made based on more complete information, the list goes on. As a result, accountability improves and relationships are enhanced.

This is not to say that listening is easy. For all of us, demands are high and time is short, and it can take effort to truly listen to someone — to turn down the volume in our brains and focus our full attention on the person who is speaking. In our society, usually we either are talking or getting ready to talk. Silence is construed as awkward. We rarely take time for reflection because there are too many trees to chop down, too many fires to put out.

However, a clear, focused three-minute conversation actually can be more productive than a three-hour meeting in which people are not listening, information is misinterpreted and people spin their wheels cleaning up messes that could have been avoided in the first place.

Editor's Note: Rob Kramer. For additional information on this topic, contact Rob@continuumcs.com

Mentoring offers opportunities for personal growth

To develop a work environment and culture that prides itself on outstanding teamwork, leadership, tradition and excellence, it is every employee's responsibility to chart the way, ensuring a climate of inclusion and success for the people around them. Mentoring is an accessible yet underutilized tool which, if used appropriately, can support and increase workforce recruitment, retention and succession planning.

Mentoring enhances professional development for managers and supervisors by increasing administrative, leadership, and service competencies. It enhances employee development by providing a safe, supportive environment to learn the specific skills and nuances of their work to maximize performance and morale. Through regular interaction and goal-setting, mentees and mentors benefit by exchanging viewpoints, experiences, ideas, knowledge and expertise. The process is simple, yet effective and powerful, practical and valuable.

There are strong business cases to use mentoring as a workforce development tool. Training Magazine published results of a survey that polled 378 companies across the country on the results they are seeing from mentoring:

- Retain employees — 73 percent;
- Improve leadership/managerial skills — 71 percent;
- Develop new leaders — 66 percent;
- Enhance career development — 62 percent.

Additionally, The Managers' Mentors Inc. reports that successful mentoring increases mentees' skills by an average of 61 percent.

If this all sounds reasonable, how can you then find a mentor? Before considering who you would like to have as a mentor, I suggest following the advice of the Center for Health Leadership and Practice in Oakland, Calif. Ask yourself the following questions:

- What do I hope to gain from a mentoring relationship?
- What kind of mentor am I interested in (e.g. in my organization, my field, with specific skills/experiences)?
- What are the potential barriers to embarking on a mentoring relationship (i.e. time constraints)?

Once you clarify what you are looking for from a mentor, consider who may be a good fit. Is there someone in your organization? In your area of expertise? Someone you are hoping to learn more about or gain skills from? After you identify a person you would like to approach, make sure you are clear on your goals and expectations for the relationship. Your potential mentor will likely want to know these things before agreeing to work with you.

Lastly, if you never thought you could be a mentor, think again. Most likely someone at Carolina can benefit from the skills, experience or insight you possess. However, proceed with caution. Being a mentor is not something to take lightly or to use as a means to fill an ego need.

Organizations can benefit immensely from sharing the incredible breadth and depth of knowledge and experience that exists on campus every day. People simply need to talk to one another.

For questions or feedback on this article, or suggestions for future topics, e-mail Rob Kramer at kramerleadership@yahoo.com.

Good boss-employee relationship is joint effort

One of the key issues with training needs and concerns across industries is the strong desire of employees at all levels to have a good working relationship with their boss. For some, this relationship comes easy, whether it be a result of good fortune and similar philosophies, or as a result of both parties working to make the relationship a success.

In the popular management book "First, Break All the Rules," the Gallup organization conducted a 25-year study and found that more often than not, when people quit, they're quitting their boss, not the job. Two key factors in employee job satisfaction and retention are the relationship to their boss and salary.

How does someone take an active role in building a solid working relationship with their supervisor? There may be many issues and factors at play, but here are five suggestions:

- **Understand your boss's world.** Your boss operates in a different working world than you. The conditions of that world may influence how your boss responds to you (and anyone else around him or her). Some predictable conditions may include: Your boss is being pulled in a hundred different directions, trying to fulfill the requests of many people at any level of the organization; your boss is trying to communicate and pass along information and resources from people above or below, from peers or from customers. It can be chaotic. Understanding this — knowing he or she is trying to survive in that world — can influence how you approach your boss.

- **Understand your boss's managerial style.** How does your boss communicate information? Make decisions? Set goals? Hold you accountable? Is there clarity from your boss on these and other similar topics? Learning how your boss thinks and operates can influence better ways to approach him or her.

- **Identify the strengths and resources you bring to the relationship.** You were hired because you bring your unique skills and abilities to the job. How can you be a resource to your boss? Of course, by performing your job well; but also try clarifying your expectations and communicating effectively. The simple, yet powerful, act of listening well to your boss can be an effective tool to build rapport.

- **Use your strengths and resources to support your boss's goals and priorities.** Your boss is trying to manage the overall effectiveness of the office while delivering the services demanded by his or her boss. Once you can demonstrate the value you add, your credibility to your boss can increase. This opens the door to possibilities to have your own professional goals met.

Assume your boss doesn't want you to fail. There are good bosses and not-so-good bosses in any organization. You would be hard-pressed, however, to find a boss who wants his or her employees to be poor performers, because it only makes his or her job more difficult. If your boss is managing you in a way that is not conducive to your highest performance, then try not to make the assumption that it is intentional. This can help you sleep better at night.

■ Lastly, if you're the boss, consider advice shared from a senior administrator on campus: Treat your employees as if they are your most important customer. That alone will positively impact the way your employees perform.

For questions or feedback on this article, or suggestions for future topics, contact Rob Kramer at kramerleadership@yahoo.com. He'd love to hear from you.

Communication Key to an Organization's Health

People tend to be more susceptible to illness this time of year. We are a smart species, however, and try to ward off those viruses before they threaten us. We bundle up, take vitamin C, and stay well hydrated. We get prepared. But do we do the same when thinking about our departments or teams?

Often breakdowns that occur in the workplace are a result of lack of clear expectations and poor communication about key issues that affect daily productivity. To avoid some of these pitfalls, here are some topics to consider:

- Does your group know its purpose - what they do, for whom, and why? It may seem obvious, but lack of focus on the organization's purpose can cause trouble with prioritizing and focusing on what, when, and how people do their work.
- Does your group have the skills and training to do their jobs well? This is key to both current performance and performance needed in the future.
- Does your group know how they are held accountable for the work they do? This can be a nebulous issue and can take some thoughtfulness. We have work plans and annual performance management processes. But on a daily basis, does everyone know what they are responsible for and how it is being measured?
- Is everyone aware of the standards that exist in your workplace? Written policies and procedures are vital. However, is everyone aware of the unspoken or unwritten rules in your organization? What are acceptable and unacceptable behaviors, traditions or practices? For example, have you ever heard the classic: "Because that's the way we've always done it?" If you or your group is experiencing ambiguity around some of these things, sit down and talk about them.
- Does everyone have a clear role and responsibilities? During times of turbulence (heavy workloads, change or transition), work can emerge that doesn't fit neatly into anyone's work plan. Do you have a system to gain clarity on this before the next occurrence rolls around?
- Is it clear how decisions are made in your group? Have you ever wondered: "How in the world was that decided?" Groups rarely, if ever, slow down enough to clarify how decisions are made and by whom. A lack of a process can result in the loudest voices in the room getting their way. Sometimes "the boss" needs to make the final decision. Sometimes the group collectively will make a decision. Make sure you are clear on how this will be done from the beginning, or better yet, before you start.

■ Does everyone know the organization's goals, as well as their own individual goals? The best organizations have alignment between individual goals being met through work, and then that work positively affects the organization's goals.

■ Finally, how well are these topics being clarified and communicated throughout your team or organization? An organization can have the greatest mission statement in the world and the greatest role clarity. However, without clarifying expectations and communicating them regularly, they remain just words on a page, ideas in someone's head, or worse, "secrets" being withheld.

Stay healthy yourself and take your group's temperature for each of these topics. See how your organization is feeling these days.

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