

Is *Communication* a problem in your organization? Try *Listening!*

Guess which organizational issue is most often cited as a problem in employee surveys, *communication!* For years, I thought poor communication meant leadership had to do a better job of “telling” employees things and doing more talking. What I’ve learned over the years is about excellence in communication means telling people AND really listening, too! In retrospect, I look at formal schooling, we are taught to read, write and speak. Who ever taught us to listen? How many of us actually had formal training in school for this most fundamental of the communication skills? I certainly didn’t.

OK – so we agree that listening is an important ingredient in communications, so then why don’t we all do it. One barrier for me was I thought listening might demonstrate that I agree with someone, or make some sort of commitment. You can only imagine how liberating it was for me when I found out listening, really listening, to someone doesn’t mean agreement or commitment, it simply means that I respect their right as a human being to be heard and understood about the meaning of their words. That definitely does not mean agreeing all the time or taking action upon request.

Listening for understanding can be difficult to learn because it does require conscious attention of the other person’s words and meanings. To listen effectively, we shift the focus from ourselves and trying to make “our point” to focus on the other and seeking to first understand. This shift in focus can feel like giving up control and can be scary. To be a great listener, create a short summary or restatement of the other’s message or point of view and put into your own words and repeat it. I especially encourage you to really listen in times of disagreement. Listening can help you be more influential and draw people to you rather than push them away by not listening.

There is one “not listening” behavior I would like to stamp into non-existence! It is the reply to someone’s idea, thought or request that starts with, “Yes....but”. For example, an employee says, “I’d like to have greeters at the door when customers arrive.” You respond with, “Yes, I see your point...but we don’t have enough staff.” The “Yes...but” response can show up as a rebuttal, disagreement or even a put down. Our cleverly disguised “but” fools few people into believing that we agree or support their thought. People sense somewhere further along in the sentence the “but” negates all the purported agreement that came beforehand. It’s the “Yes...but” that often starts or escalates disagreements and conflict at work.

So, I’m ridding my vocabulary of the “Yes...but” response and replacing it with “Yes...and”. Try it; you might just see an improvement in communication!

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