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Tips from the Coach: Opening Doors with Active Listening

What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "clear communication?" You probably think about someone who uses concise, direct language. Or you might imagine an eloquent speaker – a professor or a preacher, perhaps. In fact, clear communication is primarily about *listening*. If you're a clear communicator, you spend at least 50 percent of any conversation listening. And that's when you're speaking with only one other person. Enlarge the conversation group beyond two, and the percentage of time you actually spend speaking diminishes drastically – or it should.

Communication skills begin with listening. Sure, speaking skills are important too, but if you don't listen, ultimately, people will stop listening to you. Becoming an active listener requires:

- Not talking as often as you're inclined.
- Nodding, and giving other verbal and nonverbal indications of comprehension and interest.
- Paraphrasing or "re-capping" what the other person has said to help them feel understood, and to make sure you understand them.
- Asking open ended questions.

While all of these points are important, the practice of asking good questions can lead to the most useful conversations and insights. A good question coupled with active listening is the key to effective communication. As a manager or leader, how much time do you spend actually listening to your employees, versus speaking or telling them what to do?

When you're actively listening, you're attempting to hear beyond the words themselves. Your focus should be on the intent and shape of the message being communicated, so pay attention to:

- **Tone of voice:** Tight with tension, warm and welcoming, choked with sadness?
- **Choice of words:** Descriptive, flat, vague, specific?
- **Style of Delivery:** Forceful, hesitant, confident, calm, positive, sarcastic?

When you're engaged in active listening you're also looking for clues in the areas of:

- **Factors that motivate:** What is important to the speaker? What matters to him or her?
- **Degrees of acceptance:** Is the speaker open to suggestion or resistant to suggestion? Is the speaker approachable or do his or her words push away?
- **Levels of engagement:** Is the speaker focused and engaged in the present? Or distracted and unfocused?

The other side of this coin is making sure that your employees can practice active listening when it's *your turn to do the communicating!* Can you recall a time when you needed to repeat a request or explain a project more than once because an employee was simply not engaged in active listening?

Or perhaps you can relate to a time when conflict could have been avoided if employees had practiced active listening while communicating with one another?

When teaching employees about active listening, the "re-capping" is often a useful tool. When giving a direction or explaining a concept, stop and ask the employee to verbally "re-cap" so you can make sure everyone is on the same page and can agree on the process moving forward. A shared perception of outcome is your goal here - and you need to make certain that perceptions around the outcome are truly "shared."

Now the first time you do this, you may be amazed at what you hear! At work we're all so programmed to multi-task, that very often **what we think we hear, is not what was said at all**. That's because we're listening to the planning and dialogue in our own heads, rather than what the speaker is trying to convey to us.

The following tips for active listening are guaranteed to improve communication in your workplace.

- When approached by a colleague for conversation, stop what you're doing and focus on the speaker. Don't try to attend to tasks and listen at the same time. If the time is not convenient for conversation, schedule a time that is.
- Refuse to be interrupted by phone calls or other people. How would you feel if someone took a phone call while you were attempting to discuss an important issue? Turn off your cell phone and have reception hold your calls.
- Acknowledge any emotions you may have about what is being said, and set them aside. Don't allow your emotions to impact your ability to listen.
- Fight mind drift! Focus on the speaker even if you think you know where the conversation is leading.
- Verbally replay the key points the speaker is making to ensure understanding.
- Summarize the conversation to ensure that both parties agree on perceived outcomes.

Consider active listening as an important aspect of your interpersonal and leadership skills. Plan on optimizing communication in your workplace by practicing and promoting active listening.

McLean, Koehler, Sparks & Hammond helps owners and business leaders become more successful by providing innovative financial, technology and management solutions for every stage of their organizations' life cycle. MKS&H's organizational consulting division, Tandem Partners, specializes in people strategies that drive business results. For more information on this article or MKS&H, please contact Margaret Wilson at 410-296-6200 or via email: margaret@mksh.com.

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