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High Potency Listening

Research shows that 80% of the workday is spent in communication. The biggest chunk of that time involves listening (45%). Most people think that they are good listeners. Unfortunately, studies have demonstrated that we remember only about 25% of what we hear. This is bad news for organizations that rely heavily on oral communication to transact business with customers or to inform/instruct employees.

However, remembering what we hear is not the biggest problem. The biggest problem in listening is that oral communication conveys only part of the message. This is especially true when communication involves attitude or emotion along with facts. In some cases, only 7% of the message is transmitted in words.

VERBAL AND NONVERBAL

The verbal component of communication can be defined simply as the words one uses. Words help us to convey facts and information. When most people think of communication, they are thinking only of the words that people say. However, as anyone who has ever edited, corrected, or retracted one of their emails knows, word choices can be easily misunderstood.

Words are spoken in a context of attitudes, biases, and emotions. In his research about communication of attitudes, Dr. Albert Mehrabian demonstrated that

we get most of our clues of the emotional intent behind people's words from non-verbal sources. And, when verbal and non-verbal sources of communication are in conflict, we believe the non-verbal component. If we cannot see and hear the non-verbal sources, it is easy to misunderstand the words.



We listen with our eyes as well as with our ears.

Nonverbal sources of communication involve voice tone, gestures, facial expression, posture, eye contact, proximity, and appearance of the talker. These non-verbals enable us to “hear” what is not said in words, interpreting the content of the message so that we can discern the talker’s intent. So, we “listen” with our eyes as well as with our ears.

Listening to the verbal and non-verbal communication of the talker is only half of the challenge. The other half of the challenge comes in dealing with our own barriers to listening. We all have a variety of distractions or “filters” which distort the message of the talker. Some of the biggest barriers to listening are our personal “hot buttons”: our biases, politics, and beliefs. Another barrier is our tendency to day-dream, that is, to take short mental vacations from the subject at hand. There are innumerable distractions to listening, far too many to mention in this article. Suffice to say that distractions can prevent a listener from understanding both the verbal and non-verbal components of a talker’s communication.

LISTENING TIPS



So, what can a conscientious manager do to listen better? Here are some tips to improve your listening skills.

- Allow time to listen--if you are in a hurry, late for an appointment, or otherwise squeezed for time, you will not be able to listen well. Listening requires preparation; allow time for it.
- Take notes—the physical act of note-taking helps you concentrate on what you are hearing. It also will help you remember more of what you heard.
- Ask questions—one way to stay engaged with the talker is to ask questions for clarification on any points that you do not understand. The question and answer process can be beneficial to both talker and listener.
- Minimize distractors—put your cell phone on mute, hit the “do not disturb” button on your desk phone, close the door, turn off the radio, etc.
- Pay attention to non-verbals —remember to listen with your eyes. Body language says a lot about the talker’s intent. See if words and non-verbals match.
- Know and control your hot buttons---everyone has topics that stir up emotions and compromise listening. Be aware of your personal biases and anticipate conversations that will trigger them.

When employees feel that their manager is truly listening they are more willing to be open with concerns and to report problems in a timely manner. Listening skills will not improve by will power alone. You need to try new approaches to address both the verbal and nonverbal components of the listening process. Your effort will be rewarded. High potency listening is a skill worth achieving because good managers are good listeners.

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