

July 2013 Good Listening

***"The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood.
The best way to understand people is to listen to them." ~ Ralph Nichols***

Considerable attention has been paid in the management literature to the importance of being a good listener. However, listening or "active listening" is actually something that is learned over-time, and does not necessarily come naturally to people.

In 1991, the U.S. Department of Labor Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS) identified listening as a foundation skill necessary for success in the workplace. Interestingly, it is a skill or talent that is largely assumed by most people because "it just happens" when people speak to each other.

Actually, the process of listening is comprised of four different and distinct steps.

- Hearing – physical act of recognizing that someone is speaking to you and being able to understand what is being said.
- Interpretation – correctly (hopefully) interpreting the meaning of what is being said.
- Evaluation – determining the importance of what is being said and deciding what to do with the information.
- Responding - verbal or visual response from you that allows the speaker to determine whether you have gotten the message and what your reaction is.

***"One advantage of talking to yourself is that you know
at least somebody's listening." ~ Franklin P. Jones***

An important ingredient to building a strong, motivated team is to promote the importance of listening among all members. It is not good enough for just you as the leader to be a good listener. You must work to build the "listening" talent among everyone to truly realize its benefits. Here are a few things you can reinforce with your staff to promote effective listening within the workplace.

- It is virtually impossible to talk and listen at the same time. Allow others to have an opportunity to speak and express their ideas before responding. Do not assume that you know what other people are about to say.
- Asking questions or requesting clarification from a co-worker who is speaking to you demonstrates that you are trying to understand what is being said. It will also help significantly during the interpretation and evaluation processes.
- View the listening process as an opportunity for gathering additional information and learning something new, not just something that has to be done.
- Do not assume that the speaker knows that you are hearing, interpreting, and evaluating things correctly. Provide feedback and visual cues such as head nodding, and make good eye contact.

Good listening skills will lead to stronger rapport among team members, fewer misunderstandings, and more effective problem solving, further solidifying your status as a strong manager and leader.

"If speaking is silver, then listening is gold." ~ Turkish Proverb