



Columnists

It pays to listen

By Lora Cecca Lyons/Columnist

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MEDFIELD -

Do you know what one valuable skill you can hone that can improve your company's bottom line, lessen the margin of error and even strengthen your marriage? To find the answer, listen carefully.

Listening skills are critical in the workplace, yet it is rarely taught in school or in the workplace. Why? Most people think they are good listeners even though there is strong evidence that indicates otherwise.

The skill of listening seems to be overlooked. Most of us acquire far more training in reading, writing and speaking even though we spend most of our time listening. A study by Wolvin & Coakley in 1991 found that most experts agree that people spend about 9percent of waking hours writing, 15percent reading, 30percent speaking and 45percent listening. For executives, studies show that time spent listening is even higher - 55percent or more on the average each day.

According to HighGain.com, over 35 general business studies conducted over the past 35 years confirm that effective listening improves results. The studies demonstrate that:

Schools devote too little direct instruction to listening as part of their language arts curricula even though it is a basic skill required of all employees in the workplace. (U.S. Dept. of Labor, 1991)

Ineffective listening throughout organizational structures results in low morale, high absenteeism and turnover, low productivity, lack of upward communication and ineffective horizontal communication. (Brownell, 1994)

Employees' ability to listen has a definite impact on their productivity. (Papa & Glen, 1988)

46 percent of those who quit their jobs did so because they felt not listened to and were therefore unappreciated. (U.S. Department of Labor, 1999)

Effective listening is a skill that needs to be developed as a prerequisite for successful practice of the more "active" skills of speaking and writing. (Goby & Lewis, Nanyang Technological University, 2003)

In this high-paced, multi-tasking, overworked and technologically tethered society, to stop and listen requires a conscious effort. And, you may ask, who has the time? First off, the result of effective listening will save you the time and effort of clearing up misunderstandings and correcting errors. You can leave a lot of money on the table by not listening.

Hearing is not listening. Effective listening is active not passive. It engages your whole body whether you are in person or on the phone with someone. It builds bonds and strengthens relationships.

Try this:

Face the person squarely if possible. Take in their words.

Notice how much you may be in conversation with yourself while the person is speaking. Are you too busy thinking about your response? About how much you agree or disagree? Observe these thoughts and turn down the volume of your internal chatter.

Get curious. Listen in between the words. What is the person 1/8ths mood? What are they not saying? What are their concerns?

Ask questions and then listen.

Lora Cecca Lyons is founder of www.LyonsLeadershipCoaching.com and works with people to advance their communications and leadership skills. To receive her quarterly newsletter that offers practices to support effective action and sustainable change, go to www.LyonsLeadershipCoaching.com.

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