

Developing Powerful Listening Skills Through Effective Exercises

An anonymous quote reminds us that: “*The greatest problem in communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.*” Although communication is both speaking and listening, enhancing listening skills is the real means to “accomplishing” communication.

Active, involved listening provides an opening for creativity, partnership, and invention. To succeed, it is particularly important for managers to invest time and effort to develop and improve their listening skills. That’s why this article provides some exercises that managers can engage in and practices they can implement to help them further recognize how well they are listening and how to practice listening in a way that enhances and accomplishes real and effective communication.

WE DON’T LISTEN, BUT WE THINK WE DO

Many managers can point to examples of their exceptional communication skills — most of those illustrations demonstrate a superior ability to speak. However, listening is a completely different issue. One of the quickest ways to clear up any misconceptions about our ability to listen effectively is to complete the following exercise with a partner who is also interested in developing his or her listening skills.

- Select one person to begin the exercise. First person, tell your partner three or four things about yourself, such as your full name, where you live, who lives with you, and something you like about yourself, or something you love to do in your spare time.
- The listener then recreates exactly what the speaker said — word for word with nothing left out and nothing added.
- The first speaker then tells the listener whether he or she accurately recreated what was first said. Repeat the exercise until the listener is able to recreate the speaker’s words exactly. Then switch roles so that the first speaker now becomes a listener and the first listener becomes a speaker, and then repeat the exercise.

Even good listeners find the exercise somewhat frustrating. However, there is a great deal to be learned from it. First, the listener will discover very quickly the degree to which he or she does not listen to what is actually being said. Some listeners will find it difficult to concentrate on what the other person is saying, and others will be challenged by the instruction to recreate the exact words of the speaker. Some will become aware of how distracted they are when someone is speaking to them, and others will notice that they are always adding something to the words being spoken.

Speakers may find that they have a hard time remembering what they said. They don’t even listen to their own words! Other speakers may find that they have a tendency to give in and let someone off the hook who got “most of it” right.

In any case, the exercise is an eye-opening experience for all who participate. In a world where effective communication is a must for managers and supervisors, this exercise points to the disparity between the way things are and the level of communication that managers and supervisors desire. This disparity is fertile ground for training and development.

LEARNING TO LISTEN ... JUST LISTEN

There are three primary components of active listening:

1. The listener summarizes or paraphrases what the speaker said, not mimicking or parroting the person, just recreating the words to let the speaker know that he or she was *heard* accurately.
2. The listener expresses some acknowledgment of the feelings generated by the speaker. Let the speaker know, for example, that you realize that it took forethought and effort to talk about this issue or that you are aware of the anger or frustration the speaker is experiencing.

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3. Ask open-ended, non-threatening questions that give the speaker the freedom to fully express any underlying resentments or fears or simply to gather additional information.

Putting these components into use takes practice. It is a good idea to practice these tools with one another, in a controlled environment before we begin to use them in our regular communications with employees, staff, and volunteers. Get a partner, and practice some listening tools by completing the following exercise.

GET YOUR EARS IN SHAPE ... EXERCISE

Get a partner. Choose an **A** and a **B**. Each person should select a scenario from the suggested situations provided.

- **A** begins by talking to **B** about the situation in the scenario. Exhibit any emotion you choose (e.g., when reading the scenario, express anger, frustration, nervousness, excitement, or any other appropriate emotion).
- **B** summarizes and paraphrases what **A** said and uses the same emotion as expressed by **A**.
- **A** critiques **B**'s ability to summarize and accurately identify the emotion(s).

- Repeat the exercise using a different emotion.
- Switch roles and repeat the exercise.
- Practice and familiarity turns new tools into useful tools. Continue to practice until the listening tools used in the exercise are familiar and smooth.

Once you begin to recognize the filters that influence your ability to listen to others, and once you have developed the skills needed to listen actively, your potential and opportunity for engaging in effective communication in the workplace is greatly enhanced. The impact of expanded, effective communication on the employer's ability to meet the organization's goals is immeasurable.

LISTENING AND THE BOTTOM LINE

Managers and supervisors who expand listening skills are better communicators; they listen and speak more clearly. When employees have the experience of being "heard" and are given clear and unambiguous instructions and requests, the results for both the employer and employee can be dramatic.

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APPLYING THE FIVE CORE PRINCIPLES OF SMART RISK MANAGEMENT

Employers today face a wide variety of troubling situations involving occurrences and claims of discrimination and harassment in the workplace and other forms of wrongdoing — sometimes unique, almost always challenging. Some situations are encountered on a day-to-day basis, while others emerge over time. Some may result in significant liability, while others — in fact, most (if not all) of such situations — will lead to a costly drain on productivity.

These situations also vary considerably in their nature. No two situations ever seem to be truly alike.

However, even though the facts of each case may differ, virtually all troublesome situations present a common set of obstacles and opportunities. More than anything else, these situations call for proactive management of the risks — and potential rewards — presented.

As part of the Smart Risk Management protocol for employers, there are “five core principles” for navigating situations involving workplace wrongdoing. They are:

1. No Tolerance
2. Observation
3. Communication
4. Empathy
5. Fairness

Again, while each situation is unique and deserving of special care and handling, these principles form a general framework for analysis and action. The principles can be summarized as follows:

NO TOLERANCE

Employers obviously cannot tolerate workplace (or other forms of) wrongdoing. While there must be uniformity on this point, organizations must also employ reasonable creativity and flexibility in handling these situations. In that spirit, one can contrast the increasingly perceived inflexibility of “zero tolerance” policies, which are often portrayed as nonsensical overreactions to technical violations of organizational policy, and a “no tolerance” philosophy, which calls for an appropriate set of responses to each situation.

The key here is consistency in the “big picture.” Consistent implementation, application, and enforcement of your organization’s policies, procedures, and practices will not always lead to consistent results. You must apply the same philosophies to each situation, but you will not necessarily arrive at the same outcomes (e.g., termination). However, as a guiding principle, earlier intervention is generally desirable (and certainly easier) than allowing a potential problem to ripen into a full-blown dispute.

OBSERVATION

This principle is the key to earlier intervention. You can begin to take action based on what you see — and, sometimes, what you do not see — in order to take control of a situation before it is thrust upon you. Sometimes you will be acting preventively, and at other times you will be responding proactively (or even reactively), but you will always be acting with your eyes open.

COMMUNICATION

If “observation” is the key to earlier intervention, then “communication” is the key to successful early intervention. Perhaps the single greatest source of employment problems — as well as the single greatest tool for problem solving — is communication. The most valuable efforts at communication adhere to the “4 Cs”: Candid, Clear, Collegial, and Concise.

Candor in the workplace — even in difficult situations — is critical. Clarity of communication is just as important in order to make your efforts effective. And to maximize the success of your efforts, collegiality allows you to get the message across without any unnecessary obstacles. Finally, you want to make sure your message is complete, but always concise — above all, the focus is on the quality, rather than quantity, of the interaction.

EMPATHY & FAIRNESS

These are especially intangible principles, but are critical nonetheless. Typically, the most negative situations violate not only the law, but also these fundamental values. Employers cannot — and should not — act out of sympathy; however, organizations benefit by demonstrating — and, if need be, documenting — their commitment to empathy and fairness.

Perhaps more than anything, these principles — empathy and fairness — are the litmus test by which our actions are ultimately judged. More often than not, the most important rule of law proves to be the “Golden Rule.”

BOTTOM LINE

Good managers have experience, expertise, education, leadership, high standards, or some combination of the above. Managers may have particular strengths in sales, inventory, numbers, or computers, but to be a better manager, you must understand how to manage people. Learn to apply the five core principles in your daily management routine.

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