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by David Stauffer

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Yo, Listen Up: A Brief Hearing on the Most Neglected Communication Skill

by David Stauffer

THE REASON WHY we have two ears and only one mouth," said the Greek philosopher Zeno, "is that we may listen the more and talk the less." Zeno would have stood little chance of being famous had he lived in our day. (Since he was the founder of Stoicism, one hopes he would have been unfazed by this public slight.) The last guest that Geraldo or Oprah or Imus would want is a guy who thinks it's virtuous to listen any longer than it takes to pause for a breath of air.

But we who toil as managers in this age of information (or what the perceptive social commentator Bill McKibben calls "the age of missing information") would do well to keep our ratio of words received to words delivered more in line with the ears-to-mouth proportion. "I don't think it matters whether you're selling, negotiating, supervising, or reporting," says Cleveland sales professional and speaker Hal Becker, "a manager in any situation is going to be more effective by listening than by talking."

It's at least difficult, and perhaps impossible, to find anyone who disagrees with that assertion—or with the assessment that listening is the communication skill in which managers have received the least training. "Through schooling and seminars, most managers learn at least the basics of reading, writing, and speaking," notes business communications professor Jack E. Hulbert, of North Carolina A&T State University. "But listening is rarely taught at any level."

Yet teaching is what most of us require, Hulbert notes, because in a sense we're born to be poor listeners. "Our brains are capable of compre-

hending speech at four to five times the rate at which most people can speak. So as someone else is talking, we take all that downtime and go out on mental excursions." Perhaps that's why we feel an almost physical jolt when the speaker says our name, yanking us back to the here and now.

That's a particularly troublesome tendency today, because listening is perhaps more important to being a successful manager than ever before. "The main skill required to build and guide an effective work team is keeping your mouth shut and giving your team members the chance to give you their point of view," says Bonnie Jacobson, director of the New York Institute for Psychological Change and author of the book *If Only You Would Listen*. "In business, poor listening can be very expensive. We don't just miss hearing what our team members want, but what the boss wants, what the customers want."

The benefits of better listening were driven home to Atlanta executive coach and consultant Lew Kravitz by a client who was negotiating pay with a new employer. "He had been fired from his previous job and was willing to take a pay cut," Kravitz recounts. "When they offered a salary that would be higher, he was shocked into silence. The interviewer saw this as disappointment and raised the offer." Not surprisingly, Kravitz believes that "the best response in negotiation is no immediate response."

How not to do it

What does a poor listener look like? Sales speaker Becker provides a graphic image when describing himself (almost certainly too harshly) as "one of the world's worst listeners. I

don't remember names, I interrupt, I complete other peoples' sentences, and I think about what I'm going to say next instead of listening to what someone else is saying now." This admission probably hits home for many: according to Hulbert, "Studies indicate that immediately after a ten-minute presentation of factual information, the average person can recall only half of that information."

A portrait of the manager as a good listener

For an image of *good* listening in action, San Jose, California, real estate broker and seminar leader Hank Trisler offers this snapshot: "You're sitting there looking at the customer, asking probing questions and giving him or her more than enough time to answer. You're clearly communicating the importance of every word you hear by taking notes, leaning toward the talker, and nodding to show you understand or agree. In other words, you're absorbing information like a sponge and doing everything but talk—to let the other person know that's what you're doing."

A similar picture is described by Jack Snader, president of Northbrook, Illinois, sales consultants Systema Corporation. "When you're touching the issues that are critically important to the customer, you're listening, trying to truly understand the situation, and parroting it back to show you do understand. The other person is thinking, 'Hey, this guy is really tracking with me. He really knows the issues.'"

Listening is more difficult than talking. "Most of us have gone to a great deal of trouble to cram ourselves with facts and figures and features," Snader continues. "So we talk too much because we desperately want other people to know how much we know." But that's not what counts, he adds. His company's studies of the techniques and habits of top salespeople show that "they were better than other salespeople in asking questions and listening."

Listen . . .

The effort involved in good listening is also acknowledged by psychologist Jacobson. "We really have to work at this," she says. "That's especially true today, because we feel we have so little time. But good listening, above all, takes time—for others to make statements, for you to make sure you've heard right, and for others to restate their thoughts more accurately." It is, in other hands, "active," as opposed to "passive," work. "You aren't sitting back and receiving," Hulbert explains. "You're engaged in what the other person is saying. Tests have demonstrated physiological effects in active listening: a slight increase in heart rate and body temperature, for example, and a rise in the brain's electrical activity." So how can you become a better, more active, listener? Five key suggestions follow.

1

Realize that you could do better.

"Studies show that awareness alone is the greatest contributor to improved listening," Hulbert says. "Some experts claim that 50% or more of the average adult's potential improvement in listening can come from realizing he or she has bad listening habits and is capable of listening much better."

2

Practice.

"It's not like there's anything new out there," Becker quips. "What it takes to be a better listener has been known for the past hundred years or so." For Becker, "There's only one way to be a better listener. First, be aware you're not as good at it as you could be. Then you can catch yourself not listening and try not to let it happen again." You get good at listening the same way you get to Carnegie Hall: practice, practice, practice.

3

Rephrase what you're hearing.

"One of the best things about listening, at least when we're in small groups, is that we can find out how well we're doing," Jacobson points out. "You follow another person's

statement by saying, 'What I hear you saying is...' and then restating what you've just heard." Such "reality checks" are most important when dealing with an emotional issue—such as when a subordinate talks with you about a problem with a coworker. "Emotion tends to make a person less articulate," Jacobson says. "You'll hear the sputtering of disjointed words and phrases. So it's up to you to do even more to make sure you're getting the person's real message."

At such times, Jacobson asserts, "About the worst thing we could say is what we're probably thinking: 'Spit it out.' The person would surely have already done that if it were possible. Instead, you might ask, 'Is this what you're trying to tell me?' and rephrase what you think the person would like to say. Then make sure you've got it right by responding to the person's answer with the 'what I hear you saying' statement." Sales executive Trisler recommends rephrasing "because you demonstrate you're listening and trying to understand. Also, you get the other person to give you corrections, adjustments, and elaborations that can sometimes make a critical difference."

One way to test your progress is to get the okay from people you know to record your phone conversations. Play them back and note how often you asked questions and rephrased what the other person was saying.

4

Conquer the fear of silence.

The urge to fill a silence can be almost irresistible, Atlanta consultant Kravitz observes. "So we are best served by a personal policy of not talking right away no matter what another person says. Even if you're asked a question for which you have a ready answer, take time to think. Something about the actual situation, perhaps the other person's tone of voice, could be different from what you envisioned and make a different answer better for you." Trisler recommends counting:

"Not out loud, but to yourself—one Mississippi, two Mississippi, three Mississippi, and so on. Keep counting until the other party speaks." And even "if your answer is unchanged by the circumstances," Kravitz continues, "you'll get the practice of pausing, which will serve you well later."

5

Take notes.

This "announces to the other person that you care so much about listening that you're going to write down what he or she says," Trisler points out. "It also keeps you occupied, so you can't talk as much. And it allows you to conclude by saying, 'Can I review the things I heard you say are most important to you about this subject?'"

What if you were to come face-to-face in negotiations with another good listener—would a silent standoff ensue? Hardly, says Becker. "It's the perfect scenario. Each of those negotiators would ask lots of good questions of the other, would really hear the other's responses, and would value the information obtained by formulating terms of an agreement that reflected what's important to the other side. Confrontations that might otherwise drag on for days might be resolved in hours, which would mean everyone could do a whole lot less talking and listening."

If you want to learn more . . .

How to Speak and Listen Effectively by Harvey A. Robbins (1992, AMACOM WorkSmart Series, 90 pp., \$10.95, Tel. 800-262-9699 or 518-891-1500)

If Only You Would Listen: How to Stop Blaming His or Her Gender and Start Communicating with the One You Love by Bonnie Jacobson (1995, St. Martin's, 160 pp., out of print)

Listen to Win: A Manager's Guide to Effective Listening by Curt Bechler and Richard L. Weaver (1994, Master Media Ltd., 185 pp., \$18.95, Tel. 212-260-5600)

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