



HEAR ME, ((OH)) HEAR ME! ARE WE LISTENING TO OUR EMPLOYEES?

By Darcy Loy



Picture yourself in a routine, weekly staff meeting with your team. It's mid-afternoon, you've had lunch and that imminent feeling of sleepiness begins to invade your psyche. Soon your mind is wandering; pondering those numerous tasks that await your attention. You glance at the clock that's moving ever so slowly. Come on, admit it; we all do it. You check your phone for e-mail messages, readjust your position in your chair, and then "WHAM," you have to pull yourself back into the conversation at hand when someone says your name. Reminiscent of that high school history class, isn't it? Listening—what a daunting task that is!

Most of us truly believe that we are good listeners; but realistically, are we? We maintain the assumption that listening occurs naturally, so little thought and effort doesn't really seem necessary. If we as leaders polled our employees what would their responses be? Would they be of the opinion that we only "hear" them? Melissa Shaw states, "When it comes to the similarities between listening and hearing, the only one is you use your ears for both. After that, they're very different." (Shaw, September 2003, p.1)

Listening is one of the most crucial skills that we as leaders need to possess but is often the most difficult to master. It takes hard work, concentration, and specific skill sets to become an effective listener. As facilities leaders we need to perfect the art of listening to our employees. They possess pertinent knowledge about our day-to-day operations that we need to run efficient and effective units. Bottom line is that they have valuable things to say. As Calvin Coolidge once said, “No one ever listened himself out of a job.” We should be embracing the concept of genuine listening and utilizing it daily in our departmental operations. As leaders we need to recognize the importance of perfecting listening skills so that we can use it to inspire and motivate our staff, gain knowledge to enhance our day-to-day operations, and reinforce within our employees that they are of great value to the success of our organizations.

LISTENING: A TOOL TO MOTIVATE

Effective leaders consistently search for ways to motivate their team members. If we don't the work becomes monotonous, the team becomes stagnant, and productivity and creativity diminish. Lack of listening de-motivates and diminishes the employee's sense of worth, responsibility, and ownership. In the article “Listening, the Key to Employee Commitment,” Bennet Simonton states, “The obvious question is why should they turn on their brainpower if no one will listen?” He further states, “The sad thing is that many bosses, high and low, are so busy giving direction and orders that they fail to listen, and subordinates decide to leave their brainpower at the door as they enter the workplace.” (Simonton, February 2006, p.1)

As leaders we comprehend that the “dollar” is usually the most successful means in which to motivate individuals to be more productive. But in these difficult economic times, when layoffs and lack of pay increases are in the forefront, we need to find other ways to inspire our staff. The simple act of listening makes

good business sense as a motivational instrument. It's financially viable; all it costs you is a bit of your time and attention.

The results have the potential to produce content and more productive units. Zane Safrit, former CEO of Conference Calls Unlimited states, “...never forget that your employees are listening to you. They're listening to you for answers to these three questions: ‘What's in it for me?’, ‘Why should I believe?’, and ‘Why should I care?’” (Safrit, February 2009, p.1) If you as a

leader can effectively listen and answer these types of questions, you will empower your team members. Empowerment is a monumental catalyst for increased motivation. Empowered employees feel valued and will give back their time, energy, and passion to your organization. They will be motivated to bring ideas, creativity, and solutions to the table.

Motivation is contagious; motivated employees will in turn inspire you to be a better leader.

Remember your employees want to listen to you. As an effective leader you need to communicate to them your vision, purpose, and mission for the unit. In turn, you need to listen to them and incorporate their values, concepts and ideas into your plans for the unit in the future.

LISTENING: A TOOL TO GAIN KNOWLEDGE

“It is the province of knowledge to speak and it is the privilege of wisdom to listen.” Oliver Wendell Holmes.

Webster's dictionary defines knowledge as an “understanding gained by actual experience; a range of information; something learned and kept in the mind.” To be successful facilities leaders we must constantly strive to attain knowledge in all aspects of our organization. Whether it be new trends or processes, technological advancements or awareness of new products, we need to incorporate what we learn into our day-to-day operations. This enables us to be competitive with other institutions of higher learning. We gain valuable knowledge by attending conferences and networking with colleagues, by reading trade magazines and books, watching training videos and researching topics.

But our most valuable source of knowledge pertaining to our operations can be gained by actively listening to our employees. They are the individuals who are out on our campus daily performing the tasks and interacting with our customers. The team member knows the most efficient way to abate litter or the best product that is needed to wax a floor. Our workforce most generally consists of staff members who have been with our units for many years, and new, younger employees. Each brings a diverse facet of knowledge to the table.



7 Tips for Effective Listening:

- Concentrate on what others are saying.
- Send the non-verbal message that you are listening.
- Avoid early evaluation.
- Avoid getting defensive.
- Practice paraphrasing.
- Listen (and observe) for feeling.
- Ask questions.



Tangible Benefits from Listening in the Workplace:

- Bond of respect.
- Productivity.
- Cooler Heads.
- Confidence.
- Accuracy.

Veteran employees bring experience; they have witnessed changes in procedures and trends. They know the job and have the knowledge and expertise to be excellent mentors for our younger staff. Younger employees bring a fresh and new outlook to our teams. They are enthusiastic to share their knowledge of current processes and technology that will enable us to be on the cutting edge. It is vital to us as leaders to utilize the knowledge that all of our employees possess. An effective leader asks questions of their staff and actively listens to their answers. Open-ended questions are the best because the speaker has to convey more information. Superior listeners clarify points and paraphrase their responses to make sure they fully understand the employee's information. With perfected listening skills leaders gain power in regards to being armed with information that is vital to successful organizations.

LISTENING: A TOOL TO REINFORCE VALUE

Bennet Simonton states, "To be committed to the work, one must have ownership of the work. To have ownership of the work, one must be able to influence what goes on in the workplace associate with that work." (Simonton, February 2006, p.1) Successful leaders want their employees to embrace their jobs and take ownership and pride in what they do. Employees want to feel valued within the organizations. They need to perceive that their ideas, knowledge and concepts are important to the success of the team as a whole. Employees who perceive a sense of value from their leaders will become highly committed. Highly committed employees strive for excellence. "Superior leadership is listening to your subordinates to receive their valuable input, and it is rewarded by their trust in you and their commitment to the job." (Simonton, February 2006, p. 2)

In order to achieve this level of performance from our workforce, we as leaders need to not only listen but to actively take an interest in each employee. We take the time to get to know them and it doesn't always have to be a conversation about work related issue. It is as simple as stopping by their desk as you pass, or stopping when you see them performing their daily tasks. A simple "Hi, how are you? How was your weekend, or How are the kids?" Make a vested attempt to get to know them on a personal level. Don't talk about work unless they bring it up. This develops and builds solid working relationships within

the organization. When an employee does come to you with an idea or concept that would benefit the unit, or with a problem that they're having with a task or coworker, give them your undivided attention.

In the facilities management environment we as leaders find ourselves juggling numerous problems and projects on a daily basis. Multi-tasking is second nature to us, but in order to actively listen we need to be able to set that all aside when someone comes to us. Non-verbal messages are as important as verbal ones. We give them our undivided attention by turning off our phones and we concentrate on what they are saying. Making eye contact with the person speaking and using body language to relay that you are paying attention is essential. Verbally, leaders need to ask questions of the individual so they can elaborate or explain something that isn't clear. Don't interrupt; let the speaker finish their thought and then make necessary comments. Be mindful that you don't make an immediate judgment or decision. Validate the fact that you have listened. Schedule a future meeting to relay information that you needed to verify or to render a decision in regards to an idea or process that they have suggested. This reinforces that you value what they have to share and appreciate their dedication and commitment to the unit.

There's no doubt that listening is hard work. However, in order to be effective leaders we need to realize the value that active listening brings to our unit. Listening to our employees is crucial. It is a means by which we gain their trust and form bonds of respect that will be beneficial to the success of our organizations. By listening we empower them to share their knowledge and give them a true sense of self worth. In return, we obtain highly motivated and committed employees that will strive to help us as leaders accomplish our mission and vision for the department. As Jack Nichols once said, "Every person I work with knows something better than me. My job is to listen long enough to find it and use it." ☺

Darcy Loy is the assistant director of grounds maintenance at Illinois State University, Normal, IL. She can be reached at daloy@ilstu.edu.

NOTES

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2. McGarvey, Robert. (June 1996). "Now hear this: lend your employees and ear-boost productivity." Entrepreneur, p. 1.
3. Safrit's, Zane. (February 13, 2009). "Listen to Your Employees. Small Business Trends, p. 1 & 2.
4. Shaw, Melissa. (September 8, 2003). "Hearing vs. Listening." Network World. www.networkworld.com, p.1.
5. Simonton, Bennet. (February 24, 2006). "Listening, the key to employee commitment." www.management-issues.com, p. 1 & 2.
6. Wilson, Bruce. (2003-2005). "Practical Benefits of Better Listening for Leaders and Teams." Business. LISTENING/Wilson Strategies, p. 1.