

Keeping an Eye on Productivity? Make it an Ear, Too

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I recently attended a conference with a friend. As we drove home, our comments centered on a woman we had met whom we both described as a "brilliant conversationalist."

Yet reflecting back, it dawned on us that we really didn't know much about her nor did she elaborate on her own views and thoughts.

She was indeed a brilliant communicator. She did not so much hold her group spellbound as she drew everyone else in. Within a short period of time, she knew each person's "hot buttons" - those things that mattered to the individual - and she pushed those buttons.

The ability to listen in the business world can be translated into a workforce that is more productive. A manager who listens to his or her people creates a feeling of caring and appreciation. A sense of joint ownership and belonging is conveyed. That manager is also gaining creative new ideas that can save time and money and move a project along.

This country has the most educated workforce ever known. As people become more educated or experienced, they have more knowledge and expertise to share. An educated, experienced workforce also expects to be consulted. Smart management cocks a listening ear.

A recent study conducted by a New York consulting firm, suggests that an inability to communicate, especially to listen, is souring many buyers on the salespeople who call on them.

In a survey of over 400 corporate buyers across the nation, salespeople were tabbed as being "too talky." Sixty-nine percent of these buyers rated salespeople as poor or merely fair at their jobs.

The percent of salespeople that buyers felt really listened? Only 28 percent fit this category, leaving 72 percent of salespeople placed in the category of poor listeners!

The use of good listening skills has a two-fold purpose: 1) to gain a new body of knowledge and 2) to reach a higher level of understanding.

A good listener allows others to exercise, stimulate and churn up their minds. A good listener is an adventurer, who thrills to the exploration of new people and ideas.

A good listener realizes that everyone has experiences which can be contributed and recognizes that no one, including him or herself, has the total truth.

James Simpson was a clerk who became chairman of Marshall Field & Co. He often told people that he smoked a cigar to keep his mouth shut. He also had a sign on his desk that said, "Be Quiet." It faced toward him!

Here are tips for those who would like to learn to be more quiet, become better listeners and encourage others to talk:

- Use body language that fosters open communication.
- Practice good eye contact, have a pleasant, relaxed facial expression, lean forward in an attentive way and use nods to indicate attentiveness.
- Restate or paraphrase a speaker's thoughts, once again reaffirming your attentiveness. This is also a way to make sure that your interpretation is accurate.
- Avoid talking over someone or finishing the sentence. Try talking over or finishing sentences a few times, and you will find people losing interest in trying to communicate. It stifles creativity and self-esteem.
- Remember that intent is as important as content. Terminology and words should not be more important than the message itself. If you are confused about what someone means, ask them. Try to reach a mutual understanding of what is being said.
- Avoid evaluating or judging in the initial stages. This is not always easy to do but learning and understanding are based on listening with an open mind. Also be careful if and when you do give an evaluation—judge the message, not the speaker.
- Analyze all evidence and hear all sides before making an evaluation. Good listeners are careful to have all the key information before reaching any decisions or expressing an opinion.
- Maintain a positive attitude. Pick one thing upon which you agree and build on that.
- To rank in the top percentile of good listeners, keep in mind that courteous listening is not enough—be keen to learn. Listening well can cause new ideas to surface, build self-esteem and good will, relieve the responsibility and stress of having to do things alone and create an atmosphere of consensus and teamwork.