

The Importance of Listening

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2006, published in the Houston Daily Journal on Thursday, November 30, 2006

I was exploring with a colleague the value of listening as a key ingredient in strengthening relationships. My colleague asked, “Do you know what’s worse than not being listened to?”

Not knowing where he was headed, I just shrugged my shoulders. “Nothing!” was his response. “Nothing is worse than having someone not listen to you when you are trying to express an idea or a feeling! Folks want to know that they matter, and the way they know you care is if you make the effort to understand them.”

And how do you do that? You genuinely listen, which is not particularly easy.

If you want easy, just pretend to pay attention. Or ignore them outright. Or interrupt them when they are speaking. Or finish their sentences for them. Any of those behaviors are pretty certain to damage your relationships!

Listening doesn’t involve just your ears. Your body language and especially your facial expression can be a huge tip-off if you are not sincere in your listening. If some distraction has even a small portion of your attention, it will usually be apparent to the speaker.

Your eyes, however, can be one of your greatest allies in listening. Studies indicate that only 7% of our communication is contained in the words we use. Another 40% is apparent in the tone used in conveying those words. The rest, the majority of the communication, comes from what we can see in the speaker’s facial expression and body language.

That’s where the feelings of the person are typically evident. They might try to hide what’s in their heart through the words they use and their tone of voice, but the face and body are much more difficult to disguise. Sensitizing your eyes to look for the cues given off as people speak will make you a much more effective listener.

As you listen, look for what the person is not able to say, either because of limited vocabulary or because of reluctance to express the concept or feeling. If you suspect the individual would like to convey more, take a risk and acknowledge what you think is there but has not been said. Often the other person will express gratitude for your having sensed the situation. If your assumption is inaccurate, the other person will likely correct you. Usually, no harm will have been done.

If you are a leader, work to understand life from the viewpoint of those individuals under your authority. They can’t possibly imagine the quantity and magnitude of the hassles you have to address—and they don’t really want to know. But they do live with their own irritations, many of which they would like for you to know.

Just being available is likely to begin the dialogue. If not, be the kind of leader who has the guts to ask, “What could I or someone else start or stop doing that would help you be more productive, or more creative, or more effective in serving your customers?”

(I’m using “customers” here in the generic sense. Most of your employees probably serve other employees, not the paying customer. If you have built the culture properly in your organization, internal customers receive excellent service just as your external customers do.)

All too often, leaders think “good communication” is only the flow of information out to others. However, every person in your organization has an opinion and loves to be heard. Give them respect by listening to their thoughts. Some of their ideas may turn out to be valuable gems.

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach who helps leaders build effective cultures and effective processes. Contact him at dennis@buildingfutureleaders.com or phone him at 404-575-3050.