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The Listening Circle: A Simple Tool to Enhance Listening and Reduce Extremism Among Employees[☆]

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An employee's listening ability has implications for the effectiveness of the work team, the organization, and for the employee's own success. Estimates of the frequency of listening suggest that workers spend about 30% of their communication time listening. However, the ability to listen might be even more important to managers, as empirical evidence suggest that they spent more than 60% of their time listening. Hence, success of both the employee and the manager in communication, and thus in the organization, rests in part on possessing good listening abilities.

WHAT CONSTITUTES LISTENING IN INTERPERSONAL CONTEXT?

Although listening is a complex phenomenon, it appears that people perceive it holistically. That is, people seem to feel in a split second whether the person with whom they interact listens or not. It seems that speakers perceive how well they are listened based on multiple “backchannel” signals sent by the listener. Furthermore, it seems that speakers develop this perception based on three listener's behavior: attention, compression, and intention (ACI). First, speakers monitor the attention of their listeners. If speaker sees that the listener is busy with anything else (e.g., Smartphone) than paying attention to the speaker, they perceive poor listening. Yet, attention is not sufficient. Speakers gauge from the total behaviors of the listener whether the listener comprehends the message, as the speaker understands it. Related to the perception that one is being understood is the

relationship intent of the listener. It seems that speaker ask themselves “Is this person caring about me, and accepting me the way I see myself, or trying to find faults in my message, or even taking advantage of me?” Thus, although people “know” when they are being listened to, it seems that they quickly gauge ACI: attention, understanding (comprehension), and relational components (benevolent intention towards the speaker). This seems to capture what employees mean when saying “Listen to me!”

THE BENEFITS OF LISTENING IN ORGANIZATIONS

When people listen well, they create many of benefits both for themselves and for their interlocutors, according to theories and empirical data. High quality listening enables speakers to (a) elaborate on an event, (b) connect emotionally to it, and (c) become more self-aware. As a result, high quality listening makes speakers, talk more fluently, coherently, and produce more interesting narratives. This process consequently influences speakers' self-knowledge and memory of these narratives. Moreover, experiencing high quality listening sends the speaker a signal that she is interesting and worthy of attention, thereby increasing personal growth. Furthermore, it has been shown that the non-judgmental nature of high quality listening frees speakers from self-presentational concerns, which increases their psychological safety and reduces their social anxiety. In addition, perception of good listening is positively associated with job satisfaction, relational satisfaction, and better mood, including higher positive affect, lower negative affect, and lower job burnout, to name a few. More so, perceived listening quality is positively correlated with objective measures of

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performance. This is because good listeners have the opportunity to learn more from others and are able to see how others experience and make sense of the world. This, in turn, leads them to gain more knowledge and broaden their perspective, thereby improving performance. For example, sales people in the financial industry who are perceived by their customers as good listeners sell more. In addition, good listeners are better liked by their interlocutors, and better trusted; this is because listeners who listen well show their interlocutors that they care about what they think and what is on their minds, which in turn builds trust between the listener and the speaker.

Furthermore, leaders who listen well are perceived by their subordinates as more concerned with their subordinates' well-being. This leads subordinates of such leaders to perceive them to be high on the ability to lead people, and characterize them as high in people-leadership style. Integrating these benefits for speakers and listeners suggests that good listening can constitute a *high-quality connection* at the workplace; one that is *mutually* growth fostering, enhancing and promoting the development of both dyad members as well as the tie between them.

HOW CAN MANAGERS KNOW IF THEY ARE REALLY LISTENING TO THEIR EMPLOYEES?

Managers are usually characterized by their strong opinions, decisiveness, and strong attitudes. However, much less attention is devoted to managers' ability and willingness to listen to their employees. Managers become accustomed to speaking rather than listening to their employees, thus, it is no surprise that many managers struggle with their listening ability. This struggle derives from the fact that listening is like a muscle, in order to develop it, a manager has to practice it. Hence, we next offer recommendations for practicing and improving managers' listening muscle.

Develop an Attitude to Become a Good Listener

The most important step is for the manager to develop an attitude and make a decision to become a better listener. The result of such an attitude is prioritizing the goal of improving one's listening skill at the top of the manager's list. Yet, you are probably not going to adopt such an attitude without experiencing the potential benefits of listening and being listened to. Thus, you can try the next time you have to listen to someone who makes you anxious to interrupt, to announce that you are now in a listening mode, put a timer for three, or even five, minutes, and tell your interlocutor that you are only going to listen. Try it with three different people, and then reflect what have you learned from being silent. Moreover, if you adopt the goal to improve your listening skill, you are likely to fail often. Thus, a concomitant attitude that may help acquiring the skill is the recognition that this skill is hard to acquire and that the failing along the way should be greeted with self-compassion. Once you develop a strong pro-listening attitude, you may find it easier to overcome the urge to interrupt, and to jump into immature conclusions. Such an attitude may enable you to hear the information your employees are trying to share with you.

Avoid Distractions

If the managers' attention is elsewhere during a conversation, he or she risks sending a message that the employee and what the employee has to say is not important enough. Such incidents occur daily in the modern workplace, for example, when a manager plays with her smartphone during a conversation with an employee. Therefore, every time when people address you, you need to reach a decision. Can I pay attention now? If the answer is yes, dedicate your time to the other person. That is, move away from your screens (computer, smartphone, tablet), even ask someone else to take your calls, and be ready to give 100% of your attention to the speaker. If you cannot pay attention, do not pretend to listen. Apologize that you cannot pay attention at this time, and if relevant, schedule a time, in which you will be "present" in the conversation. Alternatively, if you are planning for a conversation in which you sense you will have difficulty to listen, you can practice mindfulness before going into that conversation. By practicing mindfulness, you may be able to reduce the "internal noise" that prevents you from listening to the other.

Look for Non-Verbal Cues

High quality listening is more than merely hearing words and nodding your head. Much of the communication in the conversation passes through the non-verbal channel. For example, the employee might say one thing but her face and body are saying the opposite. A manager should pay attention to the verbal and non-verbal cues, which are conveyed by the employee. You may want to indicate that you read your interlocutor's attempted meaning. For example, you may say "It seems that you are worried about this change", or "I guess that X is the gist of the opportunity you see."

Ask Questions

Asking a good question represents attention, intention (a question that can benefit the speaker) and a relational aspect (the opposite of commenting and judging what the speaker has said). A good question can be as simple as: "is there anything else you want to say"? Or, "could you please tell me some more?" A good question is a question that advances what the speaker intends to say, and not necessarily what the listener wants to hear.

Control the Need to Judge and Evaluate

People have a natural tendency to evaluate what they hear. Hence, this recommendation is challenging but crucial for high quality listening. Managers often express their disagreement with what they hear before the message has been fully delivered, especially, when the content is negative. However, listening in a non-judgmental manner is a way to achieve real communication with the employees and encourage voice behavior. In this way, managers can obtain a lot of information that would not have surfaced if they hurry to evaluate and comment on what they hear.

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