

Leadership Briefs ... Listening

(Email News Brief - June, 2003)

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Establish rapport and mutual respect with employees by truly listening to their thoughts and ideas. It is important for people to know that they have been heard. Many times employees believe that the people they report to are too busy with day-to-day activities and that they are not a priority on their schedule. Often, when time is taken to meet with employees there is a one-way communication from the manager to the employee. Recently we worked with young engineers who complained that their managers rarely met with them and, when they did meet, tended to dominate the conversation with "advice" gleaned from their experiences over the years. Many times these experiences were dated or not relevant to what the employee needed at the time.

I recently worked with a client in support of a group brainstorming session. We began the session with a short presentation on the concept of dialogue. Dialogue is a type of conversation developed by Physicist David Bohm and further explored in The Fifth Discipline and the The Fifth Discipline Field Book. The purpose of dialogue is to undertake a shared exploration towards greater understanding. The principles of dialogue are effective in a group setting and are also excellent principles for leaders to follow when meeting with and listening to their direct reports. I have found the following principles, several of which derived from the concept of dialogue, to be very helpful to leaders who truly want to listen more effectively:

- Listen with an open mind. Be aware of your assumptions and judgments as you process what the other person is saying.
- Think of the ways in which what the other person is saying makes sense versus finding the few areas of fault. In this way you will validate their opinion and build on the points they are making.
- Don't interrupt ... allow the other person the space to complete their thoughts.
- Devote your full attention to the other person (i.e. do not check email or take calls). You may want to schedule the time or meet in a more conducive setting in order to avoid distractions.
- Paraphrase - say in your own words what you heard the other person say and check it out to ensure you heard correctly. This ensures you heard accurately, forces you to pay attention and validates with the other person that you cared enough to listen and really want to understand what they are saying.
- Allow for silence and contemplation between thoughts and speaking. This creates the foundation for creativity.

- Ask questions that build on what the person is saying and draws out the points they are making. Many times these types of questions begin with the word "What" (e.g. What do you believe would have to happen in order for your idea to become a reality?).
- At the end of the conversation ask if they would like to review or add to any of the information discussed during the meeting.

Leaders who take the time to reflect and actually incorporate these principles have told me of an increased sense of partnership with employees. They find that they have a better understanding and appreciation of the ideas and behavior of employees and employees are more likely to listen to their advice when offered.

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