

The Leader Within

When I speak the word “communication” to you, what image comes to your mind? I have to admit, the first image in my mind is of a person standing before a crowd giving a presentation. Communication = talking. Right?

In leadership, so often the communication activity is in conveying to the team what is needed. We expect them to listen. Listening is an important part of the communication process. The model of Sender—Receiver assumes that someone is listening. Simple stuff. Yet, the model is a loop with a feedback component and makes provision for the Sender to become involved in receiving information. I want to give attention to the need for the leader to listen.

Listen—Why?

If you are going to accomplish the goal all by yourself. . . you don’t need to listen to anyone (not *really* true). If even one other person is involved in the task, listening becomes a responsibility. Team members entrust themselves to a leader’s vision of what can be. They attach themselves to the leader. Imagine that one of your physical body parts was sending out a signal (like “pain” or “hot”) and you did not heed it. The part plus the whole body may suffer. Let’s just say that listening shows responsible leadership and makes good sense.

Listen—When?

Sometimes we pay attention only to get feedback. Good listening is going on all the time. The effective leader is keenly aware of the context and environment of activity and the need to stay in touch with the realities. Followers can start dropping away when they sense something the leader hasn’t yet picked up! This means being constantly attuned to what is going on and what is being said.

Listen—How?

I can point to hard skills but want to highlight the “soft” ones. I would say listen with sensitivity, patience, fairness and the like. Remember, good listening is an important acknowledgement of those same people whose support you want in the next moment.

Listening is a very important part of communication. Not to lose sight of this, look at how we’re built—two ears, one mouth.

Bret Maukonen

The Coach Within

Google the word “listening” and you will get about 147 million hits. Whew! I am not really sure what I can add! Mind you, “talking” will render 300 million hits.

As a coach and a counselor, I have learned about authentic listening, active listening, empathic listening, internal listening, focused listening, global listening, and reflective listening. It is appropriate to mention, I think, that some of these actually involve talking as well. They amount to a form of communication that requires one to pay close attention to what is said, how it is said and what is left unsaid. And to also find a way to let the other person know what you heard. I think this is pretty basic stuff with which you are already familiar.

More interesting, perhaps, are the things that determine our listening habits—to what and whom do we listen, for how long and how closely? For example, one thing that varies greatly for me is the point at which I actually tune in to the soundtrack of a movie. What makes my ears “perk up” and my attention switch from the dialogue/action to the often (to me, at least) unnoticed background music? In the midst of your daydreaming, what makes you suddenly tune in closely to what someone is saying?

Here’s an example of an indicator of your own listening skills—if you were examined on the content of things a loved one had recently said to you, would you score “excellent recall” or . . . be hard-pressed to remember anything at all?

I intentionally used the word “habits” to describe listening. That is significant because habits are learned behaviour and anything learned can be unlearned. So good listeners can become even better and anyone else who is motivated can readily develop brand new skills. And, speaking of good listeners, when was the last time you had someone in your life that was—focused on what you were saying, intent on understanding your meaning, determined to hear not only what you said but what you left unsaid, able to reflect back the essence of your message and capable of commenting in a way that fully honoured that essence and yet, also carried you further along in your thinking? These are things that coaching brings to a relationship.

Lynne Maukonen

To Ponder . . . How do you feel when you sense that someone is not listening to you? How can you affirm that you are listening to someone else? (This is part of a skill set that you may have to learn and practice.) What do you observe in other people who are apparently listening to you? Just for fun . . . name 10 things to which you like to listen.