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LISTENING YOUR WAY TO ENHANCED PERFORMANCE

Three actions you can take to leverage listening

1. Successful teams often develop a protocol around speaking and listening turns. Frequently, this occurs without any formal agreement. However, if you're in a team where listening is a problem, it might be necessary to agree to some ground rules to which team members can hold each other.
2. In most teams you'll find one or more individuals who are very reflective and rather quiet. They're usually pretty comfortable with just listening, though sometimes welcome being asked their opinion. It's not uncommon to hear excellent, carefully considered ideas since they've been absorbing all the communication and not jostling for a turn to make their mark. It might be helpful to warn them ahead so that they don't feel pounced on.
3. Working collaboratively seems to be a major challenge for people at all levels. Sometimes particularly at the most senior levels, where people are used to just being in charge. Collaboration can be fostered through actively listening to others who are speaking and seeking to add to and build on their ideas in your next speaking turn. By doing this, you'll show that you weren't only thinking of your next thing to say, but really do value the contribution of others and are seeking to craft outcomes collaboratively. Visuals aids, where people add their cumulative contributions, can enhance the process.

Listening without hearing

As Bob's fingers flicked deftly across the small keyboard of his smartphone, he sensed that it was almost his time to speak at the meeting. Dropping the phone to his lap, he looked up and caught John's last two sentences. Though Bob had managed to monitor John's contribution in the background, he'd be the first to acknowledge that he hadn't really been listening.

Looking around the table, where the project team of twelve senior people were gathered, it became very clear that only one or two were fully engaged in the meeting at any time. Some sat waiting for their turn, rehearsing in their mind exactly how they would get their point across. Others sat quietly, reflecting on their day ahead, having honed the art of the occasional nod or grunt to feign attention. They would make a comment or two during the meeting, but felt it didn't actually make much difference. And then there were the Bobs who, when not speaking, were carrying on other conversations via their phones.

Why bother?

At the end of the regular two hour meeting, clusters walked away lamenting the lack of progress at the meeting. It was no surprise to hear complaints of discussions being repeated, of arguments going round in circles and, most of all, little progress being made. Yet, for reasons known only to each of the members, they continued to spend two hours per week going through the motions. Essentially they were all attending a habit or a ritual, rather than a meaningful meeting.

What can be done to avoid this type of unproductive and wasteful scenario that plays out daily in countless workplaces around Australia?

Listening as a powerful influencing behaviour

With the flood of information competing for our attention in much more complex environments, listening is emerging as a powerful influencing behaviour that can deliver significant performance benefits. *Listening involves actively paying attention to the communication of others* and it's a vital leadership skill at every level.

UGM research has found that listening, along with communicating, is a core influencing behaviour. Teams that don't have sufficient quantities of both of these core influencing behaviours do not thrive and are unlikely even to survive for very long.

A lack of listening also results in raised levels of tension in teams. This may lead to increased conflict or increased withdrawal. In this type of environment the scale and scope of ideas is also badly affected.

Listening for enhanced team performance

Listening can be a strong shaper of the volume and direction of idea flow, particularly when those with most influence choose to listen to some ideas rather than others. The risk of overlooking good ideas increases when people listen only now and again. What happens if that significant, game-changing idea is raised just at the time you're checking your Blackberry? Or, worse still, you don't give that idea a chance because you choose to ignore its originator.

UGM research shows that teams with plenty of active listening deliver a much greater output of creative ideas and solutions to team challenges than teams where listening is less practised. Teams with a lot of listening also tend to show greater resilience. Members tend to feel on board and aligned and are better able to withstand turbulence.

In addition to enhancing a sense of ownership listening, particularly by those with authority, sends a potent message to those being listened to. It demonstrates that others' opinions are important. Team members report feeling that *"listening is a type of leveller"*. It enhances the sense that others do care and that everyone is on the same team. As a result, people step up their individual contributions and team performance increases. All these benefits can be leveraged from an easily exercised behaviour.

Listening a key tool in the preferred leadership style

Listening is particularly relevant for the 71% of ANZ CEO's in the 2010 IBM Global CEO study who reported that they use persuasion and influence rather than command and control. A lack of listening often signals a desire for control, even if that's not the intention. So, being a good listener is an essential element of a more inclusive approach, in contrast to the 'one-way' style of command and control.

In a command and control environment you're expected to listen to (or take) directives from above. Trouble is, quite often those instructions are followed without the investment of any critical thought or buy-in. Influencing and persuasion, on the other hand, requires more of a give-and-take exchange. All parties get to make a contribution and feel some ownership of the exchange as a result.

How well are you leverage listening?

Reflect for a moment on the impact of Bob paying greater attention to his smartphone than his colleagues. It is not surprising that the meeting made little progress. Continued lack of listening will ensure continued lack of progress. It also virtually guarantees fewer creative ideas to break the impasse.

How often do you come across the Bobs of the world, and how good a listener would your boss, your colleagues and your direct reports rate you?