

The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from  LifeSolutions

Much of the conflict in our lives can be explained by one simple but unhappy fact: We don't really listen to each other. (Michael P. Nichols) The ability to "listen well" is essential to effective communication in the workplace. For leadership, it is a crucial management skill. A talent for listening attentively and the ability to convey understanding and empathy can make the difference between an "okay" manager and a "great" manager. This issue of *The Successful Supervisor* focuses on listening. Some material is adapted from *Choosing Civility: The Twenty Five Rules of Considerate Conduct* by P.M. Fiorni, St. Martins Press, 2002. As always, we are interested in your feedback and/or questions. Please email the EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com. or contact an EAP account manager at 1.800.647.3327.

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LifeSolutions regularly conducts workshops for new managers. When asked to characterize a successful leader, participants reliably place "the ability to listen" near the top of the list. Its importance is so obvious that it is sometimes passed over in favor of discussing seemingly more complex skills such as the ability to manage conflict or a talent for knowing how to motivate employees. This is unfortunate. While most of us recognize that having good listening skills is essential, the ability to listen well does not necessarily come naturally or easily. Most of us have developed some fairly bad habits that interfere with our capacity to listen. Listening is a complex skill that requires self-awareness, selflessness, genuine empathy, commitment, and practice.

What are some of the different ways we "listen"?

There are many different ways of listening ranging from approaches that leave the speaker feeling frustrated, insignificant and unheard, to those that acknowledge the speaker, leaving him feeling understood, respected, and clearer about what he is expressing. As we examine a few of these, ask yourself, "What kind of listener am I? Do I have some habits that are not helpful?"

- ◆ **The "pretend" listener** (Nods, smiles, says "uh huh", but is not really listening. *Appearing* to be attentive rather than actually being there for the speaker.)
- ◆ **The "initial" listener** (Hears the first few words and then starts formulating a response or rehearsing. This listener is more focused on her own needs than on understanding the other person. This kind of listening is characterized by impatience and usually precedes interrupting. The listener wants the floor.)
- ◆ **The "disregard and proceed" listener** (Akin to the initial listener, this listener allows the speaker to finish a sentence or two, but does not really *acknowledge* what the speaker has shared and, instead, rushes in to share his own experiences or feelings. The focus of attention is shifted to the "listener".)
- ◆ **The "distracted" listener** (Has good intentions but gets distracted along the way. Includes taking cell calls, looking at the computer, paying attention to other things that are going on, daydreaming, or being unable to stay focused.)
- ◆ **The "active" listener** (Pays close attention to what is being said with particular emphasis on content. Engaged, asks questions, clarifies, and is respectful and interested. Uses reflection and occasional paraphrasing to reach understanding.)
- ◆ **The "deep" listener** (Rare indeed, this listener seeks to *understand the person behind the words*. Listens between the lines, attends to emotions, watches body language, and registers needs, wants, and values. Absorbed and fully present; free of impatience, judgment, or boredom.)

Not every exchange requires the same level of listening. If the speaker is talking about something that is not too emotionally laden, active listening may be the best choice. It takes less time and energy and is often focused on problem solving. If the speaker has

underlying issues or is distressed or even very excited, deep listening will convey more of a sense of being "heard" and fully understood.

Listening Tips:

- ◆ **Give your undivided attention.** Put down your phone, turn away from your paperwork or computer, focus, and do not allow yourself to daydream or become bored.
- ◆ **Demonstrate that you are listening.** No fidgeting, looking away, or glancing at your watch. Maintain good eye contact, nod occasionally, and encourage the speaker by asking open-ended questions such as "What is that *like* for you?"
- ◆ **Be quiet!** Give the speaker space to talk. Don't interrupt, shift to your own stories, or hurry the person.
- ◆ **Clarify.** Reflect back, *occasionally* paraphrase, restate for understanding.
- ◆ **Physically place yourself on the same level as the speaker** . . . standing over someone is intimidating.
- ◆ **Subtly mirror volume and pace** (if the speaker is talking softly and slowly, lower your voice and slow down to match his pace.) This conveys empathy and builds rapport.
- ◆ **"Now is not a good time".** Better to reschedule than to listen impatiently or halfheartedly.
- ◆ **Don't rush to agree or disagree.** Your initial goal is to *understand*.

What a good listener does is pay *real* attention to the speaker, ask questions that encourage the speaker to say more, clarify for understanding, and demonstrate that the listener values not only the message, but the messenger.

Next month we will talk about Supervisory Referrals. In the meantime, call LifeSolutions if you would like to learn more about listening skills.

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