



Can you hear me now?

"My staff gave me some tough marks," Judy was looking over the results of a recent employee opinion survey. "They say I don't listen very well. I know what they must be experiencing. When I'm on the run, it's hard for me to pay attention. Sometimes I let my own opinions get in the way! Can you give me some pointers on how to improve?"

"You're not alone, Judy" I replied. "Listening skills are something that we often take for granted. We do it every day, so we think we must be good at it! When we're conducting manager-training sessions, we cover some tips that might help you."

LISTEN ATTENTIVELY WITHOUT INTERRUPTING. This seems so basic, but it's something that we need to remember. Often, we are so busy evaluating and judging what's being said, or preparing our own rebuttal, that we don't concentrate on what the person is saying. We need to give up judging, expecting, assuming that we already know what the speaker will say.

Judy nodded. "I need to slow down and stay present — really hear the message and try to understand why it's important to the speaker. I've also noticed that I need to pay attention with my eyes *and* with my ears." I agreed. Body language may convey additional meaning to the conversation. What is the speaker's tone of voice? What's their facial expression? Do they look tense? Relaxed?

MAKE A CONSCIOUS CHOICE ABOUT YOUR RESPONSE. Words, issues, situations, and/or personalities trigger us emotionally. When our "hot buttons" are activated, we may tune out, pre-judge messages or even dismiss the messenger. If you want to be effective at listening, you need to control your emotional "hot buttons" and think before you reply.

"I used to have trouble with this one," Judy explained, "until I learned a trick to buy time. Now when I feel the heat rising, I reply 'That's interesting, tell me more about it.' This gives me the few minutes I need to get myself calmed down. It also gives me more information and sometimes what I hear takes away my concerns."

ACKNOWLEDGE THE OTHER PERSON'S FEELINGS. It's important to listen for the speaker's emotional meaning and the subject matter content of the message. This can be tough in a business setting. We want everything to run smoothly and have everyone "get along," "be calm," "put a smile on." However, we're all human beings, and part of being human is to have feelings. If you want people to feel heard, you must make it okay for them to express their feelings, even when they are angry or frustrated.

"How do you do this?" Judy asked. "There are several things that are effective," I noted. "When you want to convey a positive, encouraging attitude, respond with a smile, nod, or a word of acknowledgment as the speaker is talking. You could also use empathy and say something to let speakers know that you recognize their feelings, such as 'It sounds like you're concerned about this' or 'It sounds like this situation is frustrating for you.'"

ASK OBJECTIVE QUESTIONS FOR CLARIFICATION. As a listener, you'll want to evaluate the message, but not prematurely. Once you start evaluating, you'll be formulating your own ideas instead of listening to the speaker. However, when the speaker is done, you can begin to clarify what you've heard to be sure you understand and can base your response and opinion on all available information.

"I usually make assumptions about what people are saying," Judy admitted. "I think I know most everything that's going on, and I'm often rushing to get on to the next thing. I just want to 'cut to the chase' in the conversation!"

"You're not alone," I acknowledged. "But asking questions, especially open-ended questions, encourages information-sharing and new ideas. It also lets the speaker know that you are interested in understanding what they're saying. You might ask: 'Could you clarify this for me?' or 'Could you please repeat that?' or 'I'm not sure I've got it. Could we go over that again?'"

TRY TO SEE THE OTHER PERSON'S VIEWPOINT. This is a tough one, especially when we have a strong opinion about the subject under discussion. Try to stand in their shoes without making value judgments. Ask yourself what their needs are in this situation. Why are they reacting this way? You might ask them: "How did this affect you?" or "What do you need?" or "What would you like to see happen here?" or "What approach would you take?"

Judy was taking notes. "When employees bring problems to my attention, I get so wrapped up in solving them that I often don't take time to understand it from their perspective. I can see how asking these questions could have an added benefit of helping them come up with the solution themselves!"

"Listening to problems is a real challenge," I agreed. We discussed the patience it takes to problem-solve effectively. The best solutions aren't always the immediate ones. It's important to be patient with the other person and yourself. If a solution can't be reached then, schedule another time to meet and take time to think about the situation.

EXPRESS YOUR VIEWPOINT. Good listening means giving the speaker an appropriate response, verbally and/or non-verbally. "I thought you'd never get here!" Judy exclaimed. "This is my favorite part of any conversation!" I smiled. Judy is a very persuasive speaker, and we talked about the fine art

of presenting your opinion without making the other person defensive or forcing them to prove their point.

Judy became thoughtful, "What can I say if I don't agree with their concerns? I don't want to shut down conversation, or their suggestions, but I can't always do what employees want me to do."

"Good listening doesn't mean agreeing with what the speaker is saying. However, it does require acknowledgement of the speaker's opinions, and a response that let's them know you've considered what they had to say. You might reply: 'I appreciate your feedback; I'll take that into consideration next time,' or 'Thanks for your perspective. Here's what I'm thinking.' It's helpful to explain why you feel the way you do. A reasonable explanation can often diffuse an emotional issue. You may have information that the speaker does not, and sharing it might help them to understand your conclusions."

Judy smiled. "I've got lots of good ideas to work with here. I can't wait to practice them with my staff!"

Six weeks later, Judy called again. "I asked for more feedback from my staff," She sounded excited and happy. "They've given me a 'thumbs up' in communication. They feel that I'm listening to them now and that I'm concerned about what they have to say. For my part, I'm hearing ideas and solutions from them that I've never heard before. It's like we're a real team! I'm so glad I listened to their feedback in the first place."

I smiled. "You know Judy; I came across a quotation from Winston Churchill the other day that really sums it up for me. He said, 'Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.'" ■

Anne Heron is a Senior Associate with The Personnel Perspective, a human resources consulting, training, and recruiting firm in Santa Rosa, CA. Anne has over 25 years of management and HR experience. You can contact her at 707/576-7653.