

The Power of Not Listening

In a society where we are either talking or getting ready to talk, listening has fallen by the wayside

By Rob Kramer

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As a manager, I would often joke that my job was to attend meetings and to wait for people to interrupt me. Then, after 5:00 pm I could actually do my work. The world is full of distractions, full of information, full of media messaging, full of traffic and errands and waiting in lines and responsibilities. The challenge comes in how we as leaders respond amidst the chaos of our daily routines. A secret weapon to combat the endless realm of overwhelms and distraction comes from a source we oftentimes forget has much value, especially at work.

Peter Drucker, the father of modern management, has stated in multiple ways that the most important leadership competency is listening. In many ways, it is also the least developed. In a society today where we are either talking or getting ready to talk, listening has fallen by the wayside. It has become the fool's strategy who chose to listen rather than push hard to make their voice heard amidst the chatter.

It is in the not listening, however, where the greatest challenges often arise. Have you ever experienced talking to someone in the hallway while they are typing on their phone? Ever attended a meeting where people are doing the "Crackberry prayer" (lowering their head from the meeting to focus on answering emails under the table)? Ever tried to talk to someone while they are also typing at their computer? Ever been in a meeting in someone's office and they turn away and answer the desk phone when it rings?

What is your experience of being on the receiving end of these behaviors?

When we experience a person as distracted, multi-tasking, or otherwise not giving their full attention, our response, more than ninety percent of the time, is negative. We may feel ignored, marginalized, or stupid. We may label the person as uncaring, unhelpful, or downright mean. These impressions do not take long to form. In as little as thirty seconds, we take in the experience and label it.

This could explain why Drucker identified listening as the most crucial of the leadership competencies. The damage created by *not* listening well, and not *demonstrating* we are

listening well, is huge. Fundamental and foundational rapport, respect, and trust all have their roots in quality, attentive listening.

A second bi-product to not listening is the fallout to the listener. Partial listening yields partial understanding. One main reason a nine hour day becomes an eleven hour day is due to failures in listening. This is tricky because our days are filled with meetings and constant interruptions. It becomes harder to focus and listen well as the day progresses, as schedules collide with "fires" and our brains become overloaded with new input, new demands, and new problems. Yet this is precisely what creates the longer days. During the chaos, as our listening wanes, it results in our need to clean up our mistakes, to backtrack and clarify information we did not fully take in, or we say yes to work we otherwise might not have if we were more focused. Ever find yourself spending an extra twenty minutes dealing with someone else's issue? It is the compilation of these little moments that extend our day, increase our stress, and compound problems.



Quality, conscious listening occurs when we make a different choice -- a choice to face every interaction and every engagement as a unique moment that deserves our attention. When we listen better, our interactions improve. We more clearly hear what is needed from us; we respond with more intention; and we maintain healthier boundaries. Our relationships improve; the need to backtrack and perform clean-ups is reduced; and our days may not be as long as they used to be.

It sure would be nice to get back to a routine when we were home earlier, had more time with our family, our friends or for ourselves. It would also be incredibly helpful to have clear expectations with staff, quality relationships with coworkers and a mind as fresh at the end of the day as at the beginning.

Who knew? All this, by returning to embrace a simple yet powerful tool; one we've always had available but often forget to use. I hope you didn't miss an opportunity to listen while reading this article.

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