

Listening, the Doorway to Employee Commitment

The skill of listening is every executive, manager and supervisor's doorway to employee commitment. But to understand the true power of listening we must first understand "putting in our two cents", a stimulant known to cause brainstorming.

I have heard many, many employees in the midst of a bad workplace say that all they want is for someone to listen to them once in awhile. They state how great that would be even if little is ever done. That's real hunger! The obvious question is why should they turn on their brainpower if no one will listen? Why try to be creative to make improvements for the sake of productivity or quality, or make suggestions to reduce cost if no one will listen? The answer is obvious: it would be dumb to try if no one will listen. "Why make an effort if they don't care what I think?"

The sad thing is that many bosses, high and low, are so busy giving direction and orders that they fail to listen, and subordinates decide to leave their brainpower at the door as they enter the workplace. People with suggestions are viewed as troublemakers or complainers. In this mode, no one can participate, be involved or be committed. They can only be a number or a pawn, and they think that no one cares. In this state, the boss loses the employee's brainpower, the source of their creativity, innovation, productivity, motivation and commitment.

- WHAT IF people could put in their two cents any time they chose and management would always listen and get back to them with possible actions and/or answers?
- WHAT IF they were allowed to add their two cents again on this response and the process would continue until management had decided on a course which seemed reasonable to everyone?
- WHAT IF management only changed things after conducting this dialogue?
- WHAT IF in response to questions, our bosses were forthright and provided the real answers and their whys?



- WHAT IF management took this one step further and went out of its way to provide information relevant to job, company and anything which might affect or be of interest to each employee?
- WHAT IF the working level could get in on the ground level with work plans and policies before they turned to cement, get in on what work and how it was to be done before starting?

Would you like to work in such a workplace?

Understanding the process of gaining commitment

To be committed to the work, one must have ownership of the work. To have ownership of the work, one must be able to influence what goes on in the workplace associated with that work. And to influence the workplace, one must be heard and reasonably answered by bosses. So when management does the WHAT IFs above, subordinates are in reasonable control and will develop a sense of ownership of their workplace. When managers take no action which might affect employees without their concurrence or at least giving them sufficient time to comment, and share with employees all knowledge about the company which might be of interest to employees, applying their brainpower to every aspect of the workplace becomes a worthwhile effort for employees. They are suddenly released to their own motivations and start using 100% of their brainpower on the work.

In this mode of ownership, the boss provides information and assistance so that each subordinate can take charge of their own work rather than sit around and wait for orders. In this

mode, the boss allows people to resolve issues on their merits because he/she knows that authoritative declarations are self-defeating and destructive of the very commitment that gives birth to innovation and productivity.

Over-direction always gets in the way of ownership and pre-empts commitment. Orders are probably the weakest action a boss can take because employees consider orders to be demeaning and disrespectful, clear evidence that the boss does not consider them valued team members. In an emergency, orders may be warranted, but for all else the rule should be "do what you think is right unless the boss can logically convince you that a better way exists".

Orders are a "cart before the horse" error common to many management techniques and styles. The most basic reason may be that bosses have no faith or trust. They don't trust juniors to arrive at reasonable conclusions and thus deny them information, rationales, value standards and listening. These bosses are greatly limiting their own success. Superior leadership is listening to your subordinates to receive their valuable input, and it is rewarded by their trust in you and their commitment to the job. It has significant positive bottom line implications to your company!

Problems and difficulties occur in any work group with a predetermined regularity dictated by the difficulty of the work and the extent to which employees are committed to the work. The higher the difficulty and the lower the extent of commitment, the greater the number of problems and the longer each remains before resolution. Highly committed workers continually strive for excellence. The more committed they are, the more they act to find resolutions to problems. The less committed, the less energy and thought they devote to correction and the more time they spend causing problems.

Some details about the process of listening

Listening requires plenty of practice and concentration. You are listening to your people and since they are the ones who do your work, they are very important people. So listen with 100% of your attention. Don't be distracted or be

thinking about how you will respond or whether the moon was blue last night. Listen very intently and carefully, and to keep yourself focused on listening take notes to record what was said. Pay particular attention to tone of voice and body language since these may send signals more important than the words spoken. Ensure that your own body language and tone of voice clearly send the message that you really care about what this person is saying.

When the person stops talking, start asking questions to flesh out what you have heard. It is very normal for people to give you less than half of what they know about the problem, so your respectful and caring questions are essential to getting a full picture. Once you understand all that they know about the problem, ask them if they might have a suggested solution or know someone who might.

Don't try to give a quick answer! Unless you have an answer that you know meets very high standards, show great respect by being willing to go away to consider the issue. Then return in a timely fashion with what you think may resolve the issue and allow the person to comment on your solution before taking any actions. Gaining employee commitment is far more important than solving individual workplace problems, and besides, committed employees will on their own solve many, many more problems than you can.

The Bottom line

Listening is your most important leadership skill. How better to lead people to treat customers and each other in the most outstanding way. And think what you could accomplish if suddenly your own brainpower and commitment was multiplied by the number of employees you have.

About the author:

Bennet Simonton managed people for 34 years. He effected four successful turnarounds including a nuclear-powered cruiser and a 1300 person unionised group in New York City. Ben provides the "whats", "whys" and "how tos" of the leadership skills he used to effect these turnarounds in the book "Leading People to be Highly Motivated and Committed".