

SHUT UP AND LISTEN!

By Richard Citrin and Michael Couch

Silent is an anagram of listen and as a leading indicator, the more we can keep our mouths shut and pay attention to what others are saying, the more informed and wiser we become as leaders.

Consider these two scenarios:

1. A major issue has arisen with a customer and you head over to your boss' office to discuss it with him. As you begin to describe the situation, he hears an alert from his phone and reaches over to check it out. While you continue to describe the situation, he types out a response to the inquiry and tells you to go on. He continues to check on some other email and when you finish describing the situation and look for a response, he jumps into advice mode, suggests a few ideas and tells you that his ideas will solve the problem. You leave not feeling any better and maybe a bit worse than when you entered.

2. After entering your boss' office, he hears an alert from his phone and excuses himself while he turns it onto silent mode. He takes out a pad and begins to take some notes while you describe the situation. While you share your concerns, he nods understanding and waits for a pause in your description to ask an occasional clarifying question. As you finish your telling of this tale, he asks what you've considered as options and you realize that the three ideas you've been floating around in your mind

become much clearer and the best choice has bubbled to the surface. You share that idea with him and suggest that you know how you want to proceed. He nods in agreement and as you thank him for his time, he counterpoints that you knew the answer all the time; you just needed to have someone listen to you to help you bring it out.

Listening is a powerful tool and one of the easiest ones we can use as leaders. Among the many benefits gained by being a good listener are:

- **Gathering "Free Information":** People, whether they be employees, peers or customers want to share their most important information with us. We don't have to ask invasive or probing questions but by listening and building on their comments we can find out a lot we didn't know. We call that "free information."
- **Demonstrating respect:** When people feel listened to, you are conveying to them that you think their ideas and presence bring value. The more you convey that sense of belief in what they do, the more you empower them to take independent and effective actions.
- **More success:** Effective listening leads to better data gathering and improved decision-making. In many discussions, people speculate around potential actions and will often offer an "I think" solution to a particular problem. By being a good listener, you catch those kinds of comments and push your team from just thinking to knowing by making certain they have the data they need to be effective.

Building the competency of listening as a leader is not particularly difficult and, in fact, listening is considered to be one of the easier skills to learn. Here are five ways to strengthen your listening:

1. Make a commitment: Changing from being a talker to a listener is not difficult but does require a commitment to certain actions. You can start as we described in the scenario above by putting distractions aside and approaching your conversations with others from a place of respect, interest and even curiosity.

2. Practice "not interrupting": Sit on your hands or put tape across your mouth so you refrain from interrupting others until they've finished. You can count to 2 after what seems like an appropriate pause to begin sharing your thoughts and when you do...

3. Reflect and Restate: Validating what the other person says is what takes your conversation to the next level. Using phrases like, "I hear you saying," or "I understand that your concerns are about..." validate their issues and says to them "I understand and value what you are saying."

4. Use the "Echo" technique: The echo technique means that you repeat the last word in a sentence encouraging your colleague to continue their thought. For example, if your speaker says, "I'm concerned that the team is not responding to this project with urgency," and you respond "urgency?", then they will be encouraged to continue on "yes, they don't seem to understand that this speed is critical to success." From there you can continue to drill deeper to make certain you understand the key issues and that your colleague has to explain their key thoughts.

5. Summarize: If you find that you cannot remember everything that was said, you were probably not doing a good job of listening. Taking notes is a good way to make sure you've captured all the key ideas and reflecting back with summary comments ensures that everything has been heard and honored.

There are many keys to being a successful leader but they all begin by understanding what others are saying. You'll be amazed by how much your leadership stock goes up when people know you are listening to what they are saying. Go ahead and see if you can be a better listener today.

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