

Being Heard

When Cary wrote this paper as my guest leader, I was taken by its insight and beauty. I believe that listening to appreciate what another person is saying and feeling is absolutely key to our success in leadership in today's business world, and it will only become more essential as our organizational cultures continue to evolve with more women in key leadership positions, and as our Gen Y continues to grow in magnitude within our workforces.

When is the last time you were truly heard? Do you know what that experience would feel like? Being heard is like being in love the first time, in that you don't know what it is until you experience it.

Like a child who doesn't grasp the depth of a parent's love or a teenager who mistakes passion for intimacy, we don't even have a gauge for being heard until we experience it. But once we know what it is like to be heard, all other forms of communication pale in comparison.

I wonder if the recent emphasis on active listening really does justice to this experience? My observation is that we have defined active listening as an ability, while neglecting to define its intended impact. As such, we've done a disservice to the leadership community by suggesting that the simple ability to focus on another's words, refrain from multitasking, and ignore distracting thoughts encapsulates active listening.

May I propose that active listening is evidenced not by what we do but by our impact on others -- on their experience of being heard? And if this is so, then active listening requires so much more than self-monitoring and management -- it requires a genuine curiosity for the other person, an ability to tap into intuition without being drawn into assumptions, and a heart and mind fully invested in the other's agenda regardless of our own.

These characteristics of active listening lie much deeper than skills - they reside in our purpose and intention. Perhaps this is why training courses present active listening as nothing more than surface level behaviors while leadership coaches tap into the purpose and intention that differentiates being listened to from being heard.

It is said that being listened to is so close to being loved that most people can't tell the difference (David Oxberg). What a litmus test. Do others feel loved by the way you listen to them? If anything less than loved, what's missing in your listening?

I heartily agree with Cary's message here. People want to be heard and to feel that their ideas matter. We must ask them for their ideas and advice and their feedback. And then we must listen appreciatively. What are they telling me? What are they not expressing, and what are they feeling? Their emotions are part of their message.

One client I work with, an extremely intelligent, caring and very busy executive, had the habit of jumping to judgment, often before people were done explaining their message. In fact, he often finished their sentences.

Thankfully, his company invested in him and other senior executives by offering 360 assessments. He was shocked to learn that the perception of people who reported to him was that he was self-absorbed and that he came first, not his team.

But that is not really him, at all. He does care deeply about his people. He truly is all about the team. His poor listening is a blind spot. He was totally unaware of his habit and the effect it had on others.

Let's face it, most of our habits are ingrained, maybe something we've been doing a certain way for twenty or thirty years, maybe forever, and we don't even realize it.

The fact it that almost everybody thinks they are a good listener, and most of us are not. Women tend to be better listeners than men, though some are not, and some men are very intentional and effective as listeners.

I certainly hope that by bringing this message to a business context I have not debased Cary's lovely message about being heard. I just hope we all realize that our intentional and appreciative listening is a gift to others that will also help us become a much better leader. In my experience, people are much happier, more motivated, and they work harder for someone who shows appreciation by truly listening to them and asking what they think and why.

Thank you, Cary, for allowing me to expand on your beautiful message to help us deepen an essential leadership skill, our ability to listen to understand, learn and appreciate.

About The Authors



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