



Episode 017

Did I Get What You Said?

Introduction

One characteristic of highly effective leaders of large teams is they know how to bring the team along. They know how to bring out the unique contributions from their teams. Part of that requires us leaders to listen effectively.

James 1:19 (NIV)

My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry...

Many successful leaders are effective communicators, able to convey their hearts and vision in a compelling fashion. But not all are effective listeners. Being an effective communicator does not necessarily imply one is also an effective listener. Quite a different set of skills and attitudes are required.

Effective listening skills are also crucial in many areas such as in pastoral care, conflict management, relationships and so forth. For that reason, it is crucial for leaders to grasp the importance of gaining good, effective listening skills. Over my 3 decades of leadership, I have seen the impact of inadequate listening skills undermine leaders' effectiveness. Conversely, seen well developed listening skills lift a leader's influence. Thus, effective listening skills are neglected to a leader's own detriment.

This podcast will examine foundational aspects that lead to effective listening skills. It complements my previous podcast on [Did You Get What I Said? \(Effective Leadership Communication\)](#).



The Importance Of Listening Well

1 Our team feels valued

When we actively listen to our team, they feel that we appreciate their input. That their input is important to us. This builds a deeper sense of teamwork. A sense that they are a valuable part of the team.

2 There is greater ownership

People tend to own decisions more when they have had a part in working towards it. Also, they tend to understand it better. The bigger the team, the bigger the organisation, the more critical it is that people own the decisions. Because we cannot manage them so tightly.

3 We get better contributions and outcomes

When the team feel that their contributions are valued, they will invest more into their contributions. This usually leads to better quality of contributions. When there are good contributions, whether it be ideas, opinions, feedback – it helps us reach better approaches and solutions. It leads to better overall outcomes.

On the other hand, if the team feels their contributions are undervalued, they will invest less effort in their contributions. Ultimately, the team suffers.

4 We gain more respect as leaders

When we respect the opinions, perspectives and thoughts of others, they feel respected. When we respect others, they tend to respect us in return. Further, when we help the team to bring out better contributions and get better outcomes, it improves our credibility.

5 It enables us to be more impacting

Sometimes good listening only listens, and ministers best by keeping quiet. However, good listening also provides us insights to minister words of grace precisely to the place where it is needed. As Bonhoeffer writes, “We should listen with the ears of God that we may speak the Word of God.”



Proverbs 18:13 tells us that the fool “gives an answer before he hears”. But the wise person tries to resist defensiveness, to listen from a nonjudgmental stance, training himself not to formulate conclusive opinions or responses until the full update is on the table and enough of the story has been heard. Then when we do speak or act, it will be wiser. Because we have gained a better understanding of the context, situation, facts etc.

What Hinders Us From Listening?

1 Greater concern for our agenda than the person

When we enter conversations with our own agenda as a much higher priority over the person, we tend to view what the person says through the filter of our agenda. Inevitably, we tend to hear what aligns with our agenda and disregard what does not. If we do this regularly, people will regard us as having selective hearing. Promote the agenda, demote the person.

2 Pride in our perspective over theirs

A danger lurks for successful people. We may begin to develop a pride that our perspectives are better than those of others, in the areas of our success. Hence, when others present a view that is different or opposed to us, we may be motivated to debate and demolish the other’s view.

With such an attitude, we listen for weak points in order that we may dismiss it. We focus on the flaws and forget the person. Our attention is on mounting the argument and we fail to hear the person’s heart. Win the argument, lose the person.

3 Stereotyping instead of personalising

In an attempt to simplify our analysis, leaders have to categorise matters, situations and even people in some kind of framework. The danger is when our framework is too rigid, narrow or inadequate. We may stereotype or label a person inappropriately or incorrectly. It is even worse when we speak it out prematurely. It tends to come across judgmental.



When a person is perceived to over-manage or dominate, the label “spirit of Jezebel” is sometimes used which has a strong negative connotation. When a person does not do his work as he should, it is easy to fall back to labelling the person as “lazy”. When a person becomes less committed to spiritual work, some may too quickly label a person as “backsliding”.

Such labels are not helpful especially when it hinders us from a more nuanced understanding of a person. It becomes a filter that hinders our listening to a person. If expressed unwisely, it repels the person as it appears judgmental, harsh and one-dimensional in its assessment. Reinforce the stereotype, repel the person.

4 Emotions over objectivity

Objective, effective listening is obstructed by elevated emotions. Highly sanguine emotions may give us an overly positive perception of a conversation. We may overlook the more sober issues being raised. On the other hand, highly negative emotions will negatively colour our perception of the conversation. We begin to put a dark tone on every aspect of the conversation, over-exaggerating the negative elements. Elevated emotions colour our perceptions. Elevate your emotions, lower your objectivity.

5 Critical attitude

As a leader we often desire people to be a better version of themselves. However, the unhelpful way to go about this is to be critical. Where we are highly observant of faults and make it our holy goal to point them out to them. Instead of listening emphatically, we search for faults. Instead of projecting empathy, we project judgment. Criticising tends to achieve a number of things. It gets people into a defensive mode, feeling smaller and ultimately, pushing them away.



Some Fundamental Attitudes And Pointers To Listening Well

1 Value the person

When we value the person and their thoughts, we will listen because we want to. We will not dismiss their thoughts out of hand.

Philippians 2:3-4 (NIV)

3 Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. 4 Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

I do have to qualify this because some people talk incessantly and possibly say things which are not valuable. We need wisdom to know who to give the time and energy to. But today I am focussed on your teammates.

If we are too focussed on our own ideas and thoughts and fail to listen to the team, it means we don't value the team's input adequately. This will become obvious eventually, that we have not been listening properly. It will frustrate the team.

2 Be patient

Sometimes we think we know where the speaker is going already and we start formulating our response without hearing them completely. Sometimes we are in a rush with something else and we kind of half-listen. We may be too preoccupied with our own matters and lose patience with the speaker. We may start cutting them off.

When we have a tendency to be quick to speak, it takes Spirit-powered patience to not only be quick to hear, but to keep on hearing. Especially as some speakers waffle like crazy and don't seem to make clear the point. In such cases, it needs some advanced skills to guide the conversation back to the main point. Simple comments and questions can nudge the conversation back on track like, "You were saying about ...?", "So what is the point you are trying to make on ...?", "I am trying to understand what you meant when you said...?", "Is this relevant?"



3 Be present

To be present means to be actively involved in the conversation. We may be physically there, but our attention could be divided. It is very off-putting, especially when we missed parts of the conversation. And we later make remarks etc that have already been covered. Or we fail to remember at all parts of the discussion because we were not “present”.

Another problem today is the continual multi-tasking. That is not helpful to being present. At times, we need to put away our devices if it is distracting us. Good listening often means silencing the smartphone. That is why I rarely look into my smartphone while in a conversation. It helps that I only switch on mobile data intermittently and my notifications are normally on silent.

It takes effort to be attentive and present. We should aim to be externally relaxed and internally active. It takes energy to block out the distractions that keep bombarding us and the peripheral things that keep streaming into our consciousness. I have noticed that after some conversations, I am literally tired. Not necessarily because the conversation was intense but because I had to work hard at giving them my full attention.

A key way to remain attentive is to intentionally interact in the conversation. If we are too passive in the conversation, the danger is our minds may wander off. A lower level of attending to the conversation is through simple affirmation. "Wow. Right On. Couldn't say it better. For sure. Amen. Yeah." Or the more neutral "I see. I get it. Uh huh. Okayyy. Mmmm." It signals our attentiveness.

4 Be active

To be active means we are intentionally involved in the conversation. We take the trouble to get clarity of what others are saying, in the important points. How? We restate or rephrase what they said. By stating back what we heard the speaker say gives the speaker the opportunity to adjust or elaborate on what was said for better clarity. We could offer clarifying questions. “Did you mean this?” “Was that your point?” We could ask perceptive questions. “What made you think that?”, “Why did you think that was so important?”, “How did you reach that conclusion?”



It is the fool who “takes no pleasure in understanding, but only in expressing his opinion” (Proverbs 18:2 ESV), and thus “gives an answer before he hears” (Proverbs 18:13 ESV). “The purpose in a man’s heart is like deep water,” says Proverbs 20:5 (ESV), “but a man of understanding will draw it out.”

Good listening asks perceptive, open-ended questions that don’t tee up yes-no answers, but gently peels the onion and probe beneath the surface. It watches carefully for nonverbal communication, but doesn’t interrogate and pry into details the speaker doesn’t want to share, but meekly draws them out and helps point the speaker to fresh perspectives through thoughtful, but genuine, questions.

5 Be aware of deeper issues

Most do not communicate very well with words what they are thinking or feeling. Many lack the vocabulary or the self-awareness to adequately articulate what is going on inside. Many lack the communication skills to bring across what they seek to communicate clearly. Further, many tend to articulate only the tip of an iceberg and not present the rest of the related issues.

This is the reason why counsellors often require many sessions to get to the root of one personal issue. Consequently, it would be a mistake to simply take people’s words at face value. It takes an effective and diligent listener to draw out deeper issues. If we care enough about the person, we would be willing to invest the time to do so.



Conclusion

Effective listening is a crucial skill for leaders who seek to be working effectively with people. Some key benefits include helping our team feel valued, fostering a greater sense of ownership leading to better contributions and outcomes. It also helps us gain more respect as leaders and be more impactful in what we do.

I pointed 5 attitudes that hinder effective listening. These are:

1. A greater concern for our own agenda over others
2. Pride over our perspectives
3. Stereotyping instead of personalising
4. Emotions over objectivity
5. A critical attitude.

Most importantly, we should cultivate the following 5 attitudes:

1. Value the person
2. Be patient
3. Be present
4. Be active in listening
5. Be aware of deeper issues

I trust that these insights will help you improve as a listening leader.



Discussion Questions

These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. In what ways do you think that listening well would help your leadership and team?
2. Are there some elements that are hindering you from listening well? In what way?

Actionable Steps

Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. Talk to your team and ask them to feedback how you can improve your listening.
2. Are there 1 or 2 attitudes that you need to change to improve your listening? Consider some actionable steps to change your attitudes. This may include:
 - Being more self-aware of your unhelpful attitudes as it surfaces during conversations.
3. Having listened to our team and considering the points raised to improve listening, identify 1 or 2 specific areas for improvement. Consider the following:
 - Are there some specific skills that you need to work on to improve your listening skills?
 - How scenarios can you use to practice the new skills?





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