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Overcome Barriers to Listen Better

Research shows that we tend to retain less than 10% of what we hear in a face to face conversation. When we are multitasking, we remember even less.

To upgrade your listening skills, identify potential traps and take steps to avoid them:

- **Jumping ahead.** Beware of concentrating on what you want to say next rather than focusing on the speaker's remarks in the here-and-now. Mentally skipping ahead to what you intend to say can prevent you from capturing critical information that will help you respond appropriately.
- **Seeking agreement**—and nothing more. It's easy to listen when you agree with what you hear. But the real challenge is tuning in once you realize the speaker is presenting an argument that you find objectionable. If you stop listening to an opposing view, you limit your ability to learn from others. Instead, welcome comments that are not aligned with your opinions or experiences. Tell yourself, "I want to understand this different perspective."
- **Rushing to play fixer.** Your good intentions to help others solve their problems can lead you astray. If you interrupt to offer a solution, you might alienate people who aren't ready to accept your advice. A smarter strategy is to wait until speakers finish making their point. They may need to vent, tell a story or reveal their underlying concern before they are able to embrace your solution. Listen patiently until you are sure they've covered everything on their plate.
- **Applying your biases.** Listeners often filter what they hear through their own screens. If you bring certain biases or assumptions to a conversation, you might miss the real message. Example: A senior executive might meet an entry-level clerk and think, "This person isn't too bright." If you conclude that someone has little to offer, you'll listen half-heartedly.



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Thinking for Success in Leadership

Success in leadership begins with how a leader thinks. There is a direct connection between how a manager or supervisor thinks, and how they approach dealing with an employee or situation.



For example, if a supervisor thinks optimistically about an employee's performance problem (i.e., "with some additional support and training, this employee will probably improve their performance"), they will tend to spend time providing the kind of guidance and training that it takes to bring about the desired improvement in performance. On the other hand, if the supervisor thinks negatively about the employee in question (i.e., "this employee is not a productive contributor"), they will likely not put in the time and effort it takes to bring about improvement.

The importance of developing a more positive attitude

Our attitude consists of how we think, how we feel, and the behavior that results. Like in the example above, a supervisor who practices positive thinking (i.e., "our problems are temporary", "if we put in enough effort, our performance will improve", etc.), will typically feel encouraged and motivated. These positive thoughts and feelings will help to drive constructive management behavior that can improve outcomes.

Responding positively to challenging circumstances is important

As we all know, supervisors often face difficult situations. It comes with the territory. Although we can't change many of the circumstances that confront us (i.e., budgetary constraints, lack of upper management support, etc.), we can control how we think and respond to them. By choosing to think more constructively about our circumstances - even the most challenging ones - we'll improve our resilience and maintain the motivation it takes to lead our team effectively.

Staying upbeat also improves staff morale

Supervisors who stay upbeat in challenging circumstances can also have a significant positive impact on the morale of their team. Even if nothing specific can be done to change a negative situation, a supervisor can provide encouragement by committing continued support to their staff (i.e., "I'm here for you" or "we'll get through this together"). This type of support can help many of the individual team members to stay positive and productive during difficult times.

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Ask Your EAP!

The following are answers to common questions supervisors have regarding employee issues and making EAP referrals. As always, if you have specific questions about referring an employee or managing a workgroup issue, feel free to make a confidential call to the EAP for a management consultation.

Q. Can you recommend a quick conflict resolution strategy that supervisors can use? Is there such a “formula” – an A, B, C approach? Then, if that doesn’t work, we can refer to the EAP.

A. There are thousands of books on conflict resolution, each with variations on the subject. This shows the difficulty in a cookie-cutter approach. However, where conflict resolution between two employees exists, changing the dynamic to elicit more cooperation between warring parties can help speed a resolution; for example, insistence by management that the conflict be resolved and having participants face some sort of penalty or consequence for failure to do so. Instantly the dynamic is one of cooperation, with the conflict itself, not the other party’s perceived unreasonable demands, the bigger problem. If your organization is interested in using a mediator to resolve an ongoing conflict within the workplace, statewide mediation services are available.

Q. My employee has no job issues, but I am fearful of his return to absenteeism problems and angry mood swings everyone was seeing two weeks ago. Is it too late to make a supervisor referral to the EAP? Also, this same pattern happened about six months ago.

A. Formally referring an employee to EAP is based on work performance issues. If you anticipate that problems will return then consider consulting with the EAP. What you say and how you say it are also important, so consider discussing with the EAP an effective delivery, if work performance issues surface again. The EA professional can also help you identify additional key points to include in your constructive confrontation. A referral to the EAP is important because serious personal issues may underlie this type of behavior-performance pattern.

Q. I often see references to the importance of “being yourself,” “being authentic,” and “being a real person” as a skill for supervisors. What does that actually mean? Does it mean being a certain way or making sure that you do not act in a certain way?

A. Being yourself, being genuine, being “real,” not pretending to be perfect, or learning how to be more available emotionally to employees all refer to the same thing: “authentic leadership.” This is a dynamic in supervision, the goal of which is to increase productivity of workers by establishing optimal relationships with them. The idea is to be professional but at the same time to balance this with approachability, friendliness, and openness. The opposite of this is a supervisor who is physically and/or emotionally remote, detached, and appears unapproachable to his or her employees. This balance is a learned skill. Supervisors vary widely in their ability to do it. Being authentic is not just being nonthreatening to employees. It is being purposeful so that employees can feel open in talking with their supervisor so that their strengths and weaknesses, personality, and working style can be better understood. This in turn allows the supervisor to help an employee maximize his or her potential. This improved relationship with the supervisor facilitates the workers also putting forth more effort.

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