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Smart Listening

Chief Executive magazine listed a flexible willingness to listen as one of the six key personality traits for an effective CEO. “Flexible willingness to listen” is an interesting phrase; it suggests discrimination and judgment – other important leadership attributes.

Smart listening is as much attitude as skill. Consider the example of a mother who can hear her child’s soft, plaintive cry in a cacophony of chaos. A leader could take a lesson from mom here: train yourself to stay alert for important cues in the midst of busy, fast-paced days. This requires a broader perspective than the tunnel vision that may entrap us when we have a laser focus on a specific issue. Develop subconscious pattern recognition, and you can if you open your mind, that will say, “Wait . . . this seems out of kilter.” Even if you cannot fully investigate the anomaly at that time, you bookmark that thought and return to it later.

The best listeners hear what’s unsaid in addition to what’s verbalized. A situation that frustrates me as a management consultant is when followers don’t ask for enough help from their leader (The reverse situation is annoying, but not as potentially damaging). Too often the follower

agonizes over a solution until he gets so frustrated that he vents, and even then the leader may not hear about it. Smart listeners can sense a follower's frustration and will open a discussion to understand the core issue. Often, a leader can easily solve what to the follower seems insurmountable.

Smart listeners also understand when to use each of the 3 types of listening: Attentive (don't interrupt, let the narrative unfold), Active (more interaction, "What other choices did you consider?"), and Affirmative (show empathy).

- Attentive listening is important for new or unusual events, or when someone is upset, and lets the speaker relax and focus; the sequence of events is often important.
- Active listening is the most common type in business, and seeks clarity and understanding.
- Affirmative listening focuses on feelings and emotions, and is used to understand the content and its meaning to the speaker.

Finally, smart listeners frequently ask "why" and "what happened next" and "what would you like to see happen?" These questions may lead to unseen solutions, and in the best cases the follower identified the solution to their problem. That, of course, builds confidence because a smart leader never misses an opportunity to praise a noteworthy accomplishment.



Tom

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