



1 Skill of Effective Communicators - Listening

by Mike Hawkins
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Randall was my boss at IBM. He brought me into his organization early in my career as a first-line manager. As great leaders do, he saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I'm glad, because in my first few months as a manager, I made a lot of mistakes. I first tried being a *super-contributor*, a manager who relies on his own contributions rather than working through his people. Then I tried to manage my team instead of lead them. I focused on controlling my employees and enforcing company policies rather than coaching and enabling them. All the time, Randall was patient.

Randall's office door was always open. I could come to him with my questions, frustrations, or need for encouragement. He would always hear me out without interrupting or redirecting. Rather than change the conversation to something he would rather talk about, he would stay on my topic. He would probe, reflect, and show empathy.

When you talked to Randall, you knew he was listening and not merely formulating his response. When you left Randall's presence, you felt understood. He had a way of making you feel good about yourself. He made you feel important. It was even therapeutic at times. Depending on your need, Randall could be a proxy for your counselor, pastor, friend, and even your parent.

Great leaders are great listeners. They are not merely great speakers or talkers. They leverage the power of both their mouth and ears. They provide information when appropriate, but equally well receive it. They make themselves available to their constituents. They are open-minded. They seek to understand before being understood.

Talking to someone is not a conversation. At best, talking is half of a conversation. The other half of a conversation is listening. If you are talking to someone who is distracted and not understanding, your talking is more a vocal cord exercise than a conversation. For effective communications to take place, there needs to be effective listening.

Counter intuitively for many people, people who focus more on speaking than listening are not as effective in their ability to influence. They don't garner the trust of others. They don't endeavor themselves to others. They don't have as deep and meaningful a dialog. Nor do they understand or learn as well.

There is no joy in being with someone that wants to do all the talking. They constantly redirect the conversation back to themselves. They don't care about what others have to say. They want to be the center of attention. You think, "Why don't they just talk to a mirror? It's obvious they don't really need anyone else in their conversation."

Listening enables understanding and builds relationships. It makes people feel important, valued, and respected. It satisfies people's basic need to feel understood. There are many situations where people don't need you to solve their problems or do anything other than empathize and listen.

The ability to influence, collaborate, encourage, coach, gain trust, and learn is more dependent on a well-developed ability to listen than to speak. As Stephen R. Covey, author of *The 8th Habit*, said "The most important skill in life is communications. And the most important communication skill is listening."

Regardless of your role or level, develop the #1 skill of effective communicators – listening - and watch your performance dramatically increase.

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