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Listening to employees can make all the difference in business world

BY BILL HOWATT /Business Columnist

If only it were that easy to listen.

I recall having a conversation with a boss who was not interested in listening to my input and clearly had his own agenda. I knew this both intuitively and behaviourally (he was reading e-mail while I was talking). I felt devalued and questioned how much my boss respected me as a professional.

But at another job my boss was genuinely interested and engaged me to have conversations about what I was thinking and doing. I knew he was really listening to me. I felt empowered, more motivated and committed to my role than with the first boss, who appeared focused only on being right and being the boss.

A critical skill for effective leadership is the mastery of listening skills. This is a simple concept but many leaders do not realize that a deficit in this area may ultimately be their Achilles heel and even lead to their departure.

Consider this simple listening survey:

Have you ever felt you were not listened to?

How did you know?

How motivated were you to perform for your leader who did not listen to you?

After 18 years of consulting, coaching, counselling and teaching, I have come across tons of research and personal anecdotes that concur with my perceptions. For example, five happy employees will be more productive than five unhappy ones. One key to facilitate a happy employee is the development of healthy interpersonal relationships. For this to happen, a leader must be willing and committed to listening.

Listening skills are critical for a leader's credibility and success. Why? Trust is earned, not given. To gain the trust of another person they must feel they are an equal and valued. This occurs only through positive interactions and perceptions.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck says, "Just because it is simple does not mean it is easy." The Achilles heel for many leaders is the gap between knowing and doing in regard to the skill of listening. One common theme I explore when coaching middle managers is how

they hear and lead. Leaders who focus on listening over time not only enjoy their job more but develop happier and motivated employees.

Listening Skills Crash Course

L — look at the person you are talking to and be interested in what they are saying.

I — investigate the meaning behind the message so you are clear what the other person means. Do not assume you know what another person is thinking.

S — summarize what the other person is saying throughout the conversation to demonstrate you are interested in their point of view and to be sure you are getting their meaning.

T — talk with the person, not at them. It's important for the other person to feel they are your equal in the conversation and their opinions are valued and welcomed.

E — evaluate and monitor your conversations and pay attention to what you are doing so you can be a leader who listens.

N — no multi-tasking when you are having a conversation; focus on the person.

I — insinuating guilt without the facts, making statements vs. asking open-ended questions or being judgmental will stop meaningful listening and create defensiveness.

N — no talking over the other person. Let them speak first and then add your contribution once you are clear about the other person's point of view.

G — get active in conversations with your workforce. The more you listen, the more your workforce will trust you and be committed to your visions and expectations.

