CHAPTER SIX

Competency 6: Listening Like You Mean It

Liam Pak, St. Nicholas's head of marketing and public relations, checks her notes as she waits for Emily Gohara to finish another meeting. She has been waiting for almost 20 minutes but does not mind too much; she knows Gohara is very busy with other priorities, and she appreciates the opportunity to talk to her. Pak has been under pressure to create a comprehensive marketing communications plan, and she will need Gohara's backing for it.

Meanwhile, Gohara is meeting with her controller and the external auditor. The news is not good: Several new projects went over budget and will likely push the health system into the red this month. Inpatient admissions were also down, and losses in the employed practices were higher than expected. Emily will need to report these issues to the board later this week. At best, she will hear "I told you so." And she would rather not imagine the worst-case scenario.

Gohara comes out of the meeting and sees Pak waiting. She has had a rough day, but she does not want to cancel on Pak again. Pak follows her into her office and excitedly starts outlining her ambitious marketing plan. A less-seasoned executive, she jumps right to her ideas for flashy social media ads and event sponsorships without first building her business case. Gohara only hears what sounds like another huge money pit opening up in front of her. She has already made up her mind to reject the proposal, but she lets Pak keep talking out of politeness and exhaustion. Her silence soon turns to seething as Pak continues her image-focused presentation; Pak, thinking Gohara is losing interest, picks up her pace. Pak wraps up her pitch with, "I'm getting the sense that the timing isn't the best for this. Yes?"

"Yes," says Gohara, relieved that Pak arrived at the conclusion herself.

This vignette describes a typical conversation between two leaders in healthcare: different perspectives clashing awkwardly in an inadequately planned, poorly executed meeting. We can feel the frustration and disappointment on both sides, and we can probably relate to the experiences of one or both people.

Throughout the conversation, each had chances to interact differently that would have increased learning, enhanced mutual understanding, and improved the outcomes. These chances were missed for lack of better listening skills.

WHAT IS LISTENING LIKE YOU MEAN IT, AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Listening Like You Mean It distinguishes true active listening from all other forms. Many people think they are good listeners, but we all know there is a difference between really trying to understand someone versus simply waiting for your turn to talk. Listening, and showing that you are listening, are skills that most of us can improve. As a leader, it is worth your while to do so; it will boost the trust people have in you and improve your ability to lead them effectively, especially during times of significant uncertainty and change.

Listening Like You Mean It means you maintain a calm, approachable demeanor; you are seen as warm, gracious, and welcoming; you are patient, open-minded, and willing to hear people out; you get to the real meaning behind the words people say (i.e., you get to the point); you keep in touch through formal and informal channels; and you build strong rapport over time.

Active listening makes a leader more effective in several key ways. Perhaps most importantly, listening helps you better understand the goals, priorities, and views of the people you work with. This understanding equips you to have more helpful and meaningful conversations about the work you do together, which can also lead people to trust you more deeply.

Listening can also help you to be a more effective change agent. With a better understanding of your peers, direct reports, and superiors, you will have an easier time understanding how people feel about their work as well as how they think organizational changes may affect them. When you propose changes, you will be better able to anticipate fears and concerns and address them proactively. This capacity to solve problems makes these leaders better at creating and sustaining high-energy organizations.

HOW HIGHLY EFFECTIVE LEADERS LISTEN LIKE THEY MEAN IT

Great listeners grasp a great deal of meaning from what a speaker says. But they also get a lot from who the speaker is. Exceptional leaders understand the motivations behind the message and appreciate the speaker's unique point of view.

Understanding the Message

Beyond the surface content, great listeners will also understand the *why* behind the message—what has led the speaker to their statement, presentation, or request. They will feel the speaker's emotions, and they will perceive the level of agreement or disagreement in the ongoing conversation.

As you improve your listening skills, keep in mind that every message is crafted by a person who is trying to get a set of needs met—maybe their own, the team's, or the patient's. These speakers are expressing needs and revealing something about themselves, hoping that the listener will understand them better.

Showing Respect for the Messenger

What if you do not agree with the message? Effective listeners will still show they value and respect the thoughts, opinions, and ideas of speakers. When they disagree, they will still recognize that the speaker's perspective is valid and make sure the speaker feels heard. Instead of saying the speaker is wrong, effective listeners will view the disagreement as a difference in opinion or perspective: something to be explored in a way that both parties gain a better understanding of each other.

WHEN LISTENING LIKE YOU MEAN IT IS NOT ALL IT COULD BE

Leaders often vary widely in their listening effectiveness depending on the circumstances at hand. The following are some of the ways listening can fall short of being effective, and why.

Listening Inattentively

Inattentive listening can come from different causes. For example, some leaders like to talk to people throughout the day; others prefer working alone. Leaders who like to work alone (sometimes called introverts) can have more trouble with inattentive listening. They may give off signals that they do not want to be disturbed, or they may seem impatient when people do talk to them.

Another type of inattentiveness can arise from not having dependable communication channels. Leaders who do not have regular meetings with their staff (or who often cancel them); who do not reliably answer voicemails, e-mails, or texts; or who answer them in ways that show they did not really read and understand the message can send the same implicit (albeit unintended) message to others: Your communications are not that important to me.

Mobile phones and other communications devices have made the problem of inattentive listening much worse. Some leaders find it hard to set these devices aside when they are with others. The message people get is that their needs are not worthy of the leader's full attention. Inattentive listening habits are also a greater risk in virtual meetings, in which the temptation to split attention can be especially high.

Hearing Selectively

Hearing selectively means tuning out information the listener disagrees with. We all do this sometimes, and need to; leaders do not have the capacity to work through every disagreement they have. But this also works against us in two important ways: (1) it can prevent us from taking in useful new information, and (2) it can stop us from recognizing the legitimacy of divergent perspectives. Taking the time to understand *why* a staff member does not agree with you can be an important part of building and maintaining the working relationship. People are usually less upset about being disagreed with than being ignored.

Being Impatient

Impatience is a pervasive barrier to effective listening. Almost all leaders in healthcare work under extraordinary time pressures, and listening can sometimes feel like an unproductive use of time. The ever-present temptation is to find ways to "listen more efficiently." Efficiency can be virtuous, but it is often pursued in the wrong ways.

In situations of acute time pressure, effective leaders will tell a speaker how much time they have available so the speaker can manage that time wisely. The

less effective approach is to try to reach a speaker's conclusion before the speaker is finished talking. This might involve finishing the speaker's sentences or, even worse, assuming you have the "gist" of it and simply cutting the comments off and taking your own turn. In some uncomfortable dialogues, or those in which the leader cannot productively respond in the moment, she may even change the subject without warning.

Being Emotionally Volatile

Emotional volatility goes by a number of names: "short fuse" and "hair trigger" come to mind. It represents a basic failure of listening in that the leader's emotions are overtaking her ability to objectively hear what the speaker is saying.

The consequences of being volatile can be severe. At a minimum, it decreases people's trust to the point that they may actively hide bad news from the leader to avoid being scolded. At worst, it will cause people to withdraw from the working relationship altogether.

Providing Time Rather Than Attention

Some leaders master the art of "listening without listening." They do all the right things to ensure their peers and direct reports have adequate access to them, and they do not rush people or cut them off. But the listening is ultimately a façade; silence is provided for politeness's sake, with all mental energy wandering elsewhere or formulating rebuttals rather than considering what the speaker has to say.

When Listening Like You Mean It Is Not All It Could Be

In leadership roles, listening can fall short for any of the following reasons:

- Listening inattentively
  - Direct reports are given the impression that their communications are bothersome intrusions.
  - Few or no routine settings are provided in which listening can take place.
  - The listener is attending to his devices rather than giving others his full attention.

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- Hearing selectively
  - Divergent opinions are ignored.
  - Time is spent formulating counterarguments rather than listening.
- Being impatient
  - The listener jumps to erroneous conclusions and cuts people off prematurely.
  - The listener changes the subject rather than concluding it.
- Being emotionally volatile
  - The listener reacts with visible anger, disgust, or disappointment.
- Providing time rather than attention
  - The listener is effective at taking turns but substitutes silence for genuine listening.
  - The listener focuses on formulating rebuttals rather than on taking in what is being said.

MISUSE AND OVERUSE: HOW LISTENING LIKE YOU MEAN IT CAN WORK AGAINST YOU

It is difficult to conceive of leaders getting themselves into trouble for listening too much. Indeed, former US President Calvin Coolidge was famously quoted as saying, "No man ever listened himself out of a job." In our experience, if leaders are viewed as overdoing it on listening, it is usually because they are engaging in one or more of the following.

Taking Too Passive an Approach to Listening

Some leaders do not take enough control of the listening process. A common example is a meeting where the organizers provide too little structure, allowing some people to take over the conversation and/or steer it in their own direction. Leaders who are too afraid of causing conflict may also fall into this trap. They may allow others to air their views but won't challenge them publicly, even if they disagree. In the end, these leaders will do what they want to do anyway, regardless of the feedback they receive, leaving others confused and frustrated.

Using Listening to Avoid Action

When leaders have to make tough choices, listening can sometimes become a stall tactic. Getting input from stakeholders is an important step in many difficult decisions, but it can also be overdone. If you have ever been stuck in an endless survey process (i.e., a survey that only leads to more surveys), then you are familiar with this dynamic.

Misuse and Overuse: How Listening Like You Mean It Can Work Against You

Listening is rarely viewed as an overused skill. However, perceived overuse is usually a symptom of one of the following problems:

- Taking too passive an approach to listening
  - People are allowed to take the podium without regard to time or efficiency, particularly in meetings.
  - Points of disagreement are not expressed or explored.
- Using listening to avoid action
  - The leader listens too acutely when a decision must be made (and may not listen enough at other times).
  - Requests for additional input, opinions, and discussion are used as excuses to delay needed action.

HOW TO IMPROVE AT LISTENING LIKE YOU MEAN IT

Finding Role Models

Where do you find good listening mentors—people who can help you hone your listening skills? One approach is to look for people who are professionally trained in listening, such as counselors, therapists, and chaplains. However, while these professionals may be terrific listeners, they may not be as practiced at balancing listening against the other time constraints managers regularly face. People who are likely to be good at balancing attention against time pressures include executives in human resources management, marketing and communications, community relations, and philanthropy and development. These roles often involve the need to carefully attend to agendas that may or may not be compelling or personally relevant, and that they may personally disagree with, and often under considerable associated time constraints.

Additional Opportunities for Personal Development

We recommend to all readers, no matter how seasoned, that they seriously consider working on their listening skills. Our experiences and those of others who provided input for this chapter suggest most of us have more room for improvement in this area than we may believe and will see more payoff from improving these skills than we may realize.

As with many of the skills discussed in this book, the best approach to improving your listening skills involves a small amount of education and large amounts of practice with feedback.

Seek Out Feedback

Feedback is essential for improving listening skills. None of us are always good or bad listeners. We may do better or worse depending on factors like the topic, audience, and time of day. Also, because we never intend to listen poorly, it can be hard to pinpoint when we are listening well or not.

Trusted colleagues can help you with this. If someone tells you that they feel like you do not listen to them, ask them to give you specific examples. Start by looking back, but then ask them to also help you identify examples going forward.

If a colleague agrees to give you this feedback, promise yourself to work extra hard to use it. If they have genuinely caught you at a listening low point, thank them for their help. If there are other circumstances that prevent you from listening better, at least take the time to explain this: "I understand that you didn't get to finish telling me your concerns. Unfortunately, the meeting agenda was starting to run late, and I felt we had to move on to give enough time to the other items."

Develop a Clear, Active Listening Posture

Displaying active listening involves more than silence—body language and eye contact also play a substantial role. If you have ever seen someone roll their eyes after hearing something, then you know what bad listening looks like; other signs include checking the time, sighing loudly, looking away, or looking at your phone or computer screen. Body language associated with effective listening includes facing the person who is talking, sitting up straight, maintaining good eye contact, nodding in acknowledgment or reacting to key points the speaker is making, and taking notes.

Summarize

Summarizing is a particularly useful technique in situations where your own opinions disagree strongly with someone else's. In these situations, challenge yourself

to summarize the speaker's comments back to him: "If I understand you correctly, you think you are more qualified for this project than I am because you have prior experience with their department's VP, and I do not. Is that correct?" Challenging yourself to take this step serves several goals. First, and most importantly, it forces you to listen to what the other person is saying at a deep enough level that you are able to represent it back. Second, it helps you decentralize from your own perspective long enough to gain a glimpse of the speaker's perspective. Third, if you still disagree with the speaker, he is less likely to believe it is because of a lack of understanding.

Summarizing can also be helpful in less heated dialogues. You can think of them as checkpoints that provide you with the opportunity to be sure you and others are still proceeding with a common understanding.

Ask Probing Questions

Probing questions are follow-up questions designed to elicit a deeper understanding of a subject. One style of probing—requesting specifics—focuses on clarifying the message: "You said employees are upset about this change. How many employees are we talking about? How upset are they? Do they want to resign? Do they feel betrayed or merely inconvenienced? How would you compare their reactions to the premium increase (or other example)—stronger, weaker, or about the same?" A time-based probe can help clarify whether an issue seems to be a flare-up versus an ongoing trend that may be building steam: "How long has this been going on? How consistent has the trend been?"

Monitor Your Emotions

Strong emotional reactions can quickly derail good listening practices. This can play out in several common ways.

- *Shock*. You might react with shock when you find news or ideas difficult to believe. In these situations, it is important to guard against the tendency to dismiss the information or to react too strongly to it. A good way to handle this reaction is to put it on the table in a nonthreatening way: "This comes as a surprise to me. I may need a few minutes to take this in."
- *Anger or disgust*. Reactions of anger and disgust can happen when you believe someone is thinking or acting incompetently or in a way that is not in the best interests of your department or organization. In these situations, there is often a need to convey an important learning point or to foster a better understanding between yourself and the other person; however, this need may be competing with an instinctive feeling of being threatened and

a commensurate reflex to strike back. A more moderate, and typically more effective, approach is to use questions instead of attacks: "Can you help me understand how this would positively affect our department?" or "How would this resolve the problem?"

- *Elation*. We can all come up with examples of when our negative feelings toward someone else interfered with our ability to attend to their communication. The same is true about positive emotions. If you find yourself getting overly excited about an idea, you may find your own internal thought process triggering at such a fast pace that you lose the thread of what is being said.
- *Boredom*. A reaction of boredom most often comes from judging the communication to be irrelevant, unimportant, or not delivered efficiently (e.g., unnecessary or overly elaborated details). Sometimes, particularly if the speaker is anxious, both the communicator and the listener will be well served by some assistance in framing the message: "Let me see if I understand the heart of the matter here." Other times, however, the meta-communication the speaker may need to hear is, "I want to feel you value my opinion and will take the time to hear me out." In these cases, the challenge is more internal: Find the anchors to keep yourself appropriately and mentally engaged in the dialogue. Balancing your focus between the content of the message and the personal meaning behind the content can be a useful approach.

Schedule Time with Smaller Groups

Large group meetings, while effective for many purposes, do limit participants' comfort in disclosing points of disagreement. You can facilitate the flow of feedback by finding occasions to meet with smaller groups of staff. Smaller group meetings also allow you more opportunities to build individual relationships of trust.

Find Opportunities for One-on-One Conversation

Just as small group meetings can provide a higher quality of feedback over large groups, so too can one-on-one communication over small groups. Think for a moment about the people you rely on most in your organization. Do you have opportunities to talk to each of them one-on-one once in a while? If you do not, you should consider creating these opportunities from time to time. Talking with someone individually gives you a unique opportunity to reflect not just on the work you do with this person but also on the quality of your working relationship. It is important to note that this practice has become even more important with the proliferation of virtual meetings.

Visit Teams on Their Turf

Highly effective listening means going beyond a "my door is open" policy to a "let me knock on your door" policy. While staff appreciate responsiveness to their concerns, there are few actions that demonstrate concern more concretely than planned and purposeful visits to worksites.

Focus Closely on Virtual Meetings

Highly effective listening is more challenging when the participants are not in the same room. You can improve your virtual meetings by following some simple tips: keep your camera on, look at the camera as if you are making eye contact, ensure you are in a quiet environment or mute yourself when you are not speaking, and make sure everyone is given the chance to share their thoughts. Some leaders also follow up with a phone call to make sure everything is clear after a virtual meeting.

Mind Your Limits

Despite your best efforts, at times you will not be as effective a listener as you would like to be. Fatigue can be a barrier to effective listening—for example, at the end of a hard day or week, or after difficult conversations or disappointments. Another key barrier is role conflict—someone coming to talk with you about a concern at a time when your mind is firmly pointed elsewhere, or when you need to be preparing for your next meeting.

How you handle those situations depends partly on your ability to overcome your fatigue or distraction, as well as on how fatigued you are. On the one hand, concentration, like other skills, improves with practice—if you push yourself to listen through your fatigue, you will continue to get better at it. For this reason, taking the time to listen can sometimes be better than putting a conversation off.

However, there may be times when you are too tired or distracted to have any hope of listening effectively. In these situations, efforts to overcome your fatigue will not pay off, and diplomatically delaying the conversation is the better move. You can do so by first acknowledging the importance of what the speaker has to say before requesting a postponement: "I can see this is an important concern to you, and it deserves my full attention. However, right now I won't be able to give you the attention you deserve. I will be too distracted by this meeting coming up later today. I'd like to find a time when I can give you my undivided attention on this matter. What does tomorrow morning look like for you?"

Given how important listening is to interpersonal effectiveness, there are also numerous books that provide an in-depth treatment on this topic. Two excellent reference books that go into greater detail on listening practices are physician Mark Goulston's (2009) book *Just Listen: Discover the Secret to Getting Through to Absolutely Anyone* and Edgar Schein's (2013) *Humble Inquiry.*

SUMMARY

There are few more powerful tools for building staff engagement than giving employees the sense that their leader hears and understands where they are coming from. Exceptional leaders are particularly adept at sending this message to the people they work with through their body language and actions in the context of listening.

Think About It

Dr. Linda McKenzie had become one of the top surgeons in Barkley by the time she turned 45. She graduated from a top-tier medical school, completed a world-class residency, and had been selected for one of the top fellowship programs in the country. She was smart, hardworking, and talented, and loved taking on the most challenging cases with the toughest attendings. She was widely viewed as a natural leader: confident, decisive, and driven. She had a rapid climb up in surgery, ultimately becoming vice chair of the department. Everyone expected her to become the first female chair of surgery at St. Nicholas Hospital. Yet the more position power and influence she gained within the organization, the more assertive (some would say aggressive) she became. It reached the point where, according to a number of the residents and nurses, "Linda was no longer able to manage her own arrogance." Her conversations became lectures, and her team meetings became a forum for her to belittle others. She did not really change who she was; she just became a more extreme version. She still was one of the top surgeons in the country, and her referral base continued to grow. But with all this success, there was a cost. She ignored social cues. She didn't get it when her team sat there quietly as she droned on. Slowly but surely, Dr. McKenzie lost trust and respect among her team and some of her peers. She became so convinced that she was always right that she turned others off. People no longer sought her out or wanted to work with her. She started losing valued and experienced nurses, and some residents began gravitating to other surgeons. She got into petty fights with other executives over resources and direction. Each argument ended with others saying something along the lines of, "You seem to be certain that you're right," and Dr. McKenzie responding, "That's because I am." She was shocked, then, when the chair and Dr. James, the CMO, told her she was out of the running for the chair position. In fact, Dr. James suggested that she consider another hospital in which to practice. Although the communication surprised her, they had tried to warn her several times before, but she never really heard them. She thought her achievements made her untouchable.

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- How do factors like expertise, power, or status affect people's ability to listen?
- How might you help Dr. McKenzie to change her style?

Think About It

Go back to the Introduction of this book and review the section on self-concept (pages xxx–xxxiii). In what ways might having a negative self-concept harm listening? How can having a more a positive self-concept boost your listening skills?

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