

The Successful SUPERVISOR

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Tips from  LifeSolutions

This issue of The Successful Supervisor is the third in a three part series on “servant-leadership.” As noted earlier, servant-leadership is a philosophy being applied in organizations across the world. In issues I and II, we defined servant-leadership as a practice devoted to treating people right, serving those we have the opportunity to lead, and creating an environment where the primary concern is always the success and well-being of all stakeholders. According to Robert Greenleaf, listening is the ultimate skill a servant leader must practice. He not only believed that one must be a good listener to be a servant-leader, he also suggested that learning to listen well can turn us into natural servant-leaders. It makes sense, then, to devote this final issue to listening. Content is taken from the numerous writings by Robert K. Greenleaf, the publications of the Greenleaf Center for Servant-Leadership, and from The Serving Leader; Ken Jennings and John Stahl-Wert, and the Blanchard Family Partnership, Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 2003. As always, we are interested in your feedback and/or questions. Please email the EAP at ask@lifesolutionsforyou.com or contact an EAP account manager at 1.800.647.3327.

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“Listening rightly done is the most important thing you can do for a person.”

-Carl Rogers, founder, Client-Centered Therapy

For most of us, listening involves hearing what someone has to say, analyzing what they are saying, and waiting for our turn to respond. We hear with our ears and may even be able to parrot back what the person has shared, but mostly we are thinking about what we are going to say next. This is *not* how a servant-leader listens. For the servant-leader, listening is a highly developed skill. It involves listening “from the inside” and approaching the speaker with empathy. This practice of deep listening makes the leader available for others, opens up communication, and can transform both the speaker and the listener. The servant-leader, as a listener, is fully present, gives undivided attention, and uses not only his ears, but his eyes and heart to listen.

“So when you are listening to somebody, completely attentively, then you are listening not only to the words, but also to the feelings of what is being conveyed, to the whole of it, not part of it.”

-Jiddu Krishnamurti

Listening well is difficult. For all of our education, most of us have never been trained to listen. The following facts may help you understand why listening can be so challenging; (Source: “Now Hear This and Pay Attention” by Don Oldenburg. *The Washington Post*, February 20, 2011)

- ◆ Most people speak at 125-250 words per minute.
- ◆ We can accurately listen to a speech rate of about 400 words per minute, but we think at 1000 to 3000 words per minute. This creates a listening gap.
- ◆ Immediately after hearing someone talk, we usually recall only half of what we heard. Beyond that, we remember about 20%.
- ◆ We are distracted, preoccupied or forgetful about 75% of the time.
- ◆ We spend about 45% of the time listening.

Given the challenges, how do we develop our listening skills?

Listening On the Outside

Some listening skills are external. To practice listening “on the outside” you can:

- ◆ Make appropriate eye contact. This varies from culture to culture. This usually involves looking people in the eye without staring them down.
- ◆ Lean slightly toward the speaker to indicate interest and involvement.
- ◆ Nod your head.
- ◆ Avoid distractions. Don’t check your watch, cell phone, or computer.
- ◆ Do not interrupt.
- ◆ Use encouraging phrases like “I hear what you are saying” or “Tell me more.”

- ◆ Ask clarifying questions such as, “Are you saying that really upset you?” or “Do you mean you are confused?”
- ◆ Paraphrase what the speaker has said and check to make sure you are clear in your understanding.

Listening On the Inside

Listening from inside ourselves *and* from inside the speaker takes communication to a whole new level. Greenleaf describes listening on the inside as being attentive to the inner voices and spirits of others.

To listen to yourself “on the inside”:

- ◆ Be aware of and work on your own attitudes.
- ◆ Use silence at times. Don’t feel like you need to “fill in the gaps” in a conversation.
- ◆ Avoid giving advice or offering a quick fix.

To listen to others “on the inside”:

- ◆ Invoke empathy by imagining yourself in the speaker’s situation.
- ◆ Listen with your *ears* for content and feeling.
- ◆ Listen with your *heart* for the underlying emotions that the other person is trying to express without words. Respond to the underlying emotion with empathy.
- ◆ Be aware of your body language and the speaker’s. Much communication is non-verbal.

Skilled leadership is an art. Becoming a servant-leader will enrich both your own work experience as well as the experiences of those you lead. If you would like to learn more, please call LifeSolutions for a consultation.



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