

Leadership Essentials

Conversation

Authentic leaders understand the power of conversation and how to listen



A conversation is two or more people talking to each other. Over the last century communication in organisations has moved from giving instructions to conversations. To be effective as a leader you need to understand how language can be used to create connections, calm a situation, make an impact, affect mood and much more.

Listening Skills

Active listening is the basis for all effective conversation. It gives you the information you need to make the best decisions or solve problems satisfactorily. Active listening means:

- Listening to the words being said;
- Listening for the meaning behind the words being said, - noting tone, volume, emphasis, expression and pauses;
- Watching for any body language or non verbal signs (facial expression, gestures, posture and eye contact) that backs up, contradicts or adds to your understanding of the words being said.

Active listening also involves checking that what you think you've heard is what the person speaking meant to convey. Feedback is an essential part of this and involves:

- Paraphrasing or summarising what you've heard;
- Commenting (if appropriate) on any contradictions you are picking up between their words and their body language / voice indicators.

Sometimes it is important to encourage a person to continue talking in order to clarify a situation, get more information, or to express themselves fully. You can encourage a person to continue by:

- Using body language appropriately (this is a form of feedback) - e.g. adopt an open, relaxed posture; and nod when the talker pauses. Gently and un-obviously mirroring the talker's own body language (providing it is not aggressive or very passive) can create feelings of empathy between you;
- Asking open questions (i.e. questions that it is difficult to answer with one word);
- Asking questions to clarify points;
- Allowing pauses so that the speaker has time to gather their thoughts about what to say next;
- Feeding back what you're seeing/hearing;
- When asked a direct question yourself, think about the feeling that lies behind it, not the question itself.

Remember that people are always impressed when you can remember in future conversations exact content and expressions that person used in past conversations.

Storytelling

'Storytelling' within an organisation refers to describing, explaining or illustrating something in such a way that it touches people's emotions and sticks in their heads. A good story goes beyond words to build up pictures in the listeners mind. A carefully crafted story can hold people 'spellbound'.

All organisations have their stories; for example:

"(Once upon a time) an employee went shopping and bought up the local store's entire stock of his organisation's products, because the labels hadn't been put on straight and he didn't want his organisation to look sloppy. His organisation repaid and praised him."

Stories can be persuasive, influential, can build rapport, make important information more memorable and inspire action among your team. Before you create one, think through what purpose you want it to achieve. However, whatever their purpose, all stories should be:

- Simple and straightforward;
- Authentic and believable;
- Short;
- About someone the listeners can identify with, have empathy for or recognise within their own lives.

Stories usually follow this pattern:



Don't restrict storytelling to your employees. Other stakeholders, like customers and suppliers can benefit too.

Look out for events in your organisation that you can turn into stories, then think when it is best to tell them. One important additional tip: Never tell a story which is simply bragging about something you've done or achieved. This can provoke the sort of emotion in your listeners that might actually stop them listening.

Conversational Leadership

Leaders today engage with employees in a way that resembles an ordinary person-to-person conversation rather than a set of directions or commands. When talking to anybody at work, the particular words you use, the tone you choose, the gestures and facial expressions you employ must always be influenced by what you want to achieve in that conversation. The most successful leaders have a lot of conversations, but do not tend to give orders during them. Instead they tend to ask lots of questions.

Do remember however that sarcasm, labelling people, over-generalising with sweeping statements, finger pointing and shouting, however justified they feel, will always be perceived as aggressive and will invariably lead to problems.

Saying 'yes' to a request because you don't have the courage or energy to say no, but should have done, will also lead to further problems later.

In addition, consider the difference in tone and attitude between the following three statements:

"It's not fair! All the other staff got bonuses!"

"I might have known you'd mess this up. Get it fixed. Now!"

"There is a problem. I'd like to meet and see what we can do about it."

The first is very child-like - whiny and disempowered. The second is the sort of tone a parent might take with a child - giving orders, and being rather patronising. The third is neutral, neither childish nor parental, we refer to it simply as 'adult'.

This is known as Transactional Analysis (or TA as it is often called), a model of people and relationships that was developed during the 1960s by Dr. Eric Berne. When two people communicate, each exchange is known as a 'transaction'. The third approach to a conversation has proved to be the most powerful, and the most effective in getting things done. It is well worth trying to purposefully initiate conversations in this adult fashion as often as you can, until it becomes second nature.

Try also, when somebody talks to you like a child or parent, not to respond yourself like a child or parent. It is very difficult at first if you're not used to it. If a member of the team takes a child-like tone with you - "But I don't want to take my turn on that task", it's very easy to respond from 'nurturing parent' - "Don't worry, I'll be around to make sure you cope" or 'controlling parent' - "Oh, do stop whining!" An 'adult' will ask questions to establish why the person does not want to take that task, and then tell them whether that is reasonable or not, and why.

Conversation Top Tips

- Listen actively; not just to the words, but what's behind them
- Watch out for events that would make good stories
- Think hard about how you want to use those stories to achieve organisational goals
- When people talk to you, try to work out if they are talking from their 'child', 'parent' or 'adult' perspective
- When you talk to others at work, get into the habit of always doing so from your 'adult' self

References

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