

Practicing the Art of Listening and Reaping Its Benefits

What the world really needs are more good listeners. Most people don't really listen. What we really need is a lot more people listening with real skill. Now this doesn't mean to listen in a way that listens just long enough to tell them why they are wrong. It's not about half listening to what they are saying so you can get the information you need while you are busy forming your rebuttal. It's not about appearing to listen so that people will "feel" heard, and then rattling off the reasons why they shouldn't feel emotional and how everything will be fine.

It's about hearing the words as well as the emotions that people are sharing. Helping them get their opinions and feelings out is essential to them solving their problem. It's also essential in getting them to hear the truth in what you are telling them. And it's how you keep them from creating their own version of the truth. It's about presence - truly being present with the other person. It's about letting them say what they need to say because they need to say it.

Too often we want to "help" more than that. We want to offer advice. We want to jump in and fix their problem, or we want to explain to them that their version of the story is just not right.

That approach will work when you're giving directions on how to get from here to Portland and when you're listening to questions like which way to head on Interstate 5. It doesn't work when you're trying to build commitment in people and are listening to their emotions and concerns about what the future state will mean to them and their welfare. This is especially important when you need to get people committed to a frightening change in your organization. They aren't asking for your help, your wisdom, or your perspective. They are asking for your time, your ear, and your understanding. Presence takes practice and you usually are not be able to learn it on your own.

You have to give the person talking your attention AND your permission to say all that needs to be said. True presence is when the words and emotions they are sharing hit you all at the same time. When present, you are able to empathize, to feel what they are feeling as they feel it. You listen with the goal of understanding them, not with the goal of teaching them or leading them.

The payout of really being present to others is huge. You end up with people able to think clearly and solve their own problems. Have you ever wondered why everyone else's problems seem so easy to solve? It's because you don't have the emotion attached to the problem that they have. Let them talk out their emotion and they won't have it either. They'll be committed and independent partners ready to solve their own problems and make the vision for the organization become a reality!



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Building Effectiveness Across Boundaries

7340 Brixham Circle
Castle Rock, CO 80108

P: 303.814.3443
TF: 866.814.3443
F: 303.688.3360

info@interfaceconsultingonline.com
www.interfaceconsultingonline.com