

Re:Focus

simple ideas to help you thrive

by Simon Sinek

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How to listen

There is a difference between listening and waiting for your turn to speak. Just because someone can hear, doesn't mean they are listening or that they know how to listen. My grandfather would sit on the couch and watch a cricket match on TV, catch every word from the commentator's mouth, but wouldn't "hear" my grandmother when she called from the other room. Oh, he could hear her alright... he just wasn't listening.

Listening is active. At its most basic level, it's about focus, paying attention. When a teenager seems to be staring out the window when being spoken to, a parent or teacher will ask: "Are you listening to me?" What the parent or teacher really means is: "Are you paying attention?"

At its most effective level, however, listening goes far beyond simply paying attention. Becoming a "good listener" is a skill that requires practice. At this level, listening means trying to find meaning in what you hear. It is not simply about concentrating on what is being said to you; it is the active pursuit of understanding.

Good listeners have a huge advantage. For one, when they engage in conversation, they make people "feel" heard. The people with whom they are speaking "feel" that someone really understands their wants, needs and desires. And for good reason; a good listener really does care to understand.

A good listener must be good at asking questions. It is near impossible to perfectly understand what someone truly wants or needs on the first go, not because they are not being clear (though that may sometimes be the case), but because very often people don't express their real needs.

For example, an employee demands more money for their job because they feel they are underpaid for the work they are doing. Someone who knows how to listen won't simply hear them, they will want to understand the root of their feelings. They will want to ask questions. A good listener will want to understand the reason they feel unappreciated.

With the right questions, it will be revealed that it is the job itself, not the money that is the cause of the disgruntlement. They feel that they are struggling be-

cause they don't have the skill set to handle the responsibility they are given, for example. It is training that they need. Simply paying them more will address the symptom, but only when additional tools or training are provided will the employee feel looked after in the future. And only then will their true value to the organization be fully realized.

Here are some tips to practice to become a good listener:

Work to understand: Consciously work to understand the reason someone is telling what they are telling you. Don't assume what they say and what they mean are the same. And don't assume that the solutions they offer will fix the issue.

Ask specific questions: Don't simply ask, "What do you mean by that?" after every statement someone makes. That's frustrating for the person talking to you and it still relies on them to find the right words. Ask questions specific to the things they say. For example, if someone says, "I want to be a doctor," instead of asking why they want to be a doctor, ask them what kind of doctor they want to be. When they answer, ask them what it is about that specialty that interests them. Very quickly you will get a much clearer picture of the kind of person this is and what their strengths are just from listening closely and asking pointed questions.

Restate what has been stated: Practice saying, "Let me see if I understand" to someone, then restate what you think they mean in your own words. They will either agree or disagree with you. More importantly, they will feel heard and you will work together to find clarity and common understanding.

The great people managers, those that seem to have a pulse on their people, may have an innate sense of what's going on in the world or a Magic 8-Ball that tells them the answers. But it's more likely that they know how to listen. The same goes for innovation or customer service. The companies that know how to listen are the ones that develop products and serve people based on their ACTUAL wants, needs and desires and just what they say in market research.