

Listen Up!

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In a recent workshop I asked the 50 or so people in the room how many of them had ever taken a class in speech; all hands went up. I then asked about classes in communications, writing skills, public speaking and presentation skills; most hands stayed raised in the air. Then when I asked how many of them had taken a formal course on listening, the attendees began looking around at each other and slowly lowered their hands.

There is no skill in the world more valuable to your ultimate success than listening, but schools by and large don't teach it. Since most people would rather talk than listen, there are not many great role models to follow either. The best managers and sales people are great listeners. They allow the other person to do most of the talking and pay close attention to every word spoken, as well as the body language of the speaker.

You will always have a much greater impact on people by listening. When I was in college I registered for a class so popular that, if you were not at the front of the enrollment line, it would fill before you had the chance to sign up. I soon learned that the popularity of the class was not the content of the curriculum, but the listening skills of the teacher. He would quickly review the reading assignment for the day and then pose some thought-provoking questions to the class. He did not lecture or force his opinions on us, but rather listened intently as we shared ours.

He was so well liked that many of his students would drop into his office at all hours just to have a conversation. As young people, we were hungry to be heard and he was more than willing to oblige. As I look back on those days, I can say with certainty that I learned more about life from this man than any other teacher I ever had – and I did most of the talking.

How hungry are your employees to be heard by you? When you hold a staff meeting or visit a department, do you do all the talking or do you let them do most of it? Yes, there is certainly information about the business that you need to communicate to the staff. But, if you are like most managers, you are missing out on some of the most valuable information you need to reach peak performance; and that information comes from your employees.

A manager once told me that she could not get her team to open up to tell her what was going on in their work areas. I told her that she might be a lousy listener. She bristled and reminded me that I had only known her for a few hours, which was true. However, knowing how badly most people want to be heard, it is not much of a leap to draw the conclusion that I did. If you will listen, they will talk.

Do you want to be a great manager? Listen up!