Taking Time to Listen

Today's school business officials do much more than provide school districts with cost analyses and budget planning. In addition to the core financial elements of the job, school business officials are also often responsible for supervising staff members, collaborating with building- and district-level administrators, working with school board members, and communicating with various members of the community.

Seasoned professionals will attest that success with such diverse groups requires highly effective interpersonal skills. However, most school finance officers receive little, if any, training in this crucial aspect of their job.

Counselors have long recognized that effective interpersonal communication begins with good listening skills. Although listening certainly sounds simple enough, it is one of the most overlooked elements of effective interpersonal communication, especially in busy professional settings such as the school business office.

**Effective Listening Strategies**

People often mistakenly assume that good listeners ask a lot of questions. Although questions are certainly one component of good listening skills, they can also become a potent barrier to effective listening when overused or posed in the wrong manner. Speakers who are asked a lot of questions can feel bombarded by the listener rather than effectively understood. Heavy reliance on questions can also take the direction of the dialogue away from the speakers, thus pulling them away from their main points.

So how does one obtain information from someone without asking a lot of questions? Carl Rogers, a noted counselor, found that brief restatements, paraphrases, or "reflections" of one's understanding of the issue can actually be more effective in facilitating information from the speaker than listener-generated questions. Paraphrases and reflections allow speakers opportunities to clarify points that they may have omitted or that the listener may have missed. Responding with reflections tells both the speaker and listener whether the listener has accurately understood the speaker's main points.

In addition, reflections that are stated in ways that convey genuine interest in understanding the speaker's points and empathizing with his or her issues can facilitate mutual understanding, respect, and collaboration. Rogers warns, however, that reflections that appear mechanical or parrotlike can be ineffective and even perceived by speakers as annoying.

When questions are needed to probe for additional information, beginning with open-ended questions is generally more effective. Open-ended questions—such as “What do you think about that?” or “How effective do you believe that approach will be?”—allow the speaker to elaborate and provide additional details at his or her own pace, without being directed by the listener. On the other hand, closed-ended questions—such as “How much will that cost?” or “How many do we need?”—although important in collecting specific details, can frustrate speakers by redirecting them from their intended points or by forcing them to jump ahead in their presentations, especially when used early in the conversations.

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Interestingly, Rogers's research suggests that when these other listening techniques are employed effectively, closed-ended, fact-finding questions are less necessary because the speakers will likely have presented the answers to many of those questions already.

**Verbal and Nonverbal Attentiveness**

Another crucial skill for effective listening is to note and understand subtle verbal and nonverbal cues from speakers and to react in ways that facilitate mutual understanding. One of the simplest cues to note is whether the speaker's nonverbal behavior matches what is said.

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An example is a principal who indicates he is fine with a decision made on a funding initiative by saying, “Don’t worry about it.” An unobservant listener may take that statement at face value; however, a more skilled listener will notice subtle, nonverbal cues that imply that the principal is not fine with the decision. One of the most telling signs of disagreement is closed posture, which can include folded arms, crossed legs, and a stance that is slightly angled away from the listener so the speaker appears to have to strain slightly to look in the listener’s direction. Combined with a failure to make eye contact, closed posture generally indicates disapproval, despite what someone communicates verbally.

In addition to picking up on such nonverbal signs, skilled communicators take time to assess the situation further and understand the nature of the disagreement rather than simply ending the meeting or pushing ahead with new agenda items. In the example above, the listener could address the nonverbal cues by stating, “I know you said you’re fine with this decision, but I get the sense that you don’t completely agree.” Such statements can defuse minor disagreements rather than let them fester and escalate.

Skilled listeners are also adept at picking up on key words and phrases that lend themselves to misinterpretations or exaggerated hypotheses. For example, speakers attempting to exaggerate a problem tend to use phrases like “Everyone is upset about this” or state events as always or never occurring to emphasize the need for change. However, these words and phrases are seldom accurate in describing the phenomenon (there are always exceptional cases), and their use makes it difficult to obtain accurate assessments.

Good listeners are not only adept at noticing these exaggerated claims, but they are also skilled at gently challenging speakers to clarify or restate their points in more accurate formats. Asking speakers for concrete examples that help illustrate their points and helping them look for exceptions will allow more accurate assessments of the phenomenon in a professional, collegial manner.

**Patience: The Most Important Part of Good Listening**

School business officials often work in hurried conditions with looming deadlines and don’t always have the time to implement the listening skills addressed here. Ironically, the work of Carl Rogers and others indicates that taking time for effective listening can actually save time in the long run and make people more comfortable with speaking to you.

Being patient, using paraphrases and restatements to clarify the speaker's points, holding off on fact-finding questions until you’re sure the speaker is completely finished, and paying attention to verbal and nonverbal cues will allow staff members, building- and district-level leaders, school board members, and community members to leave your meetings feeling completely heard and understood and may actually save you time in the long run.

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ASBO Membership Directory Corrections

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Mr. Babigian should have been included in the list of Lifetime Members and in the Professional Registration Program listing.

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