

## Communication Starts with Listening

By Maureen Tazzioli

*"The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place."*

– George Bernard Shaw

Is communication difficult in your office? Is everyone too busy talking that you wonder who is listening?

For years, people have struggled to improve the way they communicate. Products such as: computers, fax machines, and cell phones bring technology to the forefront of our preferred methods in which to share information. However, we must not forget the influence of billboards, magazines and televisions to help get our message out there. But the one question that continues to surface is this: "Who is doing all the listening."

For some administrative professionals working in today's organizations credit needs to land on their ability to listen to the requests placed upon them by those they work with and for. Contrary to what others may think, being an active listener to me carries a greater value in the way we choose to communicate, especially when communicating face-to-face or over the telephone. However, as people living and working in a highly technical society, we are used to being busy and communicating in way that promotes delegating tasks and plenty of talk.

Without passing blame on any one person and/or situation, see if you can remember the last time you listened to someone – I mean really listened to them and then remembered most of what was shared without passing judgement or coming to a premature conclusion of the central message. If you are like me, chances are that it has been longer than we care to admit, but it does not have to be.

Learning how to improve the way we communicate can help save time, money and personal stress, as management teams are beginning to notice that most organizational errors could have been avoided if only clarity, at the time of communicating one's message, was requested.

With this in mind, here are a few gentle reminders when it comes to improving our listening skills so effective communication can enter our workplace environments.

1. **Take the time to listen** – Taking the time to listen to others is not always easy. But when it becomes an important part of your day there is plenty you can learn and accomplish at the same time. To practice your listening skills, set aside 30 to 40 minutes a day, preferably in the morning, to actively listen to the comments and concerns of others. You may be surprised to discover how much you can learn if you only take the time to listen.
2. **Join them in the moment** – There is nothing more frustrating to a person than to feel as though the individual(s) they are conversing with show little or no interest in what they are saying. As a general rule, respect is best shown when all technological devices such as: cell phones, Blackberry's, computers, iPods, etc, are shut off or placed on silent. Although refusing to do so may not be perceived as harmful to most, I believe doing so is extremely rude and disrespectful showing a complete lack of business grace and sophistication. If, however, a person notices that you have taken the time to remove all possible distractions from your conversation, they are more than likely to do their best to get right to the point of their concern, so that you can both return to what it was you were

working on. Joining them in the moment can lead to a positive outcome keeping respect and appreciation close in hand.

3. **Stay on task...stay focused on purpose** – An unexpected conversation can become a costly distraction forcing an interruption to one's thought process. Minimizing distractions can help save time and personal frustration. One of the best ways to combat unexpected conversations is to indicate your desire to have a scheduled appointment so to discuss specific concerns. Another way to eliminate undue stress is to indicate at the early onset of the conversation the duration of time you have available in which to converse. Doing it this way allows you to maintain a sense of professionalism while at the same time giving a clear message that you care enough about them and their concerns so to set aside some time in which to discuss things. Introducing a high standard of professional excellence is not only wise and necessary but a preferred option to those who do not wish to be interrupted all day long.
4. **What is mentioned in confidence stays confidential** – When you take the time to listen to someone else's concerns, be sincere in your actions and behaviours. With integrity and respect ensure all information shared between the two of you stays private and confidential. Respecting another's right to privacy is extremely important, for without it, the consequences could be disastrous. Just because we live in a world that craves information, does not mean that we must lose sight of our need to protect the sensitive nature of an individual's thoughts.
5. **Remember who owns the challenging situation** – When someone decides to share their challenging situation with you, try to remember that even though they are trusting you with their information, it is not your job to offer them the solution, Instead provide them with the opportunity to be comfortable and relaxed in a confidential environment while they discover for themselves what they believe the solution to be. For I have found that all people truly need is a listening ear because deep down they know what course of action they will need to take in order to improve their own situation. Just a thought.
6. **Be open, honest and willing to share** – By sharing humbling, yet successful experiences you can offer much hope to someone struggling with uncertainty. Sometimes just hearing the courage of another's actions and how they were able to move themselves out of a difficult situation and into a positive outcome, offers much encouragement and inspiration. Be honest and willing to share, you never know who you can influence.
7. **Offer third-party professional assistance when necessary** – There are times when we all need a listening ear just to help us get through the day. During these moments it is important to remember that information shared as a friend, co-worker, or boss, is usually done so with the greatest of intentions. However, there are situations when the professional expertise from a third party is appropriate and necessary. Knowing when to transition a listening ear into a courageous act of kindness is important. Knowing when to offer such guidance is an important step towards improving communications. Always be willing to suggest a qualified professional if required to do so, for it takes a person who truly cares to offer the best options available for each and every situation.

If we all choose to invest enough time and patience, while continuing to take every opportunity to practice our own listening skills, we may begin to unleash enormous potential, not just in ourselves but in others as well. By effectively listening to each other, we can achieve wonderful outcomes together.

*(Maureen Tazzioli, President of ReZultsMatter, is committed to building organizational excellence. Regarded as an expert in overcoming obstacles, Maureen's keeping it real workshops and keynote presentations are helping to unify workplace environments so individuals and organizations can move forward together. Maureen can be reached at 306.751.0009 or 1.877.953.9235(EXCEL) or by visiting her website at [www.rezultsmatter.com](http://www.rezultsmatter.com) This article is reprinted with the author's permission).*