

Do you hear what I hear?

Staff

There is an old saying that goes "we were given two ears and one mouth for a reason". The suggestion is obviously that we were meant to spend more time listening than talking, a hard task for some. But how many of us that listen really hear what is being said, or more precisely, is not being said.

If we were to rate the potential of face to face verbal communication on a scale of effectiveness, it would be fairly high when compared to the written word. The written word is a wonderful tool but is very open to interpretation, rarely has room for feedback or clarification, and doesn't allow for changing situations. The spoken word can get around many of these difficulties if the person receiving the message is a good listener and a good questioner.

Let's quickly review some of the benefits of face to face verbal communication; one can determine the tone, context, mood and intention fairly accurately, clarification or more information can be acquired, and one can sense the weight or importance of one portion of a conversation over another portion. By reading this article, you will get a sense of what is important to you, but perhaps not what I feel is important. You won't know if I am excited about this topic, or if I am just trying to fill space. There is a lot of information we can discern just by listening to people.

There are two components to any verbal communication; what words have been spoken and how they were said. Let's deal with the words that were spoken first.

The words people use are not random choice but rather a reflection of themselves. The words are a reflection of their education, their mental state, their emotional well being, how they feel about themselves and how they prefer to be

communicated with. Listen to the words and look for the clues. For example, a person who uses words relating to emotions is more likely to value the people aspects of processes and decisions. If they say 'I feel that...' or 'I was angered by...' or 'I was happy to hear...' they probably want to be communicated to with respect to the human element of their situation. Contrast this with a more results oriented person whose language will often be devoid of such 'feeling' type of adjectives. They will say things like 'the priorities should have been...' or 'we achieved the result we desired by...' or 'I followed the procedure...' These types of individuals probably more prefer a more task oriented, results driven process and communication style. So simply by listening to the words people choose we can change our own choice of words to more effectively communicate with them.

The other aspect is how people say things. This refers to their tone, body language, and emotional state when talking about a particular subject. A good example happened to me this morning. I met a gentleman at a networking

group for unemployed people and asked him how he was doing. With a big smile said "I am getting by!" I could have left it at that but prior to him speaking he fumbled for a moment. But wrapped up in that brief involuntary fumble I felt there was a bigger problem trying to get out. I simple said "getting by? What do you mean?" He had been unemployed for almost two years and was and is at his wits end about how he was going to carry on. The point is, however, that it was not the words but how they were said that gave the clue as to what was really going on with him.

So the question naturally becomes, how do we listen better? How do we get to the real issue? Let me suggest two things to consider. This first is learn when to ask insightful questions. Watch for verbal or non-verbal cues that might indicate that there is more going on than meets the eye. Such clues might be simply stumbling with common questions, avoiding or not answering the question that was asked, or change from someone's 'base' behaviour (for example if you are talking with someone that has strong eye contact with you but they instinctively look away when ever a particular issue or topic emerges, there might be more to that story).

Secondly, learn to ask insightful questions. The ability to ask the right question at the right time is an invaluable tool. High performing, professional sales people have made an art form of this. They can ask a question that gets right to the heart of an objection so the potential customer has no choice but to address it. We need to learn to do the same. This topic warrants an article unto itself but let me suggest this. If you identify that someone places more importance on the people aspect of a situation or problem, then ask them pointed questions about how they felt about the impact the situation on those involved. The opposite is true for results and process driven people. Ask them how they felt the process went and if they personally felt the outcome represented success or failure. Try to frame your questions around what is important to the individual and you are more likely to get at the heart of the matter.

Effective communication starts with effective listening. But to listen, you have to have someone who is talking which is why listening and questioning are so closely linked. It is not until we have as much of the complete picture as feasible that we should put our mouths in gear.