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AON EXPLORES THE WORLD'S MOST PRESSING BUSINESS ISSUES



PEOPLE & ORGANIZATIONS

The Business Case For Better Listening

OVERVIEW

The demand for soft skills is on the rise. Studies suggest that 59% of hiring managers are struggling to find candidates with appropriate soft skills, and 92% of executives say such skills are equally or more important than technical skills.

What is emerging as one of the most important of these soft skills, is listening. The ability to be an effective, active listener is a skill that companies are looking to add or develop further in their teams.

Listening is at the core of effective people leadership. Research shows that engaged leaders are more likely to have engaged employees. Engaged employees tend to deliver better business performance, are more connected to their organization and strive to go above and beyond in comparison to their less engaged peers. These leaders have a set of experiences, beliefs and behaviors that benefit their teams – from open and candid communication to active listening. Engaging leaders create “continuous listening” strategies to fully understand and take action to enhance their employees’ experience across the entire career lifecycle.

While key to leadership and the employee experience, listening is also fundamental to customer satisfaction. Organizations routinely solicit feedback from customers and there is a well-established link between engaged employees and satisfied customers. Increasingly, organizations are connecting what they hear from customers with what they learn from their own employees to drive continuous improvement. This is where listening to employees can help organizations listen on behalf of their customers, leading to overall improvement and even, innovation.

Why is listening becoming so important for organizations, and what steps can we take to cultivate this increasingly in-demand skill?



IN DEPTH

From engaging teams to capturing deeper customer insights, listening is critical to an organization. Yet, history books are full of famous speeches and their speakers. Who can name many famous listeners? With over five times as many synonyms for speaking than listening, our culture has placed more value on being the talker.

Industrial psychologist and a Partner in Aon's Talent & Rewards Practice, Seymour Adler, observes that throughout the 20th century, we have associated and valued traits such as being assertive and directive with strong leadership. What we are seeing now is a strong shift to the softer side. The 21st century has been characterized as a world of uncertainty. In this volatile environment, previous leadership ideals aren't necessarily the most effective – strong leaders aren't "all knowing and directive." The traditional "command and control" leadership approach no longer works as well given constantly changing business environments and shifting workforce expectations.

According to Adler, "We live in a world where listening and other 'soft' skills haven't been given as much attention. But this is all changing."

Connecting Listening to Business Performance

Recent leadership research suggests that engaged leaders are key to business success. According to research from MIT, the best leaders are "charismatic connectors, who circulate actively, giving their time democratically to others, engaging in brief but energetic conversations and who listen at least as much as they talk."

Strong listeners are effective leaders and essential to engaged teams, which correlate with positive business performance. By fostering an environment of open feedback based on active listening, organizations can better connect internal and external feedback to improve overall performance.

So where to begin?

Foster Positive Dialogue

Through active listening, leaders can gain more insights than by simply instructing. But some conversations can be more difficult than others.

Appreciative Inquiry, a conversational model developed by Case Western University in the late 80s, is an approach that focuses on creating a positive environment to drive candid reflection. With this method, leaders pose questions that allow others to enter a meaningful conversation showing their best side. This approach promotes constructive feedback, with both parties more likely to be engaged in a dialogue that gets to the heart of the matter. Arguably this method can also help employees feel more appreciated – a key driver of engagement.

Connect Employee Feedback to Customer Insights

Employee engagement is important, as employee performance impacts business performance. Listening to employees is becoming just as important as listening to customers. Increasingly, organizations are looking at tools that allow them to link systems that incorporate customer insight with employee data and feedback. Organizations such as Hulu and Ebay are creating sophisticated feedback loops that connect these two important audiences. New research suggests that employee feedback can help companies better adapt to customer expectations, essentially making the employee the voice of the customer. Such an approach not only helps improve the customer experience, but also helps management teams coach employees, assess whether the right resources are in place and identify opportunities that lead to innovation on *behalf* of customers.

David Oliver, Director of Client Insight, Aon, focuses on analyzing customer feedback and underscores the importance of connecting feedback throughout an organization. The first step in the process is asking the right questions and actively listening. “Listening to employees helps organizations better understand what customers are saying. When we’re able to connect employee feedback to client results, we’re able to extract the strongest insights that allow for continuous improvement.”

Don’t Forget to Ask

Sometimes, it’s just about *asking* for feedback and actively listening – and being open – to what is shared. Oliver emphasizes the importance of the “right knowledge”, even if it is not always positive. “Such dialogue is critical to improving the overall customer experience,” as analysis of and action upon feedback can provide interesting opportunities for improvement that might have otherwise gone unnoticed.

So how do we become better listeners?

The 5 Habits Of Highly Effective Listeners

From surveys and focus groups to sophisticated systems, there are various ways that organizations listen to their employees and customers. One of the more effective forms of communication is still one-on-one with listening central to taking action and responding to high-value discussions. As listening is an active skill that requires deliberation and attention, it can also be improved with practice, if the listener follows some basic principles

- **Be empathetic:** It’s easy to become impatient when interacting with people who aren’t communicating clearly. By paying close attention to what they are saying and giving prompts and appropriate encouragement, a good listener can help *others* communicate better.
- **Give positive verbal and nonverbal signals:** This includes eye contact, leaning your body in, saying yes, and adopting a generally attentive demeanor. These may sound like basic interpersonal skills, but in a business environment it is surprising how often such fundamentals are missed in pursuit of keeping to schedule or maintaining the traditional business persona of calm rational assessment.
- **Avoid verbal and nonverbal distractions:** While checking a watch for the time or checking email may seem minor, to the speaker they send a signal that your attention is elsewhere. Not only can this seem rude, but the speaker might lose their train of thought, preventing them from making an important point.
- **Pay attention:** Positive verbal cues aren’t just helpful for the person doing the talking – they also have direct benefits for the listener as well. Maintaining eye contact and giving short responses can help the mind stay focused.
- **Ask pertinent questions:** Not everyone is a naturally effective communicator. But everyone can be a good listener and a good correspondent – helping prompt the person they are communicating with to better express their thoughts. The key is to ask the right questions at the right time. After all, good listening often happens as part of a conversation – and all good conversations are two-way, with both participants contributing. “Leaders should use open-ended, insight provoking questions,” says Adler. “An active listener can help the speaker trigger self-analysis by prompting a few starter questions.”

TALKING POINTS



“Listening is an overlooked tool that creates an environment of safety when done well. Several studies over the decades have estimated that we spend anywhere from a third to half our time listening. And yet we don’t retain very much.” – Melissa Daimler, Head, Global Learning & Organizational Development, Twitter



"Success is about listening more than talking... it's one of the fastest ways to learn. Active listening requires understanding, and that involves asking follow-up questions and watching body language. A smart person listens and learns." – Abdulla Al Gurg, General Manager, Easa Saleh Al Gurg Group



"Emphatic listening means listening to what we and others share and have in common... Being an active listener assures one has access to a wealth of information and ideas" – Dr. Sheri N/ Everts, Chancellor, Appalachian State University

FURTHER READING

- Why Business Leaders Need To 'Tune In' To Their People – Entrepreneur, September 22, 2016
- Why Listening Might Be The Most Important Skill To Hire For – Fast Company, September 21, 2016 – Harvard Business Review
- Learning To Listen – The Link, September 2, 2016
- Using Your Employees Voices To Transform Customer Experience – Customer Think, September 12, 2016 – Harvard Business Review – August 15, 2016
- Listening Effectively – Wright State University
- Aon Hewitt's Model Of Employee Engagment – Aon report

