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Leadership Essentials

Conversation

Authentic leaders understand the power of conversation and how to listen



“Conversations hold a lot of power. They make your intentions clear, establish bonds between you and others, and can make or break a first impression when you meet someone new. The words you choose to use and how you choose to use them can make you seem smart, foolish, warm, distant, bold, shy, or anything in between.” Demers, J. (2015)

Listening Skills

Active listening is the basis for all effective conversation. It gives you the information you need to make the best decisions or solve problems satisfactorily. Active listening means:

- Listening to the words being said;
- Listening for the meaning behind the words being said, - noting tone, volume, emphasis, expression and pauses;
- Watching for any body language or non-verbal signs (facial expression, gestures, posture and eye contact) that backs up, contradicts or adds to your understanding of the words being said.

Active listening also involves checking that what you think you've heard is what the person speaking meant to convey. Feedback is an essential part of this and involves:

- Paraphrasing or summarising what you've heard;
- Commenting (if appropriate) on any contradictions you are picking up between their words and their body language / voice indicators.

Sometimes, it is important to encourage a person to continue talking in order to clarify a situation, get more information, or to express themselves fully. You can encourage a person to continue by:

- Using body language appropriately (this is a form of feedback) - e.g. adopt an open, relaxed posture; and nod when the talker pauses. Gently and un-obviously mirroring the talker's own body language (providing it is not aggressive or very passive) can create feelings of empathy between you;
- Asking open questions (i.e. questions that are difficult to answer with one word);
- Asking questions to clarify points;
- Allowing pauses so that the speaker has time to gather their thoughts about what to say next;
- Feeding back what you're seeing/hearing;
- When asked a direct question yourself, think about the feeling that lies behind it, not the question itself.

Remember that people are always impressed when you can remember in future the conversations exact content and expressions that the person used in past conversations.

Storytelling

'Storytelling' within an organisation refers to describing, explaining or illustrating something in such a way that it touches people's emotions and sticks in their heads. A good story goes beyond words to build up pictures in the listeners mind. A carefully crafted story can hold people 'spellbound'.

All organisations have their stories; for example:

An employee went shopping and bought up the local store's entire stock of his organisation's products, because the labels hadn't been put on straight and he didn't want his organisation to look sloppy. His organisation repaid him and praised him."

Stories can be persuasive, influential, can build rapport, make important information more memorable and inspire action among your team. Before you create one, think through what purpose you want it to achieve. However, whatever their purpose, all stories should be:

- Simple and straightforward;
- Authentic and believable;
- Short;
- About someone the listeners can identify with, have empathy for or recognise within their own lives.

Stories usually follow this pattern:



Do not restrict storytelling to your employees; other stakeholders, like customers and suppliers can benefit too.

Look out for events in your organisation that you can turn into stories, then think when it is best to tell them. One important additional tip: Never tell a story which is simply bragging about something you've done or achieved. This can provoke the sort of emotion in your listeners that might actually stop them listening.

Conversational Leadership

Leaders today engage with employees in a way that resembles an ordinary person-to-person conversation rather than a set of directions or commands. When talking to anybody at work, the particular words you use, the tone you choose, the gestures and facial expressions you employ must always be influenced by what you want to achieve in that conversation. The most successful leaders have a lot of conversations, but do not tend to give instructions during them. Instead they tend to ask lots of questions.

Do remember however that sarcasm, labelling people, over-generalising with sweeping statements, finger pointing and shouting, however justified they feel, will always be perceived as aggressive and will invariably lead to problems.

Saying 'yes' to a request because you don't have the courage or energy to say 'no', but should have done, will also lead to further problems later.

In addition, consider the difference in tone and attitude between the following three statements:

"It's not fair! All the other staff got bonuses!"

"I might have known you'd mess this up. Get it fixed. Now!"

"There is a problem. I'd like to meet and see what we can do about it."

The first is very child-like – whiny and disempowered. The second is the sort of tone a parent might take with a child – giving orders, and being rather patronising. The third is neutral, neither childish nor parental, we refer to it simply as 'adult'.

This is known as Transactional Analysis (or TA as it is often called), a model of people and relationships that was developed during the 1960s by Dr. Eric Berne. When two people communicate, each exchange is known as a 'transaction'. The third approach to a conversation has proved to be the most powerful, and the most effective in getting things done. It is well worth trying to purposefully initiate conversations in this adult fashion as often as you can, until it becomes second nature.

The Power of Conversation

Demers, J. (2015) writes that the way you present yourself through conversation is vitally important if you want to make a powerful impression 'and garner more respect and admiration in a professional environment', and observes that, consciously or unconsciously, 'powerful people tend to adopt and use these seven habits, all of which lead to a more powerful, memorable presence':

They have something worth saying. This isn't because powerful people naturally have more interesting things to say than the average person; it's because when they think of something to say, they hold onto it, think critically about whether it's worth saying, and if it isn't, they let it go.

They aren't afraid of silence. Effective speakers and powerful conversationalists understand that there's more power in silence than there are in empty words.

They don't dominate the conversation. Instead of talking all about themselves, powerful people tend to let other people do the talking.

They don't argue. Instead of arguing, present a different opinion.

They avoid buzzwords, clichés, and euphemisms. Try to speak your thoughts as clearly and as directly as possible.

They use simple words. Those long, complicated, highly specific terms may look great in writing, and they may work for specific purposes, but in the context of conversation they might confuse your audience.

They have varied, dynamic intonation. The most powerful speakers use a wide variety of different tones and inflections to add a layer of emotional expression to their words.

Demers, J. (2015)

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