

Irritating Listening Habits

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Employees talk a lot about their managers. Some good, a lot bad. Let's examine some of the more common statements employees make about their managers when it comes to listening. While reading these, try to determine objectively if you are guilty of any of them. If so, you will know where to begin your listening improvement program.

"He does all the talking; I go in with a problem and never get a chance to open my mouth." The classic managerial problem -- verbal diarrhea. Many managers are of the old school that believes that speech is power. These managers monopolize the conversation by doing all the talking. They tell their employees what their problems are. They tell their employees how to solve these apparent problems. They remain oblivious to what is really happening around them when it comes to their employees. If they only allowed their employees to speak their piece, they'd learn something very important - how to be an effective manager.

"She interrupts me when I talk." This is as bad as or worse than the previous statement. How do you feel when somebody finishes your statement or tells you, "I know what you mean," before you've even finished your message? Don't step on your employees' sentences - pay them the courtesy of allowing them to finish their train of thought.

"My manager never looks at me when I talk; I'm not sure he's listening." Isn't it ironic that although you listen with your ears, people judge whether you are listening by looking at your eyes? This is easily one of the most common complaints. Maintaining a gentle, intermittent eye contact is a skill that is integral to being an effective listener. If you don't believe it, think about how you feel when somebody doesn't look at you when you are speaking.

"My manager makes me feel I'm wasting her time." This is primarily an attitudinal problem. However, it is communicated to your employees through the way you say and do things. For instance, you can communicate boredom through toying with a pencil, paper, or some other item while your employee is talking. Other managers communicate disinterest through doodling, shuffling through papers, wiping glasses, or playing with a pipe or cigarettes. Another classic way of communicating that the employee is wasting your time is by frequently looking at your watch or the clock while the employee is speaking, or by not stopping what you are doing and giving your full attention to the employee who enters. Always to act rushed and make comments about your busy day will also tell your employees that they are wasting your time when they come in to speak with you. It seems contradictory that a manager should feel that her employees are wasting their time when they come in to seek managerial guidance. Unfortunately, too many managers have this attitude; whether they realize it or not, they communicate it non-verbally to their employees.

"My manager seems too preoccupied with the telephone." Managers frequently ignore an employee by taking incoming phone calls or making outgoing calls while the employee is in the office for a serious conversation. When a manager interrupts his employee to make a phone call, that employee has to believe that the manager's attention throughout the conversation was focused more on the upcoming call than on the conversation. Obviously, this makes the employee feel unimportant, to say the least. Why not hold all incoming calls while employees are in your office to talk to you, or even take the phone off the hook?

"My manager's facial expressions and body language keep me guessing as to whether she is listening to me or not." A number of managers must believe that they are in a negotiation session when talking to their employees, because they show a total lack of emotion in facial expression. This effectively keeps the employee wondering whether her manager is following her message or not. It is also an ideal way for the manager to show a total lack of empathy for the employee. Of course, some managers overcompensate with facial expressions and body language while listening to their employees. For instance, some managers try to "stare down" their employees with eye contact. Sometimes the eye contact is so intense that the employees begin to wonder if something is wrong with their appearance. Although they are careful not to verbalize it, some managers non-verbally show that they disagree with what the employee is saying before the employee is finished. This is extremely frustrating for the employee and counterproductive for the relationship between the two. Many managers also project impatience, acting as though they are just waiting for the employee to finish so they can interject something of their own.

"My manager sits too close to me." This is the proverbial territorial violation. The manager violates the employee's personal space, often without even realizing it. We talk more about personal space and territory later; but just to drive the point home, how would you feel if you were in an elevator all by yourself and one other person entered and stood right next to you? Most people would feel extremely uncomfortable, tense, and distrustful of the "intruder." Although we allow those we know to get closer to us than those we do not know, when someone gets inappropriately close - regardless of the relationship - we get the same feelings we experienced with that person in the elevator.

"I think my manager just came back from a seminar on listening. He's overdoing it." Sometimes managers get carried away with their newly found active listening skills. They were taught to have eye contact during listening, and they overdo it by staring down the speaker. They were taught to nod their heads to show that they are following the speaker, and they use all too many head nods. They were taught to project appropriate facial expressions while listening, and they put their faces through all types of contortions. The bottom line is superficial listening. The employee very easily sees through this ruse. They know their manager is trying to listen the way he was told a manager should appear to be listening, but it is obviously artificial. All good things, including listening, require moderation and appropriate application. Too much exaggerated listening is just as bad as, if not worse than, not listening at all.

"My manager is too easily distracted from listening to me and my problems."

Employees resent managers who are too easily distracted by external noise, passersby, and employee statements that remind them of prior experiences they've had or heard of. They resent managers who are always trying to get ahead of their story ... and guess what their point is. They resent managers who consistently interrupt the conversation by saying, "That reminds me of..." They resent managers who always look out the window to see if anything more interesting is happening outside their office than inside it. They resent managers who continue to read or write while employees are trying to converse with them. They resent managers who give the impression that they couldn't care less about employees and their problems.

Here are some other highly irritating listening habits that employees complain about when it comes to their managers.

"He paces back and forth while I'm talking."

"She never smiles - I'm afraid to talk to her."

"He asks questions as if doubting everything I say."

"Her questions and comments get me off the subject."

"Whenever I make a suggestion, he pooh-poohs it."

"My manager puts me on the defensive when I ask a question or make a suggestion about improving things."

"My manager rephrases what I say as if I hadn't said it right: "Oh, do you mean...?"

"My manager frequently answers my questions with other questions."

"My manager smiles or wise-cracks all the time, even when I am telling her about a serious problem of mind."

"My manager postpones the problems."

"My manager walks away from me while I am talking."

"My manager acts as if he knows it all and doesn't give me the benefit of the doubt to have the least bit of intelligence for meaningful input into the job situation."

If any of these poor listening habits apply to your style of listening, we suggest that you make haste and change them. The end result of improvement in your listening skills will be your employees saying: "I like my manager - he listens to me." And, "She really understands me and my problems. I like working for her."

If you are really willing to learn how to listen, it will take a lot of hard work to learn the skills, and constant practice to keep them in shape. The most important step is realizing that listening is a necessary skill, as important as other communication skills such as reading, writing, and speaking. Especially necessary is the understanding that listening should not take a secondary position to speaking, its verbal counterpart. Speaking has traditionally been a favorite child, but you should realize that when no one listens, it is pointless to speak. Employees feel relieved when they find managers who understand what they have to say about their problems. Once you truly try to understand your employee by actively listening to them, they will most likely reciprocate by listening to you and trying to understand your point of view. Isn't this what managers are all about?