Individual Case Analysis

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Emotional Intelligence, or EQ, in the business world is a field of study that is quickly gaining popularity. Emotional Intelligence refers to one’s ability to perceive, assess, and manage the emotions of one’s self, and of others (Baker, 2011, p. 25). Being able to manage emotions is a fundamental component of communication, and proactive listening is the key behind it all.

Background

More than ever before, competently sharing and receiving information in the workplace is central to increasing productivity and efficiency. Decentralization, with its resulting delegation of authority, has increased the need for individuals to learn how to interact in a professional setting (Bartholome, P., DeLisser, D., & Nichols, M. S., 2003, pp. 5). Listening is the key to communication, but it is a skill that is often found lacking in the workplace.

There is a common perception in business that if we learned to listen we would no longer need to compete (Bartholome). But what is listening? Responsible listening is not simply a matter of being in the same room as someone who is talking. It does not mean just being friendly, or susceptible. Listening is not a one-dimensional activity. Listening is a conversation meant to create and affirm social relationships based on understanding and trust. Listening is an educated and engaged activity that involves an analysis of impressions and interpretations (Boxer).

When we fail to listen proactively it is not only costly to an organization and ineffective, it is damaging to personal relationships and undermines an individual’s influential power. Such reasons behind the importance of listening stretch far beyond business explanations. Listening has important mental, physical, and emotional dimensions to individuals.

Mental

Business professionals across the board agree that listening is a key skill to establishing quality work. The problem is that too often this agreement is only found on paper. In actual daily interaction, few see the importance of formalized listening training. Business professionals spend 32 percent of their workday listening. Of that percent, most report only 25 percent listening efficiency, or actually remembering and comprehending what was said in order to act. Close to 95 percent of people reported regularly making up some part of their conversation with others, or coming to conclusions that were not emphatically stated (Wolvin). Such mistakes can be costly. Andrew Wolvin, a listening expert, argues that, “With 100 million workers in the work-place, a simple $10 mistake as a result of poor listening, would cost 1 billion dollars” (Wolvin).

Most modern-day communities place a high emphasis on the individual, and as a result offer many different ideals and images a person can choose to personify. “We have a vast repertoire of identities at our disposal. We choose to present ourselves in a certain way and look for approval” (Boxer, 2002, pp. 55). In his theory of love relationships, Zygmunt Bauman argues that feeling love and acceptance from other human beings is central to development and growth. Love is the act of affirming—or accepting— not only the person, but also everything that contributes to making that person unique (Bauman, 1990, pp. 98).

Listening, not only to an individual’s words but also to their tone and body language, is central to affirmation. Listening to others creates an environment of trust, comfort, and accessibility. When an individual does not feel this connection from another person, they look to other models to feel that void. Some look to consumerism or market-generated means of finding fulfillment, while others try to follow examples of successful individuals perpetuated by the media. Some find acceptance through therapy, trading money for affirmation. While each of these methods can offer some type of benefit, they can only go so far. We are social beings and have a need to be validated by those we have a personal relationship and connection with.

Today many are finding acceptance through social media. The Internet is a powerful tool that has changed the way we interact with each other and our surroundings. It has especially impacted business, increasing efficiency as other mediums for communication have been introduced. Social media specifically has had a tremendous impact on the world not only socially, but also politically and economically. What many don’t realize is that social media lowers social connectedness. In an attempt to find acceptance from others we assume a new identity and find conflict in trying to reconcile what we are with what we portray. Too often interpersonal communication tools offered on the Internet are being used to replace rather than enhance communication.

Emails, phones, and technological communication are a way of hiding from the demands and time constraints of building individual relationships while still completing the necessary amount of work (P. D. N. , ). To a large degree the Internet is “nameless and faceless” (Boxer, 2002, pp. 62). Internet users feel a certain amount of anonymity and safety because there is no face connected to their usage. They are more willing to offer information that can be highly insensitive or often misunderstood, damaging relationships of trust.

Stephen Covey explains that the power behind face-to-face interaction is because less than 10 percent of communication is verbal, and around 55 percent is body language. Personal conduct in a social setting and being able to read social cues has a tremendous impact on communicating. He counsels that behind every message a person voices, there are countless more left unsaid. What makes people effective is their ability to recognize and interpret the message not being said and act accordingly (Covey, 1989, pp. 27-40). On the Internet you lose this ability to read the unspoken message and tailor your message accordingly. Often emotion is what drives action, and when you are unable to follow the conveyed emotions of facial expressions or body language, it is often difficult to connect to another individual on a personal level.

It’s for this reason that Steve Lund, Vice Chairman of the Board of Directors for Nu Skin Enterprises, will rarely send an email when dealing with sensitive information. While Nu Skin Enterprises spread across the globe to nearly fifty countries, Lund states that if a subject is personal or likely to be misunderstood, the company will fly in representatives to main headquarters in order to meet face-to-face (S. Lund, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Michelle Moore, a manager of an event coordinating operation, maintains that email should be saved only for back up and reminders. She believes that more than a loss of personal and individual communication, technology has increased the need to multi-task. By focusing on multiple things at once, it is easy to lose the ability to pay attention to an individual and ensure you are meeting his or her needs (M. Moore, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

Tim Morrison works as an academic manager in charge of student affairs. Because of the sensitive and personal nature of most of the interviews he holds with students daily, Morrison explains that it would be impossible to do his job properly using only the Internet. Face-to-face interaction allows him to truly understand the issue and be perceived as a friend to the student (T. Morrison, personal communication, March 5, 2012).

Physical

The act of listening is not only important from a mental standpoint; it is very much a physical activity. Social interactions that are key components of listening—such as smiling or making eye contact—neurologically engages stimuli in the brain that work to deepen social attachment. Touch and proximity increase an individual’s heart rate and stimulates physical processes that are engaging and emotional. Listening is a process that involves receiving, attending, encoding, and assigning meaning (Wolvin). Facial expressions reflect emotion (mostly universal). Facial expression is a component of naturally occurring emotion. It is a way to connect to others. Emotion is motivation for individual action.

Social competence comes through shared experiences recognizing the commonality of parts of speech. The term “how are you” for example is generally perceived as a greeting and not a question of health (Boxer). Other parts of speech work to set the tone and atmosphere of communicative interaction. The word “um” conveys a sense of hesitancy, weakness, and ambiguity. It makes people feel uncomfortable (Turnbell).

Emotional

Listening develops emotional maturity and is a characteristic of responsible and influential leadership. Everyone has different experiences by which they perceive the world, and how we see the world governs how we act toward it (Covey, 1989, p. 17). Because everyone has unique experiences that tend to govern how they interpret the world, a vital part of listening is understanding.

Responsible listening is more than getting your point across. “The goal of conversation is to achieve understanding, not just to talk” (Baker, 2011, p. 10). Listening involves confidently listening to other viewpoints that may not be your own. To truly understand another’s opinion, it is imperative to try to understand that person’s background. When listening to someone it is important to maintain a comfortable, non-judgmental environment where the other person will feel comfortable in responding. Waiting until the individuals has said

The best listeners try to understand the other point of view, finish by asking questions, and then set an appointment to meet again in the near future. Often when people encounter a new phenomena, they make assumptions of meaning that may or may not be accurate (Boxer). Waiting to give a response allows the listener time to put all the pieces together. Also, the best decisions are never made on the spot. When people have the luxury of thinking over a situation for a day or two, particularly in the morning hours after a good nights sleep, they tend to make more informed decisions (Baker, 2011, p. 99-100).

The first meeting should always be used to gather facts (Tim Morrison, personal communication, March 5, 2012). While it is important to do your homework beforehand, the first interaction, whether it’s discussing a student’s academic standing or the details of an upcoming conference, should be used to listen to the other person’s ideas. If the situation involves tweaking a person’s viewpoint or explaining points they may not have considered in follow up meetings, such conflict management will go over much better if the person on the opposite end feels like his or her point has been considered and understood (Michelle Moore, personal communication, March 8, 2012).

There are certain involved behaviors, such as asking questions, and traits, such as eye contact, that aids in the listening process and helps the listener be viewed as approachable and competent. Nodding, showing interest, waiting to speak until the person has finished, smiling, being in close proximity, and asking follow-up questions for clarification develop a foundation of trust and help ensure that the message is understood properly. “Those who are able to maintain verbal and physical conduct are viewed as confident and approachable individuals” (bunch of authors).

Listening is an inherently civil act (Bartholome). While leadership is often defined as the act of persuading others to listen to and follow us, in order to accomplish that we must first listen to them.

Steve Lund holds the philosophy that listening starts with respect. He believes that we have an inherent obligation to take everyone seriously, and that people respond best when they feel they are trusted, valued, and appreciated. Lund explains most CEOs are afraid of getting on the same level as their employees because they don’t want to lose authority or be perceived as weak. Breaking down these artificial barriers is the key to facilitating communication, however. Making your employees your friends creates a sense of unity, common vision, and trust that should not impede expectations (Lund, personal communication, 2012).

Compare and Contrast

Proactive listening is commonly reported as one of the most valuable workplace skills, but often that statistic doesn’t translate over into real life. Many have experiences where they have felt neglected, overlooked, and undervalued at work, or that any input they seem to offer is never heard.

One of the most recent examples in the media is the example of Brother Randy Bott. Based on purported comments that have captured a nation-wide audience, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and its institutions have had to deal with unwanted negative media attention. Many individuals are upset with Brother Bott; some charge him with ruining the Church, and others ask that he be excommunicated. While the situation is unfortunate, what is most disturbing is the fact that no one has stopped to listen to all sides of the issue. Few are asking Brother Bott and trying to understand what actually happened. Many don’t pause long enough to consider that if Brother Bott were making certain false allegations in his classroom, those statements would most likely have been addressed before now in his career. As a result, Brother Bott is facing largely unwarranted criticism that does little to help mend the image of the Church.

I compare that experience to the one I had while interviewing Elder Lund. I had never met him before the interview and only knew of him through a personal connection. When we started our interview, he spent most of the time asking about my background. He asked what I was studying, what my plans were, and how I felt about certain issues. He shared some experiences from his family. He was genuine, kind, and would refer to comments I had made early throughout our interview. At the conclusion of our interview he shook my hand, escorted me to the door, and asked to be informed of important events that happen in my life. It is little wonder to see why Elder Lund is successful. He has excellent credentials, but even more than his academic background, he cares about and listens to everyone he comes in contact with. Not once during our thirty-minute interview did he check his phone or computer, despite his busy schedule. I came in looking for answers, but I left with an example. Even more than what Elder Lund said, it was what he did that left an impression on me. I would willingly trust his advice and do what he asks because he took that time to listen to me.

Elder Lund also shared the story of a man he admired: President Thomas S. Monson. Elder Marion D. Hanks was in a rest home battling with Alzheimer’s disease. President Monson was concerned for his friend and his friend’s grandchildren, that they would not be able to have one last lucid and attentive visit with their grandfather. Elder Monson had an idea to expand a picture of Elder Hanks participating in a basketball championship decades earlier. In the picture each teammate was smiling after a hard-fought victory. President Monson took this picture to Elder Hanks, who, surrounded by his grandchildren, began telling stories of each teammate in the photograph. Simply by remembering a little fact from the distant past, President Monson was able to bridge a gap between two generations and offer a special family memory (Lund, personal communication, 2012).

Listening is an essential and defining characteristic that separates managers from effective and influential leaders. It’s a skill that takes time and is one that most everyone could stand to improve. But it’s well worth the effort.

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