

Hear and Now: The Art of Listening

By **Amelia Chan, CHRP**

HR PROFESSIONALS SEEK INSPIRATION, insights and ideas on a daily basis. After all, herein dwells innovation and no small measure of fulfillment. However, the greatest asset available to HR in this arena is often the most underutilized—namely, our listening skills.

Neither the challenge nor the barriers are unique to HR, but shared by everybody on the planet to varying degrees. Nonetheless, nobody likes to have poor listening skills pointed out.

What if there was an extreme upside? What if a measure of humility might restore both the humanity of communications and provide better business results than imagined? Can listening really make that much of a difference?

The Most Critical Skill of All

According to author Bernard Ferrari who wrote *Power Listening: Mastering the Most Critical Business Skill of All*, the answer is a definitive ‘yes’. Ferrari holds good listening in the pole position for leading business success and integral to gaining the fresh insights and ideas which maintain

that success. Using his version of the 80/20 rule, we should devote 80 per cent of each conversation to listening and only 20 percent to speaking—primarily asking questions.

Unfortunately, while the math ratio of ears to mouth supports the importance of listening, Ferrari points to just the opposite in terms of where our efforts are most often focused. Presentation has become a primary skill set, especially in our interconnected, multi-media moment. Given the exponential growth of communications technologies, the core concentration on communications is understandable.

While presentation is key, good listening is the foundation upon which better business is built. However, many executives take listening skills at face value and spend little time in their development.

As communicators, we have come far. As listeners, we need a rethink.

Three Traits of Great Listeners

The thrust of Ferrari’s research is that listening and great leadership are intrinsically linked. Of greater application are the three core traits he identifies in any

great listener. Across industry and rank, they show respect for others’ ideas, talk less than they listen, and challenge the assumptions and subtext underlying each conversation.

The art of listening requires “slowing down” to be in the moment. If we are to understand the essence of what others are trying to convey, conversations need to be approached differently. While invariably there are desired outcomes for both parties in any conversation, the opportunity to recognize the contributions being made and explore beneath the surface yields valuable outcomes.

If we want to motivate and engage, we need to keep the lines of communication open and reciprocal.

The more tools we apply, the more isolated or separate from each other we often seem to become. We are caught up with the tools but not the “talk”. The greatest gift we can give others is being present in the here and now.

While modern technologies can be used creatively for dynamic exchange, they can also reduce communications to a series of “me to you” messages—neither



requiring nor generating a great deal of engaged interaction between parties. Likewise, the hierarchical history of the workplace has been traditionally grounded in similar uni-directional communications.

Two Steps Ahead (or Getting Ahead of Yourself?)

This leads to a breakdown in communications, which is understandable. Fortunately, it is also remediable.

We often hear what we want to hear instead of listening without judgment and for comprehension. We aren't connecting when we are just moving the conversation along—and people can sense it when you are only going through the motions or paying lip service with your ears.

Part of the reason for that is the inherently task-driven mindset that predominates in many work cultures. This creates a checklist mentality, whereby the nuance of response is easily passed over. Selective hearing is a common enough affliction for the goal-oriented, but perfunctory listening is more pervasive. As a result, despite the key messaging and cleverness of our communications, much of what we have to offer one another, whether frustration or innovation, simply fails to be addressed—or possibly even heard.

We are trained to look for the skills, knowledge and experience for the immediate roles to be filled. In doing so, we can fail to recognize of the value-added qualities of a candidate once they become employees. It's these hidden talents and special qualities that our future stars need to develop to become the leaders of tomorrow. We just need to be more aware of the potentials to be found outside the scope of our expectations.

While it might be a truism for HR professionals, we can't truly get to know people if we aren't listening to them.

The Universal Language

Listening is the true universal language. It doesn't matter whether we are familiar with the dialect or understand the words. The meaning (and interpretation of the intent) comes from more than the words being used via all the nonverbal cues of the message being delivered. The words themselves actually only communicate a small percentage of the message.

When we are relying solely on technology to communicate, we can actually be

missing up to 80 per cent of the actual communications—and the potential.

Human resources is really about communication at its core. We, as a function, are employed to think for our living—and our ears are our minds best asset. We can't provide strategies when we don't have a good handle on the situation. For this, we need to listen.

"break the greatest communicator barrier of all—the one between our ears"

Listening with Fresh Ears

Beyond Ferrari's three essentials, consider the following:

Anchor Your Intentions: Make a list of things you need to do and prioritize. Clear your mind of the chatter through active meditation. Focus gives you clarity of action and the presence of mind to be open and "available" to your management team and employees.

Be, Hear, Now: Be cognizant that we are neurologically incapable of hearing and formulating a response at the same time, so be in the moment. Instead of waiting for the next moment to speak or focusing on making your point, hear what the other person is telling you – this includes all body language, visual cues and tone.

Tailor Your Talk: Focusing on your audience is the key to creating compact communications tailored to their ears and your mutual need. It also keeps your talk to a tailored minimum and ears open to opportunity. This fits well with Ferrari's 80/20 approach and allows your conversation partner a full 80 per cent input.

Reflect, Question, Connect: If we are basing our responses on our assumptions

or imperatives alone, we are listening to understand. Commit as much of your talking as possible to asking questions. This not only garners valuable information, it provides assurance that you are indeed listening—and that your conversation partner is being heard. While this fuels innovative potential, it also builds a reciprocity of respect.

Avoid Assumptions: We have all judged books by their cover only to 'discover' their worth later. In HR, there is seldom a later without consequence. Talent is hired elsewhere and turnover tells its own internal tale. Consciously or not, in a busy environment and our rush to 'get things done', we make a lot of quick judgments of an individual or a situation.

Superficialities can be misleading. Diversity in culture and communication styles can also lead to misunderstandings. These simple errors can lead to ineffective interactions, impasses or even bigger problems. Fortunately, they can also be eliminated with more mindful exchanges from the start.

Lead With Your Ears (and Actions): People are influenced and inspired by conviction and clarity of action. Leadership needs HR to foster that connection with the executive, managers and employees alike. Employees want to be heard, but need to see that what they say and do makes a difference. CEOs, executives and managers need to lead with words and actions that showcase vision, humility and interest. The reason for HR's seat at the table in the modern 'idea' economy has never been more apparent.

While all of us can further hone our listening skills, it is refreshing to realize how a small shift in our attentions can remove many of the existing obstacles to innovation and productivity in the workplace. There is no need for a complete overhaul, just some fine tuning and smart modifications applied to break the greatest communicator barrier of all—the one between our ears. ♦

As founder and principal consultant of Higher Options Consulting Services (hr-options.com), Amelia Chan is passionate about operational excellence and employee engagement. Her boutique consultancy provides a wide range of human resources and immigration services.