

Please listen carefully

Here's an imaginary, but probably not unrealistic, conversation between a golf course superintendent and one of his employees:

Employee: "I'm really upset! Mr. Jones from the green committee scolded me about that problem spot on the eighth green right in front of several members."

Superintendent: "You shouldn't be upset. He's on the green committee, and he's concerned about a legitimate problem."

Now answer three questions about this conversation: What's the employee concerned about? What did the superintendent hear? Did the superintendent really listen?

What's the problem? The superintendent (a) didn't hear the employee's real concern, and (b) he interjected his opinion when the employee had begun to discuss what had happened. The employee is left feeling the superintendent isn't concerned about his opinions or feelings. Unfortunately, the result is the employee is likely to become less open, more uncertain and less motivated.

Let's look at a more productive response:

Employee: "I'm really upset. Mr. Jones from the green committee scolded me about that problem spot on the eighth green right in front of several members."

Superintendent: "It sounds like you're angry with Mr. Jones for making you look bad in front of members."

Employee: "Yes, because he's on the committee, he knows how hard we've worked on that green."

Superintendent: "What do you suggest we do?"

Employee: "Pay more attention to the eighth green and fix the problem."

In this version, the superintendent didn't seem to talk much. The role was listening to the employee talk through his concerns and feelings. By listening and facilitating, the superintendent enabled the employee to validate a concern about Mr. Jones' comments, work through his anger and propose a solution. In this version, the employee concludes there was a good discussion and feels the incident is closed, maintaining or increasing his motivation.

This example highlights two key points about listening: One, listen carefully to

understand exactly what's being said, and two, active or empathic listening enhances communication.

Many people don't fully listen to what's being said or ask follow-up questions to elicit greater understanding or additional information. More often than not, when someone initiates a conversation, he has spent time thinking about the idea, the issue, the concern or the situation. Interjecting off-the-cuff ideas and responses before someone completely explains their thinking loses the fruits of the time spent with that individual and diminishes the quality of the interpersonal relationship.

In the first example conversation, the superintendent didn't hear what the employee was communicating, and the premature response brought the conversation to an unsuccessful end. In the second version, the superintendent heard the employee was talking about his feelings from the incident with Mr. Jones, not about the problem on the eighth green, and continued the conversation with a satisfactory resolution.

No interruptions please

Even worse than not completely listening, people often interrupt others because they think they already know what's being said. Sometimes people hear what they want to hear, not what's being said. In the following dialogue, a superintendent has just told her staff that an employee has been injured and the maintenance staff must work extra hours. Bob, the employee she expects to resist the most, approaches her after the meeting:

Bob: "I'm concerned about the extra work because I'm taking a course and have some other plans but ..."

Superintendent (interrupting): "I knew you would be a problem. We all have to do our share. We have no choice."

Bob: "Please, let me finish! What I'm trying to say is that I want to do my part. I'm even willing to do more than my share. However, it's important to me that my time is scheduled so I can finish my class and attend my sister's wedding."

Superintendent: "Oh! That's great. We can arrange that."

In the end, the outcome of this conversation was positive even though it was awkward. The superintendent made an

incorrect assumption about what Bob wanted to say. Think what might have happened had Bob not persisted.

When supervising others, the consequences of failing to allow an employee to fully express ideas, opinions and feelings and/or to not listen completely are often two-fold. First, the conversation isn't brought to a successful conclusion. Second, you've communicated the message you don't want to listen, and even more significant is future ideas, concerns and feelings might never be communicated.

Active or empathic listening enhances communication. Our tendency is to view listening as a passive activity. A more active approach to listening can be a proactive way to enhance communication with employees. The listener takes active responsibility for understanding the content and feelings behind what's being said. The listener's underlying theme is to use active listening to help others solve their problems.

What's your response?

Let's look at another example. An employee approaches you and says: "The deadline to finish fertilizing the fairways isn't realistic." The typical response would be to insist the deadline is realistic. An active listening response, however, would be: "It sounds like you're concerned about meeting the deadline." The advantage of this response is two-fold. First, you show understanding for the employee's position. Second, you and the employee can talk about the employee's feelings and meeting the deadline. The active learning approach opens the door for communication rather than contributing to a budding confrontation.

An open communication climate is created through active listening. The listener better understands what a person means and how the person feels about situations and problems. Active listening is a skill that communicates acceptance and increases interpersonal trust between employees and their supervisors. The chance of an employee leaving a conversation perceiving he has been treated fairly is heightened by the use of active listening.

My challenge to you is establish a realistic goal for the percentage of the time you'll listen with nothing else in mind. GCN



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