

COMPREHENSIVE LISTENING

Comprehensive listening, or awareness in listening, is more than just listening. It does not need ears. Beethoven the composer, Goya the painter and Ronsard the poet were perfectly receptive to sounds, to society and to human nature although they were deaf. Comprehensive listening involves taking the risk of a change of role and a waste of time.

A crisis or an unforeseeable change in the company is a kind of earthquake. When science acknowledged that it was not within its power to foresee everything, in other words to specify in advance with any accuracy where or when an earthquake would strike and how strong it would be, the concept of prevention emerged. Prevention means telling ourselves that since we cannot foresee everything, we should prepare to take what comes. Prevention is not at variance with prediction; it complements it. Comprehensive listening for a manager is to some extent prevention in that a rational analysis of the facts complements a more unconventional intelligence engaged all-out in investigating and compiling. Prevention leads to positive effects over and above the goal of saving human lives in the case of the earthquake. Earthquake proof construction generates new markets and stimulates research; training the population to make the right moves develops civic-mindedness; drawing up rescue plans obliges the authorities to take responsibility; land-use planning that complies with strict safety standards means fighting corruption. In the company too, a manager who listens and is aware transcends the goal of problem-solving. He generates added cohesion and adhesion and often shifts obstacles that emit signals too weak to have a measurable impact.

An illustration: A manager leads a team providing accounting services to internal clients. His staff acknowledge his listening skills in the annual evaluation reports. He asks them questions, provides motivation and asks their opinion and his door is always open. However, one of the services the team provides has run into serious difficulties. Despite all the manager's efforts, they fail to tell him what is wrong. The quality of service is perceived as below par, criticisms pour in, the team rebels and the manager tenses up. He finally accepts that the laid-back atmosphere he believes he can sense cannot be the source of the malfunctions since despite very different profiles they recur with all the co-workers. In addition, he observes that highly trained and independent colleagues are no hurry to explain the situation to him. In the end what he sees is that the members of the team are standing shoulder to shoulder to support each other and are suffering from the situation.

At this point the manager decides on a change of strategy. Since the information is not reaching him, he will go and get it himself. For three weeks he works one or two hours daily alongside each of the staff members who answer questions from clients. In departing from his role, the manager is taking a risk in leadership terms and is falling behind with his own work. However, his assessment, once the experiment is over, is very positive and in part surprising. He has discovered that the software used is too complex and that the requests to clients for information are not formalised and lead to the transmission of inaccurate data requiring several attempts to correct them. Lastly, he finds that the rule in force – that every email box must be empty by the end of the day – often makes for hasty responses by the staff. He realises that the true value added of the services is initially to be found in their quality

and only subsequently in the speed of their execution. He therefore decides to replace the empty email box rule with the following standard: quality must take precedence over speed; if necessary, a little more time can be taken to provide the necessary quality but the client must be informed of the delay and the reasons for it. “The clients are going to be at our throats,” comments a staff member. “Send all the clients who complain to me,” the manager suggests.

What is surprising is that the manager, who had taken this step in order to understand rather than listen, has had very useful discussions and has found himself in possession of a great deal of information that he was not expecting. Now he knows his team better. His gesture has been appreciated. He has taken the heat off by having complaints redirected to himself and has dared to step down alongside his staff, sharing the discomfort of their jobs and reinforcing motivation by introducing a standard to be interpreted rather than a rule to be followed. By listening comprehensively and approaching the epicentre of the earthquake (a risk), the manager has not only found the key to improving the quality of the service, but has also contributed to the sustainable development of the team.

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