

3-15-19 The Importance of Listening

Many years ago, I wrote about my sister Marilyn who often said she would like to hang out her shingle that said, "I will listen." She had witnessed how useful it was to do just that; nod your head and listen to people without much comment and certainly without judgement; just listen.

People need that. Don't they?

I guess that is something my sister and I have in common. We like to listen.

I have to say, though, that recently I have noticed that when listening to someone experiencing stressful circumstances, more than just listening is needed. There are times when silence is not acceptable. They need guidance. It might be "You really need to talk to a therapist." Or "You need to call your doctor." The experience might even call for advising calling the police.

A recent listening experience requiring more than silent, but active and empathic listening involved a stressful work environment. It was stressful because the boss was controlling and yelled a lot. And lied. And swore at employees.

There are some basic concepts for these situations.

1. Document
2. Speak up, in a non-argumentative way.
 - a. Say things such as, "You are yelling and that makes me feel uncomfortable."
 - b. "You are in my personal space and that makes me feel uncomfortable."
 - c. "You are swearing at me and that is unacceptable. Stop it."

The importance of these messages is that it gives the person on the receiving end an opportunity to hear what is not acceptable and do things differently. If he or she does not, then a hostile environment has been established. Then, it is time to file a report.

3. Report to HR, (Human Resources), who will listen and investigate. If the concerns are confirmed, appropriate action will be taken. The investigation will continue, and the person being investigated might be placed on paid administrative leave while that happens.

If complaints are confirmed, the offending party will have opportunities to take classes, to make amends, to offer his/her own ideas as to how to improve the situation.

It is a process and one that is necessary and worth experiencing. After all, the current experience is unacceptable and stressful. Seeking help is better than silently suffering and feeling threatened!

Other listening opportunities arrive by telephone calls to my office. Most people just have a question or two or, perhaps many, and they are grateful for answers and guidance.

Some callers are upset, nervous, anxious and near tears or angry. Angry callers need very special listening. Let them vent. Then sort things out.

Stressed, ready-to-cry callers need listening, compassion and a plan. But even, and only, compassionate listening goes a long way towards peace and understanding. It is so much easier to move forward without the stress of worries.

The nervous visitors need a listening ear also. You know, the nice ones don't complain or yell. Instead, their flushed faces give away their feelings as they ask questions. I have learned that it is so important to keep reminding them that we are civil servants and questions are okay and answers, if we can provide them, are our job. If I don't know the answer, then we can consult with others for advice.

In person, you can watch the person calm down and feel reassured.

On the phone, you can hear the person calm down.

On my busy, (messy) bulletin board at work, one of the many items is this quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson: "It is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no person can sincerely try to help another without helping him or herself. Serve and you shall be served. If you love and serve people, you cannot, by any hiding or stratagem, escape the remuneration."

He was right. By listening to people in need of answers or reassurance or plans, I have been given the opportunity to help others and that is always a gift to me.

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