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Musings

#16: The Importance of Listening April 7, 2020

An underappreciated skill is the art of listening. I mean *really* listening.

If you are wired to learn, you must listen. If you are talking, you can't be learning – you are the one transmitting information. The best executives / leaders I know are the best listeners. They give the air time to others and “manage” the discussion like a conductor to make sure every instrument gets heard. Some years ago we brought in the famed Second City to train our team on improvisation. The basic technique of improvisation is to play off the other person by saying “yes and.” The flow stops if you express disagreement. Instead, you have to listen closely and build off what the other person is saying.

Listening can be difficult. In all honesty, I sometimes write “Shut Up” at the top of my notes as I sit down for a meeting (I still talk too much!). After a meeting or exchange, you should reflect on how much of the “air time” went to you versus the other people. One danger of Twitter and most social media is that they are broadcast mechanisms vs exchange mechanisms. Many individuals achieve success because they had knowledge to contribute and ideas they wanted to share. However, when you are in the corner office, it can't be you.

Build on your listening skills and develop the skill of asking good questions. Don't interrogate with pointed questions, but ask broader “what do you think” questions which give the other person a platform to share what they know. For example, don't underestimate the knowledge of the receptionist on what is going on in an organization. They probably know more than you do. After someone comes in for an interview, the first feedback you should get is from the receptionist. How did she or he treat you? It is an analog version of Candid Camera where you can get a glimpse of someone's true DNA.

Your final ingredient is “pattern recognition.” If you are asking questions and listening, you will get lots of information. Often you get small data points which may seem insignificant but if you “register them” and then see a similar data point somewhere else, eventually you may recognize a pattern and be able to act faster. These can be patterns on the market or patterns on an individual employee.

Remember, you can't really listen if you are multitasking. Focus on the topic at hand and the person in front of you. Listening takes practice at work and at home.

Be safe.

jml