'Active' Listening Skills Encouraged

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what did he say?

'Active' Listening Skills Encouraged

By Patrick Oliver, Ranger Chief, Cleveland Metroparks Ranger Department

The Cleveland Metroparks Ranger Department is one of the largest metropolitan park Ranger departments in the country. Its territory includes 12 parks and a zoological park in a five-county area encompassing approximately 19,000 acres of land and more than 100 miles of roadway.

As a recently appointed Ranger Chief coming from outside the organization, one of my primary concerns was to talk with each member of the department personally. My one-on-one conversations with over 90 full- and part-time employees ranged between two hours to four hours. As time consuming as the process was, it was well worth the investment because of the knowledge obtained.

As a law enforcement executive you must provide vision and direction for the agency you are leading. This not only takes insight and knowledge but requires input from others in the organization. The successful law enforcement manager, just like his counterpart in the private sector, must encourage communication among all employees. This communication encourages participation, problem solving, and motivation. We first must listen to our employees in order to address their problems and concerns.

We live in an age of specialization. Our access to information is so vast it seems nearly impossible to keep up with our own areas of expertise, let alone develop the range of knowledge that businesses and professional people had a generation ago. With all the emphasis on high tech and high speed, we can easily forget that success and fulfillment are based on one low-tech thing: other people. The manager's inability to be effective and successful in the workplace is sometimes not due to his lack of technical knowledge or expertise, but to his inability to communicate with people.

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Active listening is successful because it agrees with certain fundamentals of human nature. It does not present a threat to the individual's self esteem. As long as there is a threatening atmosphere in conversation, there can be no effective communication. Second, if we can listen to the other person with understanding and acceptance, that person should be more receptive to change. Listening is a process of thinking with people and sharing their feelings and responsibility for decision-making and actions. Therefore, if we don't attack the ego of the other person and we empathize with them, we are then in an ideal position to make a suggestion or present a solution for change.

Writers Rogers and Farson recommend five basic techniques which can be used to become proficient in the skill of active listening.

1. Paraphrasing the words of the talker. This is simply repeating what the talker has said in one's own words so that she knows she was heard accurately.

2. Reflecting the implications of the talker. Here you verbally show your appreciation of the talker by extending his ideas with some comments of your own.

3. Reflecting the underlying feelings of the talker. This is when you respond to what the talker has said by being either sympathetic or empathetic to his personal experience.

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LISTENING SKILLS (continued)

Inviting further contributions of the talker. The listener shows interest and understanding of the talker by asking her to further explain why she feels as she does.

The display of non-verbal listening responses. Non-verbal communication by the listener can communicate to the talker that you're interested and concerned about his thoughts and feelings. Such responses include affirmative head-nodding and good eye contact.

Consistently practicing these five techniques can help you become an active listener.

Why is developing listening skills so important to the individual and/or the manager? For a more in-depth look at the answer, we have reviewed the writings of various experts in the areas of management and interpersonal relations. Joe D. Batten, author of Tough Minded Management, has this to say about a leader: Leaders are positive listeners. They keep an open and flexible mind. Since they encourage creativity within their organization, they listen positively to ideas that are presented, trying to discover ways that will work. Above all, they hear.

Authors Leavitt, Pondy, and Boje in Readings in Managerial Psychology, make these comments about non-verbal communication: Many a salesman has thought to himself following an important meeting with a client, "I don't know how I know it, but I'm sure we'll eventually get the contract." Yet, an analysis of the words spoken by the client reveal no indication toward approval of the contract. In fact, the words spoken may even indicate disapproval. In this instance, communication is taking place in addition to the words uttered, a form of communication labeled non-verbal. If communication is "a process by which senders and receivers of messages interact in a given social context," then we should be aware of the non-verbal elements of communication as we are of the verbal elements.

Dr. Peter Marsh, author of Eye to Eye, gives suggestions for being a good listener. People like talking about themselves. Encourage them by being a good listener. The best way of doing this is to give a lot of feedback—lots of facial expressions, nods, and other body language signals. As well as helping a conversation along, these simple signals can also be used to control it in subtle and sometimes subliminal ways. People generally like talking to those who give a lot of feedback because they appear interested and interesting. Feedback can result in even more concrete rewards. Research has shown that, at job interviews, candidates who nod are more successful than those who do not.

Authors Bernstein and Rozen of the book, Dinosaur Brains, give advice on dealing with clients. When you're confronted by an angry client you want to keep, your goal should be to calm him or her down to the point where you can both work successfully on solving the problem. You'll prob-ably be able to think of hundreds of snappy comebacks and subtle put-downs as the two of you start communicating. Your job, however, will be much easier if you keep these responses to yourself.

A client's anger is often the result of a simple misunderstanding. It's very tempting for you to rush in and explain what went wrong, but an angry person will often perceive this explanation as an attack and fight back even harder. Your first step must be to calm the client's anger. Listen and let the client know you are listening. Sometimes a client will raise a fuss because he or she thinks it's the only way to be heard. The best way to calm down someone like this is by listening, and doing it actively so that the client knows you're paying attention.

Cynthia Berryman-Fink, author of Managers Desk Reference, states why listening is important. Listening is a communication activity required of all managers at any function or level. According to some estimates, about half the total time a person spends communicating is devoted to listening.

While listening is a process that many of us take for granted, poor listening can be costly and result in production errors, disgruntled employees, conflicts, rumors, workplace accidents, and lost sales. Many organizations hire management consultants to solve problems. However, it has shown that as much as 95 percent of the solutions presented by consultants came from the employees.

Authors Pascale and Athos of Japanese Management explain why Japanese groups are more successful. The prime qualification of a Japanese leader is his acceptance by the group, and only part of that acceptance is founded on his professional merits. The group's harmony and spirit are the main concern. Whereas in the West work-group leaders tend to emphasize tasks and often neglect group maintenance activities, in Japan maintenance of a satisfied work-group goes hand-in-

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LISTENING SKILLS (Concluded)

hand with the role. Group members expect a lot from their leader for grave problems can arise if group maintenance is neglected (also true of American groups, of course).

The Japanese realize they are creating a potentially troublesome force when they establish a group. They know how easily group process can become dysfunctional. They are keenly aware of group maintenance demands and, as a result, manage groups with great care. This is the same kind of care an American manager might invest in meeting his end-of-year profit goals. While a great many American firms have adopted "team approaches" in recent years, success has been mixed. The reason believed is that American managers don't quite realize that what they are creating requires a lot of energy and attention from them to sustain.

Dr. Madry Grothe and Dr. Peter Wylie, authors of Problem Bosses, talk about one of the primary mistakes made by bosses. How many blunders and foolish notions bosses would be freed from if they could only see themselves as their employees see them? But they don't. Very few of the bosses we've run into have an accurate view of how their employees see them. As management textbooks say, they're "insulated from feedback." Even though bosses need it, they don't get straightward, candid feedback from the people who work for them.

It's a shame that bosses live in such a feedback vacuum. The employees are "experts" on their boss's behavior for they know them well. They've seen them during good times and bad. They know their patterns, habits, and idiosyncracies. They often know their bosses intimately and yet rarely share this valuable knowledge with them. So bosses operate "in the dark" deprived of important knowledge that might help them correct their management mistakes and learn to function more effectively.

From these examples and comments, it should be evident that the individual and/or manager will be more effective when he practices good interpersonal communication skills. You should remember that as a law enforcement manager you are paid to listen. The use of active listening techniques can improve your ability to effectively communicate with others. OACP

Patrick Oliver was appointed Chief of the Cleveland Metroparks Ranger Department on January 9, 1989. Chief Oliver received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Criminal Justice from Baldwin Wallace College in Berea, Ohio. In June 1991, the Chief received a Masters Degree in Business Administration from Baldwin Wallace College. Patrick Oliver has been in the Law Enforcement profession for thirteen years.

CODE THREE CALLS
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When the problem's hot and heavy
And they label the call "Code 3"
I can tell right from the beginning
That somebody really needs me.

I stop whatever I'm doing
To jump in my black-and-white.
Code Three's get first priority
Throughout the day and night.

I use my overhead and siren
To maneuver my way to the call.
I pay attention to my driving
Or I might not arrive at all.

Here comes that rush of adrenalin
Filling me from head to feet,
In anticipation of the trouble
This cop is about to meet.

It might be just about anything,
From an illness to family fight.
It might be the neighborhood weirdo
Howling at the bright moonlight.

I pause at the location given
To scope it out best I can.
I learned many years ago
That I'm just not superman!

I handle each Code 3 assignment
Like I'm selling a used car.
I can't get personally involved
Or I might earn another scar.

When I'm no longer needed
I go and park somewhere.
I write up all my paperwork.
Then radio that I'm clear.

Ever since I was a rookie
Code Three's have made me smile.
These willy-nilly Code Three calls
Make this silly damn job worthwhile!

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James T. McBride, the author of "WHO SAYS COPS CAN'T WRITE POETRY!" has accumulated more than 20 years of service as a law enforcement officer, deputy sheriff, corporate security official, police chief, military investigator and police educator. His specialty areas are crime prevention, community relations, police training, and special district policing. He holds baccalaureate degrees from Youngstown State University and a Masters of Public Administration from Cleveland State University, and is presently the Chief of Police at Lakeland Community College in Mentor, Ohio.