

Listening: The Critical Skill for Effective Leadership

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When I was a graduate student at Oregon State University (back in the dark ages when we rode dinosaurs to class), **Roy Young** had recently stepped down as department chair to take an upper administrative post. The department was sorry to see him leave. It was said about Young that he could call a faculty member into his office to discuss a contentious issue and, following the discussion, the faculty member would leave with a smile on his face, the issue having been resolved. Furthermore, he/she would think that the outcome was his/her idea! Now, that is effective leadership.

So, what was going on there? First was a leader who took the time to listen to what was on the mind of those whom he was leading. Second was a leader who made a decision and put forth a plan of action based first on listening and then by adding his own experience and wisdom. Third was a leader who worked closely with those he was leading so they felt their ideas and concerns were taken seriously and who made clear that outcomes were based, at least in part, on what he heard.

We have all heard comments regarding leaders that go something like “we have a lousy department chair—he/she never listens.” So, what does that mean? It may mean that the leader in question really doesn’t listen, but just moves forward according to his/her own ideas without seeking input from those being led. However, in some cases, there are people who think that unless a leader does things the way he/she wants, they “do not listen.” These people equate “listening” with doing things their way.

When leading a group of well-educated people, like plant pathologists, the “herding cats” analogy is often put forth. Any chance of success in such a leadership role mandates that one first listen to what the “cats” are saying. This is an important first step, so they do not become convinced you are insincere in asking their opinions. If they conclude it’s only “window dressing,” then next time the “cats” are very likely to just brush you off and go their own way.

It has been said there are many paths to success, but a certain path to failure is trying to please everyone. Leaders walk a fine line between listening to what those who they are leading have to say, and accommodating all

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these opinions. In most cases, if the leader has made clear that he/she is open to hearing input from everyone and will seriously consider each person’s views, a variety of opinions will be expressed. Listening does not mean doing whatever those you are leading say or want, but rather learning of their aspirations and concerns, soliciting their ideas and seeking any consensus that may be there, and then formulating a logical plan to achieve the visions of the group. The final decision must take into consideration not only the views of those being led, but the personal vision of the leader, and also the realities of what is being sought or demanded by those further up the leadership chain.

The challenge of effective leadership is to be acutely aware of the needs, wants, and opinions of those you lead and making it clear to the group that you are aware of these, but then to formulate policy that works to the best advantage of the group as a whole in advancing toward a common vision. It is unlikely that everyone will approve of all decisions made by a leader, but if everyone believes they “have had their say” then most will go along with decisions made. However, regardless of what approach the leader takes, some in the group may object. In my experience, to be effective, a leader must have the support of at least two-thirds of the group, preferably more. Every group is composed of those willing to lead, those who prefer to follow, and a few off on their own agenda. Recognizing that, and knowing who is who in your group, is important information for any leader.

Young had considerable interpersonal skills in working with people and was well respected for that. Working effectively with those you lead requires that you approach everyone with respect and often on their level. Former Secretary of Defense **Robert Gates** in his recent book, *Duty—Memoirs of a Secretary at War*, stated that he tried to treat everyone with the respect deserved by professionals.

“I would approach decisions by seeking out their ideas and views, by giving them serious consideration, and by being open and transparent. Everyone would know the options under consideration, and everyone would have a chance to weigh in with his or her point of view.” He also believed that “symbolic gestures have substantive and real benefits.” He “resolved to meet regularly with them *in their space*.” Instead of summoning them to his office, he “traveled to their headquarters as a gesture of respect.” He also made a point not to talk to people across his desk, which he considered “a barrier to open one-on-one conversation.” I very much agree with this approach and, when I was department chair, set up my office in such a way that I could talk with people personally without the symbolic separation of the leader’s desk.

If leaders make it well understood that they are open to talking and listening freely with those they lead, whatever decisions finally result will much more likely be accepted and embraced. Furthermore, members of the group will then be more willing to work together toward achieving the stated goals and vision. My friend, **Ray Martyn**, in a recent APS Leadership Institute column stated that “leadership is about having a clear vision and empowering others to help achieve that vision.” An important component of this empowerment is engendering in each person a belief that his/her opinions are sought in good faith and taken into serious consideration before decisions are made. In the end, effective leadership is the ability of leaders to learn and understand the needs and aspirations of those they lead and then to make informed decisions based on their own vision, experience, and understanding of the situation in which their decisions must be implemented. In this way, the group and the leader can all move forward as a team. ■