

Can You Hear Me Now?!



By Melanie Lockwood Herman

Executive Director

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Last week I had an extraordinary opportunity to train a team of nonprofit leaders on workplace conflict resolution. The members of the team work for an international, multi-cultural nonprofit. Working together over several days we explored the process of re-framing areas of dispute and disagreement that are inevitable in the workplace. We began by discussing the fact that the parties to a dispute may be ineffective listeners. They find it hard to “hear” and therefore understand and appreciate the perspective of the person with whom they are having difficulty. When you’re at odds with a co-worker you may have a “bad” connection. And yelling—the approach used by many mobile phone users who have wandered out of range—is *never* a good solution.

In last week’s *enews* I wrote about the importance of listening and learning first...before attempting to lead. This week I’m reflecting on what it means to listen and communicate *effectively*. According to authors Kenneth Cloke and Joan Goldsmith, “There is only one test for the effectiveness of any communication, and that is what the listener understands.” The authors explain that what the listener “hears” can be degraded or impacted by hidden frameworks—factors that aren’t necessarily visible or understood by either party in a conflict. These hidden frameworks include:

- **The process used to convey ideas.** For example, how respectfully and appropriately a message is communicated by the speaker.
- **The relationship between the speaker and listener.** The unspoken needs and expectations of the parties or past conflicts may impact what is “heard.”
- **The words, symbols, metaphors, tone of voice and body language of the speaker.** These may confirm, or contradict the spoken word. Research has shown that only seven percent of messages are conveyed through words. While choosing our words carefully is important, we cannot afford to ignore the other 93% if we have any hope of being understood.

Stephen Covey reminds us to “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” Understanding another—particularly under the stressful circumstances of workplace conflict—requires effective listening. We must train and coach ourselves to be more effective listeners if we hope to restore broken relationships, collaborate successfully and provide inspired leadership.

One of the biggest “ah ha” moments in last week’s training program occurred during our discussion of the tendency to begin formulating a response while “listening” to an opponent. The experts tell us that not only is doing so *impossible* (recall the “myth of multitasking”), it closes the door on effective listening. Listening to

someone with whom you're having difficulty requires giving the speaker your full attention. In addition to silencing your mobile phone and making eye contact, it requires NOT thinking about what you're going to say next. It also requires silencing your own sympathy or antipathy. When you allow your brain to shift into sympathy or antipathy mode you're inserting yourself into your colleague's story rather than allowing them to share *how they feel* and explain *what they need*. In doing so you may also be prolonging the mutually acceptable resolution you both want and your organization needs.

Research on listening offers wonderful reminders about the difference between having a piece of equipment and knowing how to use it. As a leader with responsibility for risk management you already know that workplace conflict is inevitable. The conflict may be with a senior manager who refuses to follow policies that you believe are necessary to protect the nonprofit's reputation. Or it may be with an insurance provider who has just informed you that your recently filed claim is in fact an uncovered claim. Workplace conflict is a fact of organizational life. Unresolved conflict is not. By paying attention to the way we communicate and committing to improving our skills, we can shorten the length and intensity of conflicts and turn disagreements into personal and organizational learning opportunities.

Melanie Lockwood Herman is Executive Director of the Nonprofit Risk Management Center. She welcomes your feedback on this article and questions about the NRMC's resources at Melanie@nonprofitrisk.org or 703.777.3504.