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Understanding the Basics of Strategic Listening

The reward for always listening when you'd rather be talking is wisdom.

—Anonymous

The world is full of sounds, and so is the schoolhouse. Sounds emanate from everywhere and bounce off walls and down corridors. A principal walks through a barrage of sounds and words every working day. Sometimes, there is so much sound that it's hard to listen.

DO YOU HAVE A MINUTE?

Do you remember the last time you walked into your school building after a meeting in the central office that went on longer than you expected? It may have gone something like this.

You shoulder your way through the front door of the school with a briefcase and lunch bag in one hand, an armload of folders and miscellaneous paperwork in the other, and a head full of what you plan to

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accomplish before the day is over. The rising sounds of students' voices and the clatter of lunch trays spill into the front hall from the open doors of the cafeteria.

If you're an elementary principal, perhaps before taking two steps, you are pulled up short as a parade of first graders marches by on the way to the playground. Two students wave wildly to get your attention, point to their open mouths, and proudly cry, "Look!" You admire the new gaps in their teeth. If you're a secondary principal, perhaps you are met by a group of students who proudly want to share the results of their SATs.

At any level, K-12, you could be met by a teacher who tells you in a tired voice, "Allen's mom called this morning. She wants to have a conference with you." You wonder, "When does Allen's mom *not* want a conference?"

Two steps later, the head custodian approaches with a scowl, "Frank just called in sick and he won't be in to work the night shift. It's too late to get a replacement. If you need me for the program tonight, it'll be overtime." "Right," you think. "It would be nice if I had a budget for overtime."

As you reach the door to the outer office, the counselor sweeps by saying, "We need to meet before 2:00. We just got news about Sara's family, and it's bad." You're afraid that you know what the bad news is and you're not sure you want to hear it.

Inside the office, the attendance secretary touches your arm as you greet her and try to keep moving. "Mr. Jones is furious that you told him his daughter can't stay here because they've moved out of our attendance area. He's says he's coming back this afternoon with his cousin, the lawyer." You sigh as you begin mentally to prepare for a stressful community relations session with Mr. Jones and part of his extended family.

Continuing on to your office, as you look longingly at the door of the restroom, your secretary says, "You might want to look at that stack of phone messages on your desk right away." She pauses significantly. "The one on top is from the superintendent." Hmm. You search through your memory to try to figure out what that call might be about and hope that it's something good.

As you pass her desk, you notice that the chair outside your door is occupied by Tommy Henderson . . . again. Without prompting, your favorite student holds up both hands and says in a voice rife with indignity, "I didn't do it." Uh-huh. He's just going to have to sit there and wait this time.

Finally, inside the sanctity of your office, you take a quick breath. One of the special education teachers leans into the room, smiles brightly, and asks, "Do you have a minute?"

Your first thought is, probably, "Can't I put my stuff down first?"

LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND

In *If You Want to Lead, Not Just Manage*, Dunklee (2000) described an effective principal as one who leads a school and the profession forward—always keeping a primary focus on mission, improvement, and distinction. In order to be an effective school leader, you must understand the concerns and interests of your constituents so that you can bring them together to accomplish the goals of the school. This means that you must listen carefully in order to make sense of your day-to-day life at work.

Strategic listening is more complex than the simple act of hearing. Francis L. Lederer (2000), a physician, wrote, “Sound is a series of vibrations moving as waves through air or other gases, liquids, or solids. Detection of these vibrations, or sound waves, is called hearing.” Strategic listening is more than hearing sounds; *strategic listening is listening to understand*.

As effective school leaders, you understand the day-to-day experiences of your faculty, staff, students, and parents. You know what they worry about; what motivates them; what frustrates them; and what they think, feel, and need as they go about their work. In order to do this, you listen to the concerns and interests of the people with whom you work. By listening strategically, school leaders—you—gain the ability to understand your constituents’ most serious professional and personal concerns (Marlow, 1992).

Quite often we assume that listening is simply a matter of focusing on the speaker. However, effective school leaders must sincerely *want* to listen and must have the patience and willingness to be of assistance to their faculty, staff, students, and parents. You need to listen respectfully and attend to the emotions, needs, and concerns of those who are trying to communicate with you (Purdy, 1997). This, in a nutshell, is the essence of strategic listening.

Let’s look at an example. Phil, one of your teachers, sticks his head in the door one afternoon and says, “I need to leave 30 minutes early today.” If you simply *hear* him, you might say, “Uh, Phil. You’re not giving me much notice.” Or you might say, “Sure. Just fill out a leave slip.”

However, if you’ve been listening strategically, observing his body language, and incorporating your previous knowledge of Phil, you know that his wife is having a very difficult pregnancy and has been told by her doctor to stay in bed. You also know that Phil never schedules appointments during the school day and that he hasn’t asked to leave the building early in all the years you’ve worked together.

“Of course you can,” you say as you motion him into the office. “What’s up?” You see that he’s nervous, and you can hear the tension in his voice.

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"It's Allison. She just called and sounded upset. She's bleeding a little, and the doctor wants to see her at 3:00."

"Why don't you go now?" you say. "We can cover for you." He looks relieved, says thanks, and hurries away. By listening carefully and strategically to Phil, you were able to be of real help to him and his wife. It is likely that he will remember this specific instance of genuine concern and return the kindness with continued hard work and loyalty.

Listening is a vitally important part of communication. At work, strategic listening is a tool to gather information that has a bearing on both leadership and management decisions. More important, strategic listening is a way of making teachers and others feel that their ideas and beliefs are of value.

In *A Passion for Excellence: The Leadership Difference*, Peters and Austin (1985) described a leadership technique they called *management by walking around* (MBWA). They wrote of the power listening has for managers who move about the workplace in order to be in touch and make connections with workers. Peters and Austin defined being in touch as a "tangible, visceral way of being informed" (p. 8). They received firsthand knowledge regarding the world of their workers and an understanding of their employees' worldviews by engaging in the three major activities of MBWA: listening, teaching, and facilitating. With a focus on listening, leaders develop empathy for others' perspectives (Peters & Austin, 1985).

As a principal, you never know what you'll discover as you roam around the school. Suppose one afternoon you drop by Evelyn's classroom during her planning period. Your sole intention is to drop off a telephone message on the way to check on a group in the library. Evelyn cannot be described as a star teacher in any sense of the word. In fact, earlier in the week, you gave her an excellent book that explains in detail how to implement a specific strategy that she is not incorporating appropriately into her teaching. Working with her can be especially challenging, because she tends to be sarcastic and defensive during your conversations about instruction.

When you open the door to her room, you are stunned to see Evelyn hunched over a table at the side of the room. She is meticulously finishing a handmade chart she adapted from the book you gave her. On the floor is a stack of at least a dozen more multicolored charts that she has been toiling over. Even though copying charts was not what you had in mind when you gave her the book, you know from the look on her face and the evidence all around that she has taken your advice much more seriously than you could ever have imagined. In that instant, you know that Evelyn wants to do things right; she just needed examples of how to do it. You might never have known this had you not dropped by her room.

“Listening” to nonverbal communication is an important part of strategic listening. If you’d heard only her sarcasm, you’d have missed an important chance to lead.

LISTENING FOR SHARED MEANING

There is a saying that, although it has been seriously overused, still sends a powerful message. Depending on the source, the adage goes something like this: “You should not judge a man until you’ve walked a mile in his shoes.” The same is true about listening. You can’t truly understand the meaning of what someone says until you take a look at the world through his or her eyes.

Leading organizations is about bringing people together to accomplish specific goals, and much of leading is about recognizing and appreciating different perspectives. It’s important to remember that language is a medium that is most effective when used to create meaning and shared understanding rather than simply to share information. Many principals are not aware that there are almost endless things that can affect individuals’ perceptions when they talk to one another.

In a given year, you might have brand-new teachers working beside teachers nearing retirement. You’ll have single teachers, married teachers, and teachers in alternative relationships. You might have teachers raised in urban settings, rural settings, and suburban settings. It is more and more likely that you may have teachers from a vast array of religious backgrounds as well as those who claim no religious faith at all. We could name dozens of other factors that can affect a person’s perspective on life, but the bottom line is this: Trying to understand a person’s perspective is an important part of strategic listening.

Meaning is unique and appropriate to the situation and to the people in the situation. Because what is being talked about comes from two or more sets of experiences, you and the other person must offer each other the opportunity to contribute to the development of shared meaning (Shotter, 1993). The more sensitive you are to the fact that everyone filters conversations through his or her own unique set of beliefs and experiences, the closer you are to understanding the needs and motivations of your faculty and staff. That understanding can lead you to the development of shared meaning and a more effective way of accomplishing the goals of your schools.

Listening for shared meaning is hard work. You can probably think of a time when you looked at someone with whom you were speaking and wondered, “Did he understand what I just said?” It’s likely that the

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listener was thinking, "What did she mean by that?" Broomhilda, a popular cartoon character, always has an interesting outlook on the world. Russell Myers, her creator, provided the following conversation between Broomhilda and Nerwin in his March 5, 2004, strip in the *Washington Post*: Nerwin, that funny little character with the propeller beanie, says to Broomhilda, "I'm goin' over to Artie's to play." Broomhilda responds, "Be home by six on the dot, Nerwin." As Nerwin walks away, Broomhilda asks, "Now what did I just tell you?" Nerwin's response is, "Uh . . . have fun, see you later?" Broomhilda looks directly at the reader with a questioning expression on her face and says, "The words sound okay when they come out of my mouth, so what happens to them after that?"

It has been said that "all observers are not led by the same physical evidence to the same picture of the universe" (Schrage, 1989, p. 69). This fact can lead to some interesting mix-ups. For example, envision a cold, dark afternoon in the dead of winter at school when it begins to snow. Soon, it is apparent that the storm is well on the way to becoming a full-fledged blizzard. Being the sensitive and caring principal you are, you send a note to the teachers saying that they may leave as soon as the students are gone.

At dismissal time, you're standing in the parking lot directing the cars of harried parents through the accumulating slush. Imagine your consternation as you look up to see two of your most trusted and reliable teachers rushing to start their cars before the first bus leaves the building.

What just happened? Well, when you told them that they could leave as soon as the students were gone, they assumed that "gone" meant "gone from the rooms." However, you assumed that they understood that "gone" meant "gone from the school property." The two teachers interpreted what you told them in the context of the fact that they were worried about their long drives home. Shaking your head, you promise yourself to be more specific next time.

Listeners interpret cues and make sense of the speaker's message in terms of their own experiences (Purdy, 1997). Strategic listeners adapt to the varied communication styles of speakers and are conscious of how meaning changes from person to person and situation to situation.

You can examine collective, shared meanings to learn the norms and assumptions that guide the decisions and actions of your faculty and staff. You can listen for how members are rewarded and the priorities that repeatedly get the group's attention. You can get additional clues about your school culture by watching to see whose presence is necessary for the group to function well and how decisions are made. If you listen for the interrelationships among the perspectives of the entire staff, you can create a new reality that everyone can understand. When you and your

faculty and staff begin to listen, as a group, for collective meaning, a whole new world of possibilities opens up for the entire school.

LISTENING TO UNDERSTAND ASSUMPTIONS

Many problems with listening have to do with wrong assumptions. Quite often, people assume that words have the same meaning for everyone (Purdy, 1997). This is seldom true. As principal, you need to recognize both the differences and the similarities among your teachers' perspectives. And you need to ask appropriate questions so that each individual's unique worldview is taken into account (Brownell, 1993).

Teachers' unspoken assumptions can make or break schoolwide initiatives. Ask any principal who has announced an exciting idea to improve instruction only to have the teachers quietly sabotage the enterprise with disdain or lukewarm enthusiasm at best. The important thing to recognize is that opinions and judgments are usually based on layers of past experiences, influences, and generalizations. Consider this example.

Martha, a colleague of ours, was determined to raise test scores in her school, even though the scores were respectable by district standards. She knew that her students could do even better with more focused math instruction, so she set about trying to find the best way to teach mathematics to the students in her school. She read the research, talked to experts, and visited with principals who had successfully raised math scores in their schools. Then, with great excitement, Martha presented the research and the beginnings of a math improvement plan at a staff meeting.

The teachers at her school were hardworking professionals, and she believed they would jump on the opportunity to make a positive change in their instructional practices. To her astonishment and disappointment, every teacher at the meeting rolled his or her eyes and looked at her with varying degrees of defiance. "We're already doing that," they said as they firmly closed their minds to Martha's exciting idea. Stunned by the lack of enthusiasm, Martha went back to her office to try to understand what had happened. That afternoon, and over the next few days, she spent time talking with each classroom teacher. After spending a number of hours strategically listening, she began to uncover the assumptions that caused the resistance.

In this case, there were two unspoken assumptions in place that affected how the teachers reacted to the idea of improving math instruction in the school. First, the teachers had become accustomed to having a reputation in the school district for good test scores and did not feel that any change was needed. Second, when former principals presented new

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initiatives, there was little support in the way of training and follow-up for the teachers. Therefore, it was easy for them to dismiss any new idea as one that should not be taken seriously.

Assumptions are the building blocks that individuals use to make sense of the world and support mental models. By inquiring and reflecting, you can dig deeply into the matters that concern them and create breakthroughs in your ability to solve problems. In reflecting, you can identify patterns, generate new ideas, perceive common ground, and gain sensitivity to subtle meaning (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998). The more proficient you are in identifying assumptions, the more accomplished you will be in peeling them away to see what is causing the difficulty. In this way, you can enhance your listening, learning, and effectiveness. When you try to see the world through the eyes of your constituents, you acknowledge the value of your constituents' perspectives. This is a powerful act of respect and value (Ellinor & Gerard, 1998).

Most educators agree that, in spite of the many bright spots in public education, improvements and changes must be made in order to prepare students for life in the 21st century. Although changes are needed at all levels of education, the most important site is at the individual school itself. Effective principals can lead the school community by creating a vision and motivating that community to work to achieve that vision for the school.

Listening strategically to faculty, staff members, parents, and students through serious conversation and thoughtful dialogue is an important first step toward building meaningful relationships in order to take constructive action toward student success. As you read through the rest of this book, think of your own school and your own experiences.