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Leaders Who Listen

by Nick Jacobi



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Think about the people you know who have quit their jobs. Then think about why they left. Odds are they left because they didn't like their boss, and odds are they didn't like their boss because he or she didn't listen to them. In today's world, the leader who lasts is the leader who listens.

As a supervisor at any level, there are many ways to stop listening to those around you. Some of my favorite incidents are:

- A supervisor, in an attempt to teach his employees, lectures them but interrupts as they try to ask questions.
- An employee who uses AIM/Sametime/MySpace/LinkedIn/Facebook/Twitter is paired with a boss who checks e-mail once a week.
- A boss asks for status reports on a particular project twice a week, but never reads them.
- An executive requests research constantly, but never takes action based on the results.

There are so many ways not to listen to each other that it can be difficult to remember why we should. When you're in charge, the chief reasons to do so are:

YOU DON'T HAVE ALL THE ANSWERS.

There was a famous king named Akbar whose chief advisor was called Birbal. One day Akbar tripped on a rock in his garden and ordered the gardener's arrest and execution. As a last wish the gardener requested an audience with the king. Birbal advised him to spit at the feet of the king when brought to the throne, which he did. Birbal then stepped forward and said, "There could be no person more loyal than this unfortunate gardener. Fearing that you ordered him to hanging for no crime, he went out of his way to give you a genuine reason." The Emperor realized his mistake and set him free.

Great leaders have great advisors—people who keep them honest—and they listen to them.

YOU WANT TO AVOID THE BIG MISTAKES.

You will fail. There is plenty of defeat these days for everyone. The key to preventing a company- or career-threatening problem is to see it coming. You're going to want to listen, if only to hear when something goes wrong before it gets out of hand.

YOU WILL LOSE YOUR IMAGINATION.

This happens to a lot of great executives over the years. They can foresee the future but can't imagine it happening. "Yes, it's possible that our share price could drop to \$1 and we'll have no cash, but that is akin to a meteor strike; it's deep in the tail" or some variation are the typical last words. The more leaders listen to their people, the more in touch with reality they tend to be.

SHOW—AND GAIN—RESPECT

And finally, probably the biggest reason to listen to your people is because it is the easiest way to show respect for someone. If you do it often, people may start respecting you in return and may even follow you.

Remember that as long as your mouth is moving, you're not learning anything. ●