



## **A Leader's Guide to Conducting "Listening Sessions"**

Effective leaders create a pervasive sense of partnership, equality, and fairness. Those leaders who build commitment and high performing teams work hard at forming, maintaining, and enhancing equitable relationships – especially with his/her direct reports. And critical to these relationships is open, candid, and complete two-way communication, goals sometimes difficult for a leader to achieve with his/her staff because of the formal organizational relationship of “boss-direct report.”

I have found that “listening sessions” are one of the better ways to help assure good communication and provide useful information for taking action to maintain and enhance a leader’s working relationship with his/her staff. Note the emphasis on *listening* – not talking to or with, but an interaction in which the leader engages in careful, concentrated active listening.

### **Purpose**

There is no better way than listening sessions for you to gather meaningful data about your relationship with a direct report: what’s working, what’s not; how “the boss” is perceived in general; the type and extent of the “investments” each is putting into the relationship, the perceived payoffs from and equity in the relationship; and whether there are motivational problems or potential problems. Obviously, your follow-up actions are critical to making this work, but it’s difficult for you to be on target or even know you should take action if you have no data or the wrong perceptions (e.g., “everything seems fine”).

### **Overview**

The listening session is normally initiated by you, and may be a special one-on-one meeting or piggy-backed on to another get-together. It may be in an office, conference room, or while traveling together by car or plane. Our experience suggests fairly frequent interactions of this type early on in a relationship (or when starting to use this technique for the first time) are necessary. Less frequently scheduled sessions are needed as impromptu opportunities become more prevalent due to the maturing of the relationship. In any case, no less frequent intervals than three months is recommended.

In addition, you shouldn’t be too disappointed in the quality and quantity of learning from the first few sessions. Think about it! As you lean toward the employee, explain what this is all about, and then ask – perhaps for the first time (at least directly) – what he/she *really thinks*, what will you hear? Probably not much that’s really deep and candid until you prove that you really want to hear it and the employee feels “psychologically safe.”

Also, keep in mind that you're seeking the employee's *perceptions* of the relationship, which may not square with yours. Be prepared to hear things you don't want to hear, don't like very much, and may not agree with. Be on guard not to let your natural defensiveness intervene and damage the interaction – and probably the relationship. Work on first *receiving* the information, rather than *reacting* to it. After all, what you'll be hearing is the way the employee sees things and feels, whether “true” or not.

Your goal is to create a climate of trust and to develop a sort of “balance sheet” of the relationship: assets and liabilities. During the session, you should take occasional notes as necessary and use active listening techniques (e.g. concentration, eye contact, acknowledging, open-ended questions, restatement, reflection, paraphrasing, probing, silence). At the end, you should summarize and state follow-ups.

### **Session Outline**

We have found that if you use the following outline – and listen actively – you will eventually have good success in getting the information you need to build a solid, productive relationship.

1. Introduction
  - a) Purpose: Set the stage and tone
  - b) Setting: Informal, out from behind the desk, two chairs face-to-face or across a table
  - c) Content: Purpose and importance; need to be candid, two-way; confidentiality; your interest and emphasis on listening (you); commitment to follow-up
  - d) To get things started, ask a couple of open-ended questions, such as “Overall, how do you feel about working here? How's your job going? How do you feel about our working relationship?”
2. Three Basic Obligations of a Leader
  - a) These are: Communicating, Enabling, and Rewarding
  - b) Use to ask questions, probe, and reveal areas of satisfaction and those needing improvement
  - c) See page 3 for a description of each obligation
3. Start, Stop, Continue
  - a) These are a follow-up to the three obligations – a “catch-all” way to learn if there are additional areas of both strengths and weaknesses in the relationship, from the employee's point of view
  - b) State: “I want to be sure that I'm doing all I can to help you perform well in your job. Perhaps there are other things I should be doing, or not doing, or hopefully, continue doing, that will help you do your job.”
  - c) Ask: “Tell me first, what are the things I do, actions I take, or decisions I make that I should continue because they help you?” (Start with the positive!)
  - d) Similarly, ask what you need to start doing, then ask what you need to stop doing (i.e., interferes with/gets in the way of the employee doing his/her job)

3. Wrap-up
  - a) Summarize the input, in effect verbalizing the “balance sheet” that has just been created – check frequently for understanding and concurrence
  - b) Review the follow-ups discussed and agreed to, both yours and his/hers a
  - c) If necessary set a follow-up date and time for further discussion
  - d) Comment on how valuable the session has been from your perspective and that you hope the employee found it useful, too
  - e) Point out that you’ll continue these special sessions, and will probably schedule one in about \_\_\_\_\_ weeks/months (or, set a date and time)
  - f) Thank the employee for his/her input and help

### **Summary**

The interpersonal domain is the field in which leaders cultivate lasting, effective relationships. A critical success factor in these relationships is how the leader fulfills three key responsibilities, *communicating, enabling, and rewarding*. “Listening sessions” are a proven way to get reliable, actionable feedback on how well the leader is doing. Our experience is that leaders who use listening sessions faithfully find it to be one of the more useful and productive techniques in their “tool kit.” Without exception, these leaders cascade the process down through their organizations, requiring it of their managers. And, many use it in reverse to help them manage *their* bosses!

## **The Three Basic Obligations of a Leader**

### **Communicating**

The crux to a solid, mutually beneficial relationship is ongoing, effective, two-way communication. This starts in the employment interview, picks up upon employment, and continues throughout the relationship. Essentially, it’s the leader’s responsibility to get continuous feedback/input from the employee and to provide *need to know* and *nice to know* information. Research studies regarding internal communication have revealed that the number one source of information for an employee is his/her direct supervisor.

*Need to know* means directly related to the employee’s job; that is, input the employee needs to do his/her job. Examples: job description, performance expectations, performance feedback, upcoming changes affecting an employee’s job or performance, company and departmental policies and work rules. *Nice to know* means organizational information that helps the employee know “what’s going on around here.” Examples: the company’s mission, vision, values and operating guidelines; the department’s mission, vision, strategies, and goals; factors critical to the success of the company; how the company is doing vis-à-vis its key goals; changes in the works, such as organization structure, facilities, locations, products; industry and competitive moves and trends that will affect the company; and career requirements and opportunities.

## **Enabling**

Every leader must be an *enabler* – using his/her power and influence to provide the means to meet goals and to represent the department in the organization. The leader must support in every way his/her employees by providing the help they need to perform both effectively (meet customer's needs) and efficiently (use minimal resources).

Thus, the leader sees that his/her employees have the *resources* they need, such as funds, equipment, supplies, tools, machinery, and materials. He/she is a *coach* and provides training and development opportunities. The effective leader is there when his/her employees are in need, and he/she is an *advocate*, going to bat for them when needed.

In a sense, the leader must be a *barrier remover*, eliminating or reducing the impact of what may get in the way of his/her employees getting their job done. Whatever obstacles there are, the leader needs to know about them and do everything he/she can to make them disappear.

## **Rewarding**

One of the keys to motivating employees is to provide them – to the extent possible – with desired payoffs. The company-employee or leader-employee relationship depends on equity, each individual's feeling of getting at least as much out of the relationship as he/she is putting into it. Often, an employee harbors a perception that there is inequity, that he/she is not receiving the rewards expected.

There are two types of payoffs: *material* and *psychological*. Material payoffs are also called “tangible” and “maintenance” factors. These include salary, bonuses, commissions, incentive pay, benefits, facilities, and working conditions. Of the two types, the leader has the least control over material payoffs.

On the other hand, the leader has a great deal of control over *psychological* payoffs, “intangibles” or “motivators”. These include: positive feedback, recognition (private or public), the work itself, increased responsibility, advancement, and achievement (succeeding in one's job). Fortunately, these are not only “more available” to a leader, but also they are by far the more powerful motivators for most employees.

The challenge for a leader is first to learn what payoffs each of his direct reports desire and expect. Then, he/she must find out to what extent the employee feels he/she is *receiving* these payoffs. And, if not, what the implications are for the employee (e.g., understanding and patience or frustration and dissatisfaction). With this information in hand, the leader can work directly through the issues, to include correcting unrealistic expectations.