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PERFECTING THE

ART OF

LISTENING

(and then responding)

As employees continue to face mounting workplace pressure, navigate change and process ongoing political turbulence, it may become exceedingly difficult for people leaders to effectively listen, communicate and maintain business as usual.

As a people leader, your relationships with team members and across your organization are critical to fostering workplace culture, overcoming challenges, supporting employees and driving business continuity. More so during times of division.

And to do those things in what has been — and will continue to be — a disruptive 2024, you will benefit from not only taking a thoughtful and nuanced approach to communicating but also listening.

THE NUMBERS

An Axios report published earlier this year showed:

ONLY **26%** of workers say leaders define and accomplish an action plan when addressing tough issues.

55% of workers lose 30 minutes to two hours each day dealing with the impacts of ineffective communication.

THE IMPLICATIONS

While few people likely needed proof, the report makes clear two key points:

1. The 2024 workplace will be full of division *(as many of us already have seen).*

2. Sloppy communications will become increasingly costly throughout this rocky period.

THE ROLE OF PEOPLE LEADERS IN
EMPLOYEE LISTENING

As employees look to you for guidance, here are three recommendations to help ensure you harness the power of listening to navigate workplace division and maintain business continuity.

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1 Sharpen Your Active Listening Skills

Right now, it's essential that you work to understand what and how your team members are thinking and feeling by proactively checking in with them and asking what support they need. Here are some actionable practices:

Schedule regular 1:1 check-ins: Host informal check-ins that allow your team members to surface whatever is on their minds and express their thoughts freely.

Ask open-ended questions: Probe for a deeper level of engagement when you interact by asking things like:

- *What's your biggest challenge at work or outside right now — and why?*
- *How are you feeling?*
- *Where do you need support from me or the team?*

And as you ask, be sure to make note of responses for reference in follow-up conversations.

Request anonymous feedback: If employees are identifiable on your organization's feedback channels, also try to offer your team the chance to provide feedback through anonymized surveys, polls or submission boxes. Link to or call out anonymous feedback loops in ongoing communications and individual and team meetings to reinforce a culture of feedback and transparency on your team.

Ask for solutions: When appropriate, ask your team members for their ideas and potential solutions to solve team and individual challenges — which, depending on the challenge, you may consider doing in a private, 1:1 discussion or in a larger, collaborative group setting.

REMEMBER:

As a people leader, a worse offense than failing to check in with employees is failing to pay attention when you do.

To avoid the above-mentioned misstep, here are some simple principles you can adopt to show your people you care and are actively supporting them.

Limit distractions: Focus your attention (e.g., put your computer to sleep, put your phone on silent, temporarily close the door to your office, etc.).

Be aware of your biases and try to understand their perspective: Check your biases before the conversation and work to understand how your team member feels, what they feel strongly about and why. Ask clarifying questions (e.g., *Have I captured what you said correctly?*) to ensure you understand their perspective accurately and summarize and repeat what you heard back to them to verify you got it right (e.g., *It sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed because of the recent developments in the U.S. presidential campaigns, is that right?*).

Avoid interrupting: Exercise emotional control and avoid completing your team member's sentences. Embrace silent pauses and provide them the space and time to share their thoughts openly.

Pay attention to nonverbal cues: Ensure you're aware of your body language and that of the person you're speaking with. Reinforce you're engaged and listening intently to them by nodding your head and offering other nonverbal cues, such as attentive posture.

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2 Be Prepared and Be Agile

While it's important that you better understand how your team is thinking and feeling, it's equally important you understand how to maintain control of conversations.

To help navigate difficult conversations, savvy communicators do the following:

- **Address** the negative.

- **Redirect** the sensitive.

- **Halt** the inappropriate.

Addressing the Negative

You're responsible for addressing negative information and events that have the potential to disrupt your team's ability to drive the business forward.

While negative news can take many forms, here are two examples of how you can address issues that arise from both inside and outside the business.

You hear your employees commenting on speculative or false claims about your organization. To address this situation:

- Communicate proactively and address the claims or rumors head-on before they become bigger issues.

- Debunk anything untrue and directly correct misinformation.

- Stick to the facts and, when needed, say, "I don't know. I'll look into it and get back to you when I have the information."

You read about some breaking news — about your company or otherwise — that will elicit an emotionally charged response from your team. To address this situation:

- Looking ahead, anticipate different scenarios and play out in your head how you will communicate in response.

- Actively listen, lean into compassion and empathy, and put yourself in your team members' shoes to understand what they're experiencing.

- Remain balanced and do your best to refrain from bringing your own bias into the workplace conversation.

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Redirecting the Sensitive

Throughout the remainder of 2024, you could encounter group conversations that would be better handled in an individual setting.

While no one can predict what sensitive topics may arise, here are two examples of how you can redirect them productively and thoughtfully.

During a group meeting, a team member starts to respectfully challenge another team member's decision not to vote in the upcoming election. To address this situation:

- Assess the atmosphere in the meeting by observing team members' nonverbal (e.g., body language and facial expressions) and verbal (e.g., tone and volume) cues that may indicate discomfort. For example, if you notice a team member rolls their eyes, aggressively raises their voice, or looks uncomfortable or frustrated — regardless of whether they're actively involved in the conversation — consider redirecting. Do that by saying something like, "I understand everyone has strong opinions on this topic, but let's focus on the purpose of this meeting. After we're finished, if people still want to talk about it, they can do that outside of the workplace and business hours."

- Be mindful of the feelings of the team members involved and use nonconfrontational language to transition the conversation to another topic — and explain why you're doing it. For example, even if the discussion around voting occurs respectfully between two friends on the team, other team members might feel intimidated or threatened by the conversation and will benefit from knowing you're committed to maintaining a healthy, inclusive culture. Also, as you transition the conversation, reinforce that — while it's inappropriate to discuss these topics in the workplace — you're appreciative that team members feel safe and comfortable expressing themselves and their opinions openly.

- Put your personal opinions aside and remain neutral as you redirect the conversation. While you should strive to authentically share and connect with team members, expressing an opinion on or making a seemingly harmless joke about a controversial topic in a group setting can easily alienate team members who hold different views. For example, if a team member thinks they're the only one with a particular stance on a social or political issue, they may feel they no longer belong on your team or at your company.

View our guidance on how to best encourage employee voting and civic engagement without bringing divisive conversations into the workplace [here](#).

Despite your appropriate approach to redirecting the conversation, that same employee is now visibly embarrassed or frustrated, perceiving that they've been reprimanded for reinforcing the importance of civic engagement in the workplace. Following the meeting, address the situation with the employee 1:1:

- Briefly explain the reason for transitioning the conversation to an individual setting and provide context, as needed, to help the individual understand why privacy is necessary.

- Encourage them to share their thoughts, feelings and concerns openly.

- Remind them you have confidence and trust in them, maintain open communication with the individual and encourage them to reach out if they have any further questions, concerns or feedback moving forward.

Halting the Inappropriate

You may also observe conversations that are unquestionably inappropriate, and you need to immediately bring those to a close. To help ensure certain interactions don't devolve into unproductive or inappropriate territory, you'll need to completely disengage from certain workplace topics from time to time.

While inappropriate workplace situations can arise anywhere and at any time, here is an example and how you can stop it from worsening.

> *You overhear two senior team members asking another junior team member who they plan to vote for. After the junior team member answers, the other two team members immediately respond and ask, "Are you seriously voting for that person?"* To address this situation:

- Be vigilant and remain ready to halt inappropriate discussions by practicing your active listening skills and rehearsing, in advance, what you might say — and how you might say it — to discontinue a conversation.

- Immediately end the conversation and call the two senior employees into your office or behind closed doors for a private meeting at the next available opportunity. If the exchange among the three team members occurs in front of other employees, that broader group needs to hear/see you respectfully bring this conversation to a quick end and hear your rationale so they understand the rules of the road and have confidence that you, as a leader in the organization, are committed to maintaining a safe and healthy environment for everyone on the team.

- Then, during the private meeting with the offending employees, reiterate why the conversation was inappropriate and work with them to define an appropriate resolution. Requesting a formal apology from the offenders may feel awkward and cause additional anxiety for the junior team member, so navigate this consideration thoughtfully. Reinforce workplace policies and expectations, the need for an inclusive workplace that is respectful of other viewpoints and the importance of avoiding topics or discussions that violate your organization's code of conduct or that might make others feel uncomfortable or excluded. Depending on whether this has just occurred for the first time or is representative of a pattern of behavior for the two senior employees, determine whether any more formal disciplinary action is needed.

- Assess whether you need additional support from a third party, like HR or Labor Relations, to mediate issues that are becoming increasingly sensitive or contentious. By seeking the input of peers you trust or colleagues in supporting functions, you can effectively manage inappropriate situations and ensure fairness and respect for those involved.

- Follow up with the junior team member 1:1 to check in on how they are feeling, reinforce that the behavior demonstrated toward them is not acceptable and has been addressed, and ask what else, if anything, can be done to ensure they feel safe, comfortable and confident in your team's ways of working.

While off-limits topics will depend on the organization's policies, team culture, personal relationships and other factors, it's generally safe to say people leaders should not engage in combative conversations about contentious political topics or allow those discussions to continue when observed.

3 Look for the Best

Being able to thoughtfully and appropriately respond to the situations described in the previous sections can drive business continuity and team cohesion throughout rocky periods. But you must not forget to also actively listen and search for opportunities to reinforce the things that are going well and the need for continued collaboration, respect and support among your team.

Here are some ways you can do that:

- Clearly communicate expectations for how team members should interact with one another.

- Offer opportunities to provide feedback and ask team members for ideas and solutions to better align the team's culture with company values.

- Consistently reiterate key messages aligned to the company strategy and business impact.

REMINDER:

Most importantly, if you want to drive positive change among your team: walk the talk, lead by example and model the behaviors you want to see in others. View our guidance on how to best lead your team through a turbulent year, here.

FleishmanHillard's Talent + Transformation team delivers business outcomes at the intersection of business and communications strategy. For more than three decades, we have helped industry-leading organizations align their employees behind their most essential business needs, including strategy, culture, transformation, and critical business and functional initiatives.