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Family Businesses 101: Listening for success

According to Anita Ryan of Family Business Success LLC, “In family owned businesses, the need to develop deep listening skills may be even more crucial than in other settings. Any business characterized by poor listening increases its risks for reduced profitability and productivity.”

Listening is a critical component that makes effective communication possible. Listening is probably the most important and, yet, the most neglected dimension of communication. How often have you heard these statements: “You’re not listening to me.” “Why don’t you let me finish what I’m saying?” “If you’ll only let me, I’ll tell you!” “I may as well be talking to a brick wall!” “You just don’t understand!” “But that’s not what I said!”

If you hear any of those comments from others, perhaps it’s true you’re not listening. Listening is the art of connecting with another person so you fully understand what they are saying and feeling. It is a vital and necessary skill needed in leading others and maintaining interpersonal relationships in all aspects of our lives.

Each member of the family business team needs to be a good sender as well as a good receiver. The skills needed to improve listening are relatively simple to learn and implement. Perhaps the harder task is developing an active listening attitude.

Let’s take a quick look at six keys to active listening success:

1. Pay attention. This step enables you to focus. Give the speaker your

undivided attention. Stop what you’re doing. Maintain good eye contact.

2. Stop talking. Most of us, depending upon the situation, can do two things at once. Unfortunately, listening is not one of them. You cannot listen when you are also talking. You will only be thinking about what you are going to say next instead of paying attention to what the other person is saying.

3. Be alert to nonverbal cues. Although it is critical to listen to what is being said, it is equally important to understand what is not being said. For example, while a person’s verbal message may convey honesty and conviction, his gestures, facial expressions and tone of voice may convey doubt.

4. Avoid interrupting/finishing others’ sentences. Interrupting and finishing another’s statement can be perceived as disrespectful and suggests you want to do all the talking instead of listening. Be patient. Allow time for the speaker to convey ideas and meaning.

5. Avoid making assumptions. A major obstacle to effective listening for members of a family owned business, especially at the beginning of an interaction, is making assumptions. For example, thinking, “I know who you are and how you think.” “I know all of your body language.” “I know where you are coming from.” You need to put aside those pre-existing thoughts and focus. Take an active role within the conversation. Ask for clarification, restate a point in a

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different way and consider the other family member’s point of view.

6. Provide feedback. Ask questions and get confirmation and clarification. Examples such as the following can help enhance understanding: “So, you’re saying ...” “Let me make sure I understand ...” “Let me see if I’m with you, you ...” “If I heard you correctly, you ...”

Herbert G. Lingren once wrote, “I speak because I know my needs. I speak with hesitation because I know not yours. My words come from my life’s experiences. Your understanding comes from yours. Because of this, what I say, and what you hear, may not be the same. So, if you will listen carefully, not only with your ears, but with your eyes and with your heart, maybe somehow, we can communicate.”

Effective listening can be the key to solving problems and reducing conflict, misunderstanding and unpleasantness, as well as enhancing your overall interpersonal communication. Additionally, the payoffs for improving your active listening skills are enormous. You will have fewer communication glitches, your relationships will improve, productivity and morale will increase, and you will be able to break through those barriers of poor listening to become a more effective and successful communicator.

For more information on Dr. White’s programs and publications, visit www.successimages.com or call (225) 769-2307. ●