

Listening to Enhance Cultural Understanding

October 27, 2016

Two weeks ago, I was invited to speak on the important topic of listening to enhance cultural competency. Given the unprecedented divisiveness along racial/ethnic, gender, religious, political and other lines in the U.S. and globally today, this skill is increasingly important to build bridges to create unity. While technology has opened the possibility for greater connection, communication and work efficiencies globally, its advancements and the fast speed in which we're now required to work, has often diluted our communication to sound bytes, texts, and tweets. This form of communication increases the likelihood of misunderstanding, misinterpretation and ultimately mistrust. When we add the layer of culture, the prospect of miscommunication becomes even more pronounced. Given that an estimated 55% of our communication is non-verbal, the propensity for messages to be lost in translation from their intended meaning to how they were interpreted shows how critical it is that we find alternative ways to communicate across cultures, in particular those in which high context communication is the norm.

During the evening's event, I engaged in dialogue with a small group of Millennials about their perspective on social media. I was surprised to hear them talk about the lack of connection they feel and their negative impression of social media. After all, this is the generation that invented and popularized it, right? While social media has done wonders to enable family and friends around the world to interact more regularly and share snippets of their daily lives, it has also further perpetuated the sound byte culture and accentuated the risks of miscommunication. In these contentious times where polarized views and beliefs foster greater chasms than in the past, I often hear stories about lifelong friends severing ties because of a short message written on Facebook where there is a strong difference of opinion. Instead of "unfriending" someone when this happens, consider calling them instead, inviting them for coffee (or a glass of wine/beer) and engaging them in a more meaningful way.

Indeed, to truly listen requires us to pause, step off our treadmill, slow down, stop multi-tasking and find ways to connect authentically. When we rely on truncated messages, we not only lose the richness of debate, critical thinking, and the ability to strengthen our relationships, we also may lose important information that helps us work more effectively and strengthens our relationships. And if we are to heal the anger, fear and hatred we're experiencing both nationally and globally, it's even more crucial to enhance our listening skills.

In order to foster authentic connections to create unity, in both our professional and personal lives, it's important we develop some strategies to hone our listening skills, particularly in a cross-cultural setting. Below are some tips to consider:

- **Being present** – Slowing down and bringing our attention to the moment helps us be more engaged with the speaker and allows us to reflect more on the words we are hearing and to analyze them thoughtfully. It also demonstrates that we value what they are saying.
- **Pause before responding** – Reacting quickly doesn't allow us the space to process what we heard. In particular, if we are triggered by what we are hearing, taking a few seconds to breathe deeply and tune in to our somatic response, we can calm strong emotions and provide a more deliberate response that avoids defensiveness or attack.
- **Be open and curious** – active listening is critical to explore and encourage different perspectives. Ask probing questions that allows someone to explain more instead of making erroneous assumptions.
- **Paraphrase and summarize** – Similarly, paraphrasing what you heard in your own words and summarizing how you interpreted the message allows the speaker to clarify his/her point and reinforces mutual understanding of the message.
- **Beware of biases and stereotypes** – when we rely on hearsay or previous experiences with the individual based on his/her background, we make assumptions that impact our ability to listen fully to what s/he is saying. This may lead us to shut down to what we're hearing and jump to conclusions.
- **Be aware of body language and its meaning** – Keep in mind that body language means different things based on our cultural interpretation. For example, I used to think my Japanese students or training participants were bored and being disrespectful if they closed their eyes while I was teaching or training. It was only when I learned that this is common practice to demonstrate they are listening attentively and processing what they hear was I able to re-frame what I saw from a different cultural perspective. Researching the different meanings of body language from a cultural viewpoint can allow us to avoid this pitfall.
- **Validate the speaker** – Even if you disagree with what you are hearing, showing respect to the speaker to share his/her perspective encourages vulnerability and the likelihood of sharing important information in an authentic way.
- **Look for commonalities** – As humans we have a shared experience despite cultural and other differences. Looks for ways to bond with the speaker on a topic of mutual interest that fosters connection and helps cultivate empathy.