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Focus on Innovation

Focus on Innovation is a monthly electronic newsletter designed to provoke thoughts and ideas on how to bring innovation to life within the organizations in which we work.

For Those on the Run

Tom Kelley, President of IDEO, believes that "If you watch people with fresh eyes, and look for moments in which they have trouble, where they stumble, or even hurt themselves, THAT is where you get the spark of an idea." An innovator's ability to STOP, LOOK, LISTEN is the first step in developing creative ideas.

Stop, Look, Listen - The Most critical skill of an innovator

You are in a meeting and your mind begins to wander. You struggle to stay focused and listen to what is being said. When you do, you find yourself filtering what is being said and applying it to your own belief system coming up with all the reasons why it can't be done. Your "alligator" brain kicks in and you immediately kill the idea that has been put on the table. Sound familiar? Although most of us wouldn't argue the importance of open mindedness and effective listening in communication, listening seems to be a forgotten skill.

Innovation happens in conversations, not in our heads. Listening is the most critical skill to innovative conversation. Most people believe that they are competent at listening, when in fact, listening is a skill that is difficult to teach and usually difficult to detect. True innovators have the ability to listen to customers, to competitors, and to their colleagues concerns. They not only listen to what is being said, they listen to their emotions and dissatisfactions, to what doesn't fit in the world and what might fit.

The number one weakness in listening is the habit of interrupting others in mid sentence. This shows lack of respect for the other person's viewpoint and stifles creative ideas or suggestions. Listening is an attitude that plays out in a person as either self-centeredness or other-centeredness. A person who is self-centered, tend to cut others off, refuse to give feedback, are not engaged in and/or daydream during conversations. Those who are other-centered, focus on listening, but more importantly hear what is being said and work intensely to connect the dots - the hidden messages, the ones that are not openly communicated yet are there for the taking.

How do you judge whether you are an innovator who listens? Take this quick test. For each of the questions below, rate yourself on a scale of 1 - 5 (1 = almost never and 5 = almost always).

1. I avoid criticizing other people's ideas in their infancy stage.
2. I quietly and patiently let people fully describe their ideas.
3. I listen carefully to people's innovations to make sure that I have understood.
4. I can readily suspend judgment until I have all the facts.
5. I listen not only to what is being said, but also for what people are feeling.
6. I stop what I am doing and take the time to listen to people's ideas.
7. I provide people with clues to show that I am listening.
8. I actively practice making positive and encouraging comments when I hear people's ideas and suggestions.

If you found that you didn't fair too well, here are three steps that may help you remember to use better listening skills when in situations where you want to nourish creative ideas. Just three small words - STOP LOOK LISTEN. When a person is speaking...

STOP what you are doing. Put aside anything that might distract you from truly listening, e.g. put papers to the side or your desk or close the file, put your cell on vibrate. Really focus on the person in front of you. This tells the person that their ideas are important and they now have your full attention.

LOOK the person in the eye. Maintaining good eye contact during a conversation is a good way to recognize important non-verbal behaviour. What are the person's eyes telling you? Body language? Is it consistent with the words you are hearing?

LISTEN and really hear what the person is saying. Use minimal encouragers such as nodding, smiling, and/or huh huh's. Think about making a statement that clarifies what the person has communicated so that you fully understand and appreciate what has been said.

Finally, once you have truly listened, add to what the person has said, using it as an opportunity to build upon their viewpoint. This often leads to a seed of an idea that can lead to the next innovation.

What's the Bottom line

Listening is the foundation for innovation. We all have the ability to listen, however, many of us need to exercise it or develop it. One of the best ways to do this is to remember to STOP, LOOK, LISTEN.



Please feel free to pass this newsletter on to others.
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