

The Power of Empathy: Leadership and Listening

By Isabelle St-Jean

AT THE RECENT 2014 HRMA Conference + Tradeshow in Vancouver, opening speaker Shawn Achor brought home the importance of how we feel about the work we do.

As the author of *The Happiness Advantage* and *Before Happiness*, Achor's positivity sparked on stage, but it was his body of research on positive psychology that anchored the importance of his message. Amidst a wealth of facts and findings, one stood out of particular importance to HR professionals, recruiters and managers alike—only 25 per cent of job-related success results from “skills and smarts.”

A full 75 per cent of success is being generated by each individual's level of optimism—which gives us the ability to reframe stressors as surmountable challenges—combined with the depth, breadth and meaningfulness of their relationships.

Leadership and the Language of Empathy

A strong resonance carried over in a subsequent breakout session, “Why Empathy Should Matter” led by Dr. Craig Dowden. Via awareness generating exercises and a list of recommended reads on the subject, Dr. Dowden made an eloquent case for the importance of empathy in the workplace.

Citing *The Narcissism Epidemic*, which measures a drop of empathy in our culture of 30 per cent in the past few decades, Dr. Dowden focused on what can be done to turn the tide on such numbers. Once again, learning to listen—and with more than our ears—is key.

In *Leaders Eat Last: Why Some Teams Pull Together and Others Don't*, author Simon Sinek stresses that exceptionally successful organizations all have a culture in which leaders listen and protect from above while people on the ground look out for each other. Dr. Dowden points out that in such companies, empathy provides an invaluable bond woven throughout every layer of the organization; this is what inspires their employees to push hard, take risks and dwell in loyalty.

Dr. Dowden re-iterated what many in HR already recognize in their communications if not the figures involved—our verbal output only carries seven per cent of the meaningful input received. A full 55 per cent is communicated through visual cues and tone alone accounts for 38 per cent in equating the meaning derived.

Core Empathy Traits of Leaders

The Center for Creative Leadership highlights four indicators of empathy among successful leaders:

- being sensitive to others' signs of overwork;
- showing interest in others' needs;
- being consistently willing to help; and
- the ability to convey compassion.

For a multitude of productive reasons, an assessment for those indicators would be wise to add in the selection process for a manager on any team. Core to all four traits is the ability to listen with focus and intent.

Listening Styles: What is Yours?

While everyone has their own style of communication, listening is a matter of style and commitment. On the spectrum from disengaged and lacking focused attention, to fully present and actively engaged, here are four common listening styles:

Inactive: You are not fully engaged, may be self-effacing or passive aggressive.

Reactive: You are primarily in a defensive stance; you aim to oppose and prepare your response while appearing to listen.

Pro-active: You are leading, initiating, may be a step ahead and have a tendency to control.

Interactive: You are fully present, empathically responsive and allowing the flow of communication.

Multiple Dimensions of Listening

In her book *Speaking As A Leader*, Judith Humphrey, founder and president of The

Humphrey Group, explains that effective listening actually requires simultaneous attention on three levels: the physical, mental, and emotional. She points out that physical listening begins with where one chooses to sit or stand and what is conveyed through body language, posture, facial expression, and eye contact.

Humphrey explains that mental listening represents the capacity to open one's mind to others' views and build upon them in constructive ways. This level of listening also involves the intention to hear *everything*, without editing out what we don't want to hear—a common habit, especially in people with interests in driving certain outcomes.

Emotional listening involves a desire to give empathy, convey caring and support others. It includes taking responsibility for embracing an unconditional positive regard towards others in the process of communicating, building rapport and nurturing good working relationships. Keeping negative emotions in check also allows leaders to provide the “space” for others to express themselves and embrace an attitude of inclusiveness.

Inclusiveness around the Café's Table

That inclusivity generates its own outcomes was further illustrated at the rotating “World Café” discussions facilitated by Lisa Ryan, CHRP, VP, talent management with Right Management. Ryan has used the World Café format effectively for team sessions and strategic planning processes alike. As a means of preventing employees from getting stuck in a rut, spontaneously generating and harvesting insights, and identifying the collective progress made—the format works.

In an environment in which all voices are equally valued, this model of conversation fosters a dynamic exchange of ideas. With each round of conversations guided by a host listening and stimulating the conversation with powerful questions, the insights that can be captured in a remarkably short span of time is impressive. With the host sharing the insights of each preceding group, the collective intelligence is set ablaze.

Improvisation to Unleash a Leader's Best

A change of setting (or tables) goes a long way towards changing our communication skills and expectations. Another innovative way of freeing a rich flow of ideas while cultivating a listening presence was showcased by Ken Lawson, lead facilitator with the Vancouver Theatre Sports League.

Grounded in humour, humility, deep listening and quick thinking, improvisation has gained increasing recognition for its benefits in leadership development. Lawson regards improv as the ultimate tool for learning to create something that would be impossible to do on one's own.

Given that the working world is recognizing the increased importance and power of creativity, authenticity and innovation in the workplaces, the improv stage levels the playing field like few other group exercises. As to its effectiveness, Lawson points out that even business magazines such as *Forbes* have published articles on the benefits of improvisation.

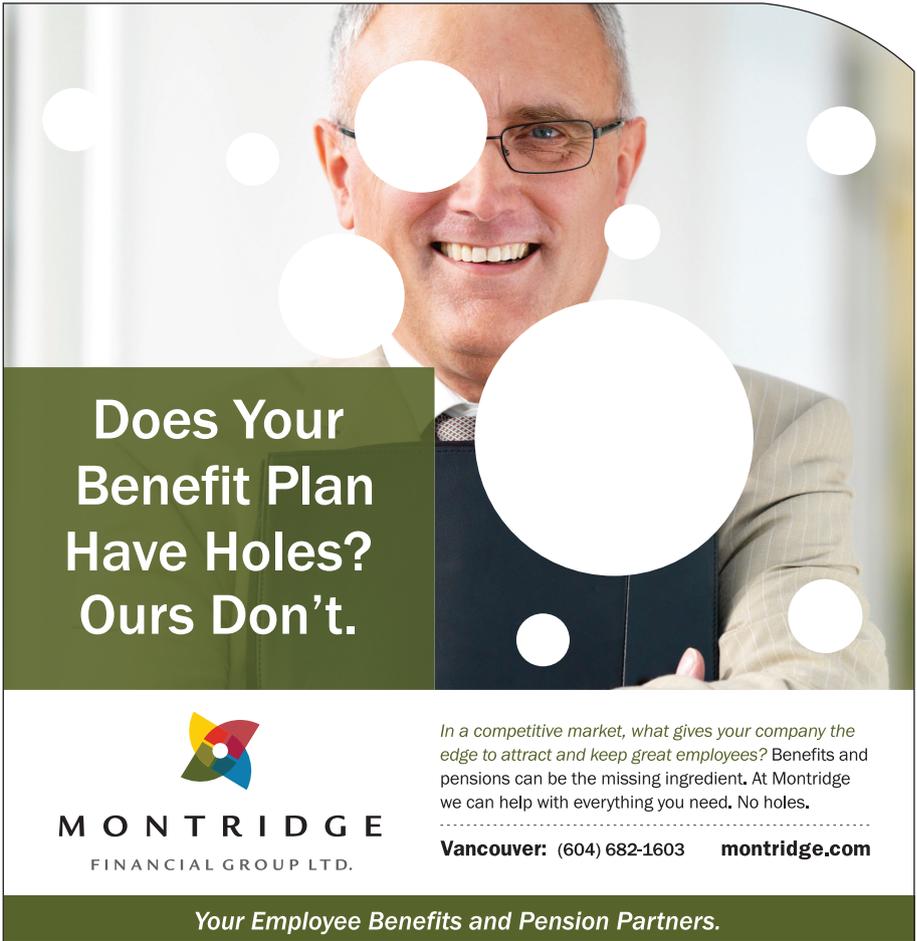
The Functionality of Fun

Moreover, these days, when everyone wants a workplace that is fun and engaging, improv can help generate that fun in a way that also enables people to say "yes" to other people's ideas and build on them.

In *Leadership Agility: Using Improv to Build Critical Skills*, Kip Kelly of UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School says that improv is really about being spontaneous, imaginative and open to playing in a collaborative way. Not only does this activity encourage team building, active listening and effective communication, it is also precisely what helps to make enterprises more creative, responsive and agile. These qualities and skills in turn help people to bring out their best from within.

After all, today's true leadership is not about emulating the greatest leader we know—it's about unleashing the best version of the most authentic and unique person that resides within each of us. 

Professional speaker, author, life and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients a decade of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions. (inspiredmomentum.com).



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