LISTEN UP!

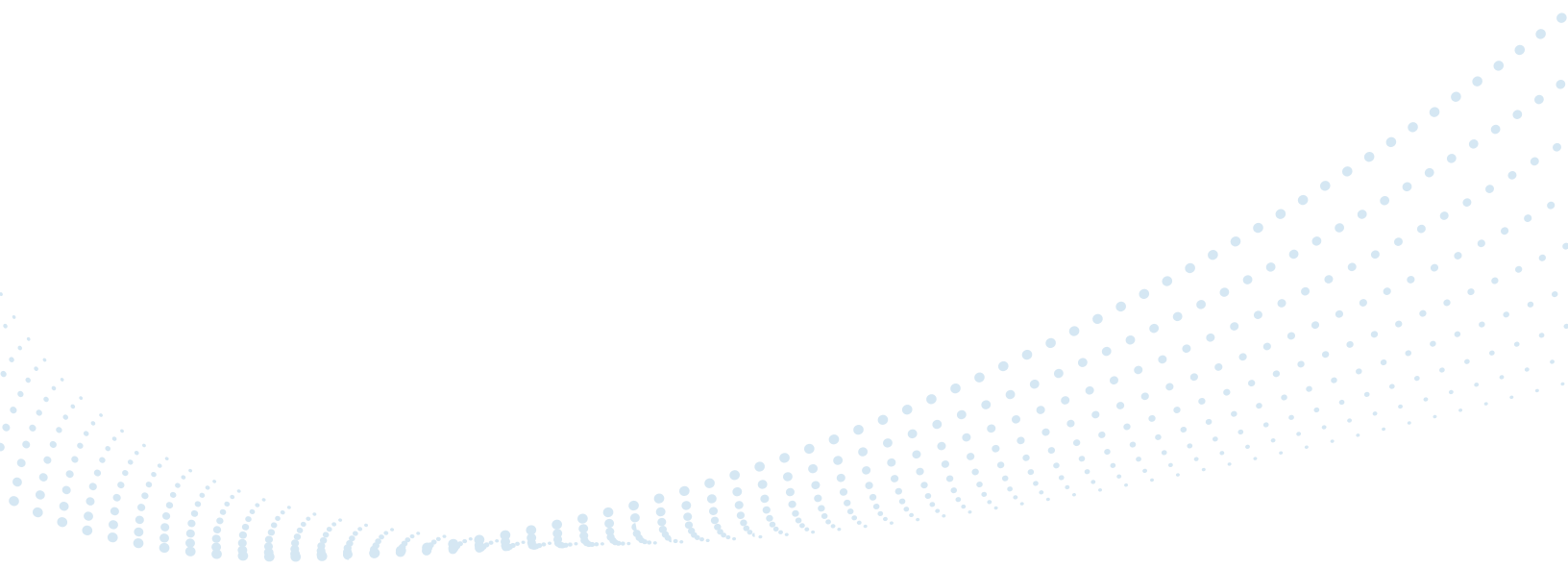Tips for deploying an effective employee listening strategy

INTRODUCTION

According to a study conducted by author John Izzo, the number one reason employees don't take more initiative at work is that their leaders fail to get their input before making decisions. In fact, he says, 64% of professionals polled said that "leaders making decisions without seeking input" was a top problem. Another 38% said that leaders dismiss their ideas without first exploring them; while 26% said there is little reward or recognition for playing outside the lines.

COVID-19 is pushing organizations to find creative ways to revamp their operations, but remote work may be further hampering leaders' willingness and ability to seek input.

Here we present expert advice to encourage you to deploy an effective employee listening strategy to help you build a culture of trust, enhance your decision-making, and ultimately improve your customer experience.

The Society of Human Resource Management (SHRM) cites 5 reasons you should listen to employees:

1. Sparks employee initiative

2. Boosts engagement and innovation

3. Increases retention

4. Helps with recruitment

5. Betters the bottom-line

What Did You Say? Common Listening Mistakes

"Organizations get caught up in the day-to-day. It can be challenging for leadership to see why they should invest in listening. The ROI is hard to calculate, and listening can be viewed as a negative by leadership," Jessica Wallen, managing consultant at Grayspace Group, says. And yet, "happy employees make happy customers. It's a leader's job to treat their employees like customers, invest in them, and show they are appreciated. If leaders start by looking at employees like they view their customers, they'll be much more successful, because employees will be happier and more fulfilled."

Additionally, Ms. Wallen says, leaders "can't be everywhere all the time. When you listen to your employees, give value to their voices, and empower them to be active, you're actually more active as a leader."

Leaders often make the mistake, however, of just going through the motions. They'll nod their head in agreement as if to show they're listening so they can check the box.

"It's as if people told them that they had to seek feedback and listen to employees. It feels very much like an exercise, but not one that is genuine. Especially if the subject is something sensitive, by human nature, we can become defensive or try to justify a decision or action," explains Jenny Hart, a human resources executive. "Leaders often interrupt or say, 'Oh that's something we could never do.' That can quickly shut down any employee feedback."

Leaders also typically do all the talking, she adds. They don't pause to let a few moments of silence bubble up, so that employees continue sharing.

All of these behaviors can have negative consequences, with the greatest disconnect often being with those on the frontlines—the very employees who interface most with customers.

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What Does True Listening Look Like?

"You can say all the right words, but listening is really about behavior," Ms. Hart says. "It's how you handle yourself during the conversation, as well as the reasons that you're looking for feedback and how you will use it."

True listening is always a two-way street.

"Listening is not about making the leader look good and, it's not limited to a single moment," Nicole Reed, retail executive says. Employees will observe what happens after they provide input. If they can have their input acknowledged regardless of whether action or change takes place, they will be more inclined to offer feedback again in the future. That back and forth builds the foundation of trust.

Ms. Wallen highlights some of the non-verbal cues of true listening.

"Good listening involves common courtesies. Like looking someone in the eye, mirroring their body image or mannerisms. But it shouldn't include shaking your head 'yes,' which can be distracting or send the signal that you agree with what's being said. Your goal in listening is to find some common ground with the person you're speaking with."

True listening can be done in formal or less formal settings, says Ms. Reed.

"You can walk the halls and simply ask, 'Is there anything I can do for you as a leader?' If you're listening, you may find people will vent. I try to ask, 'What would you suggest as a solution?' If you turn it back to them, you give them a chance to be part of the solution."

When employees are given a voice, experts say, they are more likely to be innovative and to look for areas to improve.

"People don't leave jobs, they leave managers," says Ms. Wallen. "That's especially the case if they don't feel heard. Leaders must ask themselves what they're doing to boost morale and make employees feel empowered. That will impact retention rates. Plus, when employees are invested in the results of solutions they devise, they are proactively helping you better your bottom-line processes."

The Harvard Business Review's Top Dos and Don'ts

When it comes to active listening, follow these tips from HBR.

Do:
- Take an honest look at both your good and bad habits
- Clear out all distractions that might draw attention away from the person in front of you
- Ask clarifying questions and repeat back what you heard

Don't:
- Assume you know all the answers—allow for the possibility that others have valuable information to share
- Overlook nonverbal cues—they often reveal what a person is really thinking
- React emotionally to what is being said—acknowledge the information even if you don't agree

Launch Your Listening Strategy

There are many ways to launch an employee listening strategy, but here's what our experts outlined.

Start with an audit

A key first step is to determine a baseline level of trust and to measure how well you are facilitating two-way communication up and down the organization. Collect information on the many ways your organization communicates, top to bottom. What vehicles do you use? Are there formal channels for employees to submit ideas and suggestions? Do you have technology in place that might be utilized to a fuller extent, to support surveys and feedback mechanisms? Once you have a clearer understanding of your starting point, you can begin to identify what to add and enhance.

Create a safe environment

A safe environment is one built on trust, where employees do not fear corporate politics or retaliation, says Ms. Reed. It requires an investment of time, giving employees the privacy and space to share.

"Doing it only in a group setting may be a mistake. It's important to balance individual and group settings for listening and building trust," she says. Also, find opportunities for give and take conversations, that can be open and honest, formal, and informal. Recognize that such conversations might involve hearing feedback that makes you uncomfortable.

"We think of getting feedback as formal, sometimes it's the best when it's informal," Ms. Hart notes. "Walk by someone's desk. Make your interactions, both personal and professional."

Often, she says, leaders think they must roll out a grand plan to institute change or make people feel appreciated. But small changes can be meaningful to people and show where you are willing to spend your time and focus.

"Those are the factors employees consider when they choose who to work for," she says.

Ask questions

Ms. Hart also points out that every day, leaders receive feedback about the work they're doing and issues that impact the employee experience.

"As leaders, we should ask for feedback from our teams, to enable them to not just be part of the problem but also the solution. If you rely too much on HR for input, then it looks as if you're afraid to talk with your team. You're not setting an example of how to receive feedback. Show them you're comfortable hearing what frontline team members have to say. You're not always going to make everyone happy, particularly if you are managing 100 or 200 people. Listening to your team can be a great litmus test to see if you're doing the best you can do every day," she says.

Another tip is to ask follow-up questions that indicate you've been listening. These can take place after an initial discussion. Maybe someone said something you couldn't execute at the time, but you can refer back to ideas offered during prior conversations to probe a person's ideas further.

When you pose questions in a safe environment, you also make employees accountable for their answers.

"We're not given a crystal ball, so as leaders, we may be the last to know. By listening, you find out where the needs are. You can get good feedback and empower your associates to take responsibility and be more accountable. Just like voting. It requires associates to exercise their rights and take responsibility for that feedback to be accurate, fair, and solution-oriented," says Ms. Reed.
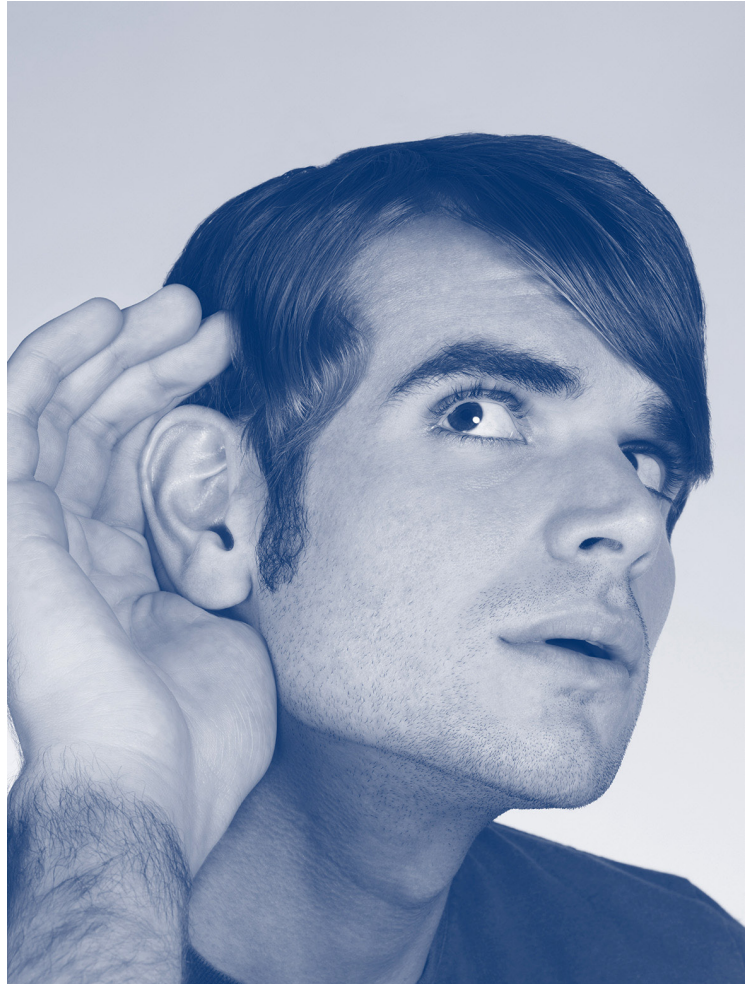
Follow up and Say Thanks!

"If you're going to ask the question, you better do something about it," Ms. Reed says. "That's the two-way dialogue. That's the proof that you listened. Maybe you provide an answer, even if it's a 'no,' but just reporting back is incredibly helpful."

Ms. Hart agrees, "Share how you've used their feedback. A simple 'thank you' to people for providing feedback is important. Especially if they're candid with you. Take a moment to thank them and acknowledge that it was difficult, but that it was important to you to hear their thoughts. You can't fix a problem you don't know about."

You also can't execute a winning idea, if you're not open to hearing it. In Business News Daily, Mr. Izzo cites the example of the Starbucks frappuccino. The drink idea was first suggested by a frontline employee. When the idea made its way up to the corporate offices, it was rejected. Yet one manager gave the thumbs up for a store experiment. The result? A billion-dollar product for Starbucks.

As Mr. Izzo says, "When leaders involve people in decisions and value people's ideas, resistance turns into productive energy." And it all begins with listening.

For additional information, please call 1-888-440-7126 or visit business.hughes.com.