



Management and Performance Associates – August 2006

Listening

"I disapprove of what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it."

This quote is attributed to Voltaire and summarizes a mindset which can be totally new to some people when listening to others.

During the last three years the partners of MAPA Consulting have conducted training classes to several audiences, in several countries, in three languages, to different cultures, and to several hierarchical levels in several industries. The common denominator in these classes was always the same: the huge difficulty people have when listening to others.

We have developed a tool kit for all of our training programs. During the course new skills are acquired and practiced using this tool kit. Once learned, these tools are available for later use as well. Recently, in a Leadership and Influencing Skills course for project managers we introduced a new "tool": the garbage can, where participants were invited to throw away all behaviors that they considered inappropriate to effective communication. Here is what was left in the garbage can, and the reasons we believe they should stay there forever and ever.

1. Talking without listening

We have a tendency to let others know our opinion without caring what the other party thinks about it. As soon as the other person starts positioning their ideas an internal mechanism articulates phrases such as "it does not work," or "not good" and similar barriers that shoot out of our mouths; phrases totally unrelated to the person we are talking to, before exploring his/her ideas. We must wonder how many excellent ideas have been killed before they had a chance to be fully presented, without having an opportunity to be developed. Not to mention the frustrations that could have been avoided.

2. Losing focus

We start talking about A, jump to B, present C,

while thinking about D, and then we return to B, making reference to X, Y and Z, without considering that most people cannot analyze four or five issues at the same time. Focusing on one topic at a time guarantees clarity, and will help the other party to explore it and probe before jumping to the next.

3. Dialogue?

It happens all the time. The meeting starts and we all speak at the same time (worse, many do not even know what they are talking about). As time goes by, profiles can be identified: the ones who do not listen, the ones who do not participate, the ones who cannot stop talking, the ones conducting parallel meetings, the ones who keep asking "may I speak?," the ones who withdraw because they are bored or mad. When asked what synergy means we can all provide a text book definition. When reaching synergy becomes required, only a few remember that only a focused and balanced dialogue between speaking and listening, where everyone can participate, will create the basis to the right path.

4. Convince. This word generates a great fascination among people, and many think that convincing the other is a divine mandate, a matter of honor. They do it so strongly that they end up not noticing the difference between to convince and to persuade. And some even confuse persuade with manipulation. To convince, as well as to manipulate, does not take into consideration the needs of the other. To persuade, on the other hand, means to reposition an idea once you understand the needs of the other party (*which suggests that you need to ask and then listen actively*) and incorporating these needs in your statements.

5. Disturbing behaviors.

Whispering to the person sitting next to us, repeating, over and over again what has already been agreed to, changing the topic, mentioning irrelevant issues, leaving before the end, interrupting without considering the other



person, these are all part of a menu of disturbing behaviors which can be seen in every meeting, so common that sometimes they are not even noticed. Worse is imagining that the outcome of the meeting will not be affected because of these behaviors. Not only is it a lack of consideration and respect for the person who is speaking but it denotes, once again, our inability and unwillingness to listen effectively. *Timely interventions (from the leader and from every participant) will help unmask behaviors that negatively impact effective communication.*

We will continue talking about the benefits of communication and, as Voltaire, we will fight for everyone's right to say whatever they have to say, even if we don't agree. Remember, it is easy to listen to what you agree with. The challenge is when you don't.

See you next time. We welcome your feedback.

To know more of our training programs, please send us an e-mail to:

sergio.pereira@mapa-way.com or

sonia.dondice@mapa-way.com

Visit our website:

[**www.mapa-way.com**](http://www.mapa-way.com)