LISTENING AND LEADERSHIP:
A STUDY ON THEIR RELATIONSHIP

EXECUTIVE LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

Listening involves hearing the speakers words, understanding the message and its importance to the speaker, and communicating that understanding to the speaker. The apparent problem is, of all the communication skills, listening is the earliest learned and the most frequently used, yet it seems to be the least mastered.

This research project uses descriptive methodology to investigate the relationship between effective listening and leadership. The purpose of this research project is to determine if a relationship exists between leadership and listening, and then to examine the following questions:

1. What is effective leadership?

2. Is there a relationship between a leaders's ability to effectively listen and their perceived leadership ability?

3. What are the barriers of a leader to effective listening?

4. Is empathetic listening a necessary trait of an effective leader?

5. How do the executive leaders surveyed, perceive their ability to effectively listen?

6. How do the employees surveyed, perceive the ability of their leaders to effectively listen?

The methods employed to investigate these questions include an exhaustive literature review, information obtained by talking to associates throughout the emergency services community, and surveys.

The results indicate that there is a positive relationship between effective leadership and effective listening skills. Effective leaders apparently hear what others have to say and empathize with their points of view.

The research recommended that since it is not known if leaders possess superior listening skills across contexts, or if they simply work harder at it, future research will need to be completed.

A second recommendation is that if they willing to learn how to listen, they become more effective leaders. It takes hard work, constant practice, and retrospective analysis to check our progress. The key is realizing that listening, especially empathetic listening, is as important as the other skills of reading, writing and speaking.

A final recommendation is that many educational opportunities are available to develop improved listening skills. These are as close as the Internet, community college or the local public library.

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INTRODUCTION

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Listening is a skill that underlies all leadership skills. It is the key to developing and maintaining relationships, decision making and problem solving. As leaders we spend as much as half of our communication time listening, much of it is wasted since we do it so poorly. It is such a part of our everyday life, both in our career and at home, that we sometimes take it for granted.

This research project uses descriptive methodology to investigate the relationship between effective listening and leadership. The purpose of this research project is to determine if a relationship exists between leadership and listening, and then to examine the following questions.

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Research was conducted by reviewing articles in professional journals, magazines and periodicals, textbooks, surveys, and information obtained by talking to associates throughout the emergency services community.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

Communication is the most important skill in life. We spend hours utilizing one or more of the four basic types of communication: reading, writing, speaking and listening. The ability to do them well is absolutely critical, not only as managers and leaders but in all of life's roles.

We spend most of our waking hours communicating according to Covey (1989). In fact, we have spent years learning how to read and write, and additional years learning how to speak effectively. Most of us, however, have had little if any training or education that enables us to deeply understand another human being from their point of reference.

In Executive Leadership we learned that creative managers are good listeners. They listen to their personnel and build on their suggestions. In particular, they seem to have the ability to draw out the best in their subordinates and then add to it (NFA, SM 6-14). Good leaders have the ability to "squint" with their ears as it is at times noted.

Axley (1996), asked the question of thousands of managers over a fifteen year period, "what percentage of your job activities involves communicating and/or communication of some sort?" His finding were that only rarely does anyone report that less than the majority of their time is spent in communication activities. That is strong testimony to its importance to managers and leaders.

Why is it then that while the skill of listening is identified by many researchers as one of the most important qualities a leader can possess, poor listening is identified repeatedly as the most common deficiency in leaders? Unfortunately, listening skills are very often ignored or just taken for granted. As a result many communication problems develop.

"Communication isn't just speaking and writing. The forgotten part of it for most people…is listening. Studies have shown that a large percentage of people listen less effectively than they believe, and many are poor listeners" (Axley, 1996. p.77). In another report by Atwater (1992), he notes that among people who have been asked to rate themselves as listeners, more than 85% rate themselves as average or worse. Fewer than 5% rate themselves as excellent.

Many organizations, in an effort to improve interpersonal communications, have encouraged skill development in reading, writing and speaking. Little if anything is ever suggested to improve listening habits. The misconception held by many, according to Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986), is that listening is related to hearing. A person may have perfect hearing, but because their listening skills are inadequate, what they understand is not necessarily what is being said.

Other simple but often overlooked reasons for failing to listen effectively are fairly obvious. Many times we are too busy talking, preoccupied, or distracted to listen. Sometimes we are too tired or, unfortunately, too lazy to listen. Listening is hard work and requires concentration. Most often, however, the research shows that we don't listen because of our faulty listening habits.

The Sandy Fire Department (SFD) is a combination department of sixty career and fifteen volunteer personnel protecting a growing community of approximately 100,000 residents. The city is predominately residential, with a mix of light industrial and retail occupancies. The fire department responds to slightly over 5,000 calls annually from four stations. To improve response times to emergencies in the north central portion of the city, a fifth station will begin construction within the year. The fire department has seven chief officers and fifteen company officers, all whom are certified officers and many whom have college degrees.

In a survey of members of SFD, the chief officers believed they were very good listeners, while the employees believed they were less skilled at listening. This is consistent with the prevailing research and provides the foundation for this research project.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review process was conducted to examine the communication process, in particular, listening; background information on managers and leaders; and, scientific data both in support and against the premise that proper listening skills are a characteristic of an effective leader. This literature review provides the fundamental information a fire service executive needs to measure their agency member's effective listening skills. A wide variety of periodicals, journals, and texts were used to garner the necessary information for this process.

LEADERSHIP

Introduction

Leadership is one of the most widely discussed topics in business today, yet it continues to be confusing and elusive to many of us. Understanding leadership and the act of leading is not merely limited to a select few. It exists at all levels of an organization.

Leadership and management are terms oftentimes used interchangeably. Since many of the human resource skills are valuable in both disciplines, this is often acceptable. They do however, have a substantially different focus. Management is a bottom line focus, or how to accomplish things according to Covey (1989). Leadership is a top line focus, or what does the leader want to accomplish. Drucker and Bennis' definition (as cited in Covey, 1989) succinctly states, "Management is doing things right; leadership is doing the right things".

Leadership, according to Rosenbach, Sashkin and Harburg (1996) is not limited only to those elected or appointed. Many people have the potential to become effective leaders. In fact, people at all levels can and must exercise leadership if the group is to achieve its goals. People do differ in potential, but everyone can become more effective through increased knowledge of leadership concepts and increased self understanding.

Burns argues (as cited in Rosenbach, et al., 1996) that there are two basic types of leadership: *transactional and transformational:*

> Transactional leaders influence followers by means of a transaction. That is, they
> give followers money, praise, or some other reward (or punishment) in exchange for
> the followers' effort and performance. Really good transformational leaders help

followers develop the confidence they need to achieve their goals. Transformational leadership, however, involves a strong personal identification with the leader. Followers join in a shared vision of the future, going beyond self-interest and the pursuit of personal rewards. They influence followers to perform beyond expectations (p.5).

Even though there is a natural tendency to associate leaders and leadership with people at the top of organizations, Decrane reports (1996) at present and in the future, true leadership will be needed across and throughout all types and levels of organizations. The character and qualities that are found in true leaders are essential at all levels of responsibility.

Leadership, as defined in the Executive Leadership student manual is "a process through which an individual influences others toward the accomplishment of common goals"(SM, 3-5). Or as documented by Davis, Hellervik, Skube, Gebelein and Sheard (1992), it is having the ability to make things happen by encouraging the contributions of others, taking a stand on significant issues and acting as a catalyst for change and continuous improvement.

There are many definitions, however, those which appear to have the most utility for those of us wanting to "do" leadership centers around two key terms - *influence and goals*. Axley's (1986) perspective is that leadership is the process of influencing people toward the accomplishment of goals.

Leaders are individuals who help create options and opportunities. They help identify choices and solve problems. Leaders build commitment and coalitions. They do this

by inspiring others and working with them to construct a shared vision of the possibilities and promise of a better group, organization or community.

Thom, (1996) in developing his fourteen guides for successful leadership, includes concepts like "charismatic," "visionary," "driven," "inspirational," "coach," and "cheerleader" in an effort to describe a leader. He goes on to note "Leadership is not a brass ring you can grab. It is a gift presented to you by your employees after you have proven yourself worthy of having it" (p. 14).

In the past, leadership was simpler, performance was simply demanded. Today's leaders are faced with a more educated and democratically oriented work force. As a result today's leaders must encourage and apply the contributions of all of the organization's human resources, both individually and in groups reports Davis et al. (1992). Problems and opportunities are complex and challenging.

Effective Leadership

"The hallmark of an effective leader is clear focus and direction. Successful leaders operate with a vision of where they are going, and they use this vision to inspire their people and their organization (Davis, et al., 1992, p. 284)". Some leaders are able to develop this vision and direction from within themselves, and develop support inside their organization. Others work with teams to create a vision together.

Axley (1996) published the results of a survey of more that 200 managers and leaders on what effective leaders do to make them effective. More than 70% of the managers mentioned the first five items. These five in order of their frequency are:

communicate well, listen effectively, demonstrate approachability, delegate effectively, and lead by example. The remaining items were listed by at least 40% of the responders: read situations and people well, use a variety of power bases to lead, teach well, care about the people they lead and show it, treat people fairly, honestly, and consistently. The vast majority of managers and leaders all agree that most, if not all, of their job activities involve communication in some way, that is, message sending and message receiving, spoken and written.

The overwhelming majority of how we define leading and leadership, Axley (1996) continues, either depends on or simply is some variety of communication activity or process. Leadership is more of a communication activity, certainly more than any other activity. Naturally, effective leaders communicate clearly, in a timely fashion, keep people they lead informed, and have the ability to listen empathically.

A truly effective leader will typically demonstrate a high degree of both *transactional* and *transformational* leadership argues Rosenbach, et al. (1996). However, leadership in the sense most people mean, is *transformational*. Effective leaders "walk the talk;" that is, they establish trust by taking actions that are consistent both over time and with what they say. Because they trust others they are trusted.

Thom (1996), points out two important skills that all effective leaders need if they want success: listening and asking hard questions.

The message is clear, according to Lucia (1997), effective leaders hear what others have to say and empathize with their issues. They walk in others' shoes by listening and caring. These two critical, respected leadership characteristics are often missing for many

reasons. One point is certain, when leaders take the time to listen with empathy, they build trust and commitment that creates an environment for success.

Listening is an essential and undervalued skill, notes Cohen (1988). Since effective managers tend to be aggressive, they are sometimes better talkers than listeners. Most managers have been promoted because they have been noticed, and people do not usually get noticed by being silent. He goes on to say, however, that managers who are bad listeners tend to be bad managers. A tendency toward one-way communication stems from the misconception that management involves ordering people around. Listening requires us to understand that our staff is important.

Leaders, may wish they had more time to listen. These constraints are unavoidable, but they are not an excuse. They may not be able to listen as well as they would like, but to be an effective leader, they must avoid making listening their lowest priority. At times, action oriented, fire service leaders make the mistake of believing that speaking and doing are more important than listening. As effective leaders, nothing could be further from the truth.

LISTENING

Introduction

An ancient sage once said, "We have been given two ears but one single mouth, in order that we may listen more and talk less." In practice however, only half of our communication is spent in listening. Atwater (1992) noted that success at all levels of management may depend on how well we listen to detailed instructions or to feedback from

our staff. Of all the sources of information to help a manager know and evaluate the personalities of their department members, listening to the individual employee is the most important (Hunsaker and Alessandra, 1986).

Despite the amount of time spent listening the average person does not listen very well. The normal untrained listener is likely to understand and retain only half of a conversation, immediately after hearing someone talk according to Atwater (1992). Within the next forty-eight hours we forget half of that again, so that we retain only twenty-five percent of what we originally heard.

In the fire service, as in any business, listening skills are very often ignored or just forgotten. Since listening is taken for granted, many interpersonal communication problems develop. In an effort to improve these communication skills countless executive courses have been developed and offered to improve their reading, writing, and speaking. Rarely, however, do we see courses offered to improve listening habits.

Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986) found the reason for this may be the misconception that listening is related to hearing. Listening is more than the physical process of hearing. Additionally, it is an intellectual and emotional process in which one integrates all three skills in the search of meaning.

Effective listening does not come easily. It is very hard work. All too often we hear the words but we miss the message. To many of us, listening is viewed as a passive exercise, something we do in addition to our present focus. If we are ever to improve the effectiveness our listening skills, we must first understand that poor listening results from a variety of factors. We are susceptible to these factors because the time requirements of

speaking and listening are mismatched. Atwater (1992) defined the typical speaking rate at about 120 to 180 words per minute. We can generally listen with good comprehension at 500 to 800 words per minute. This speech-thought gap provides the conscientious listener with a time advantage for listening. It tends to work against those who are less attentive to the speaker's words.

Newkirk and Linden (1982) summarized the difference this way:

No matter what the length of a speakers message is, we need only half the available time to comprehend the words ("comprehension time"); the other half ("reaction time") exists for us to use as we choose. A good listener will use reaction time to his advantage for better overall communication; a poor listener will waste it, or worse yet misuse it so that the comprehension of the message suffers (p. 8).

Learning to Listen

It is said that listening is the earliest communication skill acquired, the most often used but the least mastered. Atwater (1992) notes that throughout the years of formal schooling, students spend fifty percent or more of their communication time listening, followed by speaking, reading and writing in that order. However, the amount of training time students receive in these skills occurs in just the reverse order. The good news is that since listening is learned, poor listening habits can be retrained.

There is a distinct difference between hearing and listening. According to Webster's New World Dictionary, to listen is "to make a conscious effort to hear" or "to pay attention to sound." It is evident that listening involves more than hearing. Essentially then, hearing

pertains to the physical reception of sound and is an involuntary act; listening relates to the perception of meaningful sound and is a voluntary act (Atwater, 1992).

Listening is made possible because of the lag between the spoken word and the mental activity of the listener. To genuinely listen, we must make better use of the speech hearing gap. This takes the development of good listening habits according to Atwater (1992). To do this, we must first, pay attention to the speaker's message, share responsibility for the communication, use total body listening and, finally listen appropriately, depending on the purpose of the communication.

Categories of Listeners

The literature offers many examples of categorizing listener types. Typically, researchers separate listeners into three or four specific types. All systems are slightly different in how they separate listeners but all offer a continuum from non-listeners to very deep listeners.

Newkirk and Linden (1982) present a system that examines three specific listening types: *time wasters, dissonance reducers and active listeners*. Time wasters daydream, which is not in itself bad. It can provide a healthy outlet for their imagination. They can however loose control and tune all speakers out. Dissonance reducers attempt to deal with the internal conflict they encounter from new information we receive, that is inconsistent with our existing attitudes. This results from the way they receive and process new information. They need to sharpen our listening skills to achieve a new capability called active listening. As an active listener they must listen with a greater degree of sensitivity, so

that they better understand what is being said. Here they must not only understand the content of the message but also the speaker's feelings.

When people listen, they are in one of four general categories, according to Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986). Each category, like the system discussed previously, requires a particular depth of concentration and sensitivity on the part of the listener. These levels are not distinct line of difference but general categories into which people fall. The four types are: *the non-listener, marginal listener, evaluative listener, and the active listener*. As we move from the first, through the forth the potential for understanding, trust and effective communication increase.

The *nonlistener*, does not hear the other person and does not make any effort to hear what the other person is saying. The nonlistener is primarily concerned with doing most of the talking, constantly interrupting the speaker, rarely interested in what the speaker has to say and usually has the last word. This person is typically disliked or tolerated by people.

The *marginal listener*, is the second level. At this level they are hearing the sounds and words but not really listening. This type is a superficial listener, staying on the surface of the problem, never going deeper. Problems are postponed to the future rather than dealing with them in the present. They prefer to evade difficult or technical presentations, and when they do listen, they tend to focus on the bottom line, the fact, rather than the main ideas. Marginal listening is extremely dangerous, because there is enormous room for misunderstanding when they only superficially concentrate on what is being said. The

speaker may believe they are being listened to and understood when in reality they are not at all.

At the *evaluative listening* level, the listener is actively trying to hear what the speaker is saying, but isn't making an effort to understand the intent. They tend to be a more logical listener, who is more concerned with content than feelings. This listener does well in "parroting back" the words that were just spoken but totally ignores that part of the message that is carried in the speaker's body language, vocal intonation and facial expressions. The evaluative listener believes that they understand the speaker's message but the speaker does not feel understood. The evaluative listener forms opinions about the speakers words even before the message is complete and risks not understanding the true meaning of the message. This obviously leads to tense behavior and deterioration of the trust bond.

The highest and most effective level of listening is the *active listener* (Hunsaker and Alesandra, 1986; Newkirk and Linden, 1982). When they refrain from evaluating our employees words, and attempt to see things from the speakers point of view they are using the fourth and most effective level of listening. Active listening requires that we listen not only for the content of the speakers message, but more importantly, for the intent and feeling of the message as well. The active listener shows the listener, both verbally and nonverbally that they are truly interested and listening. They are usually skillful questioners, but never interrupt and are always looking for verbal and visual cues that signify the other person has something to say.

Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986) discuss three additional, very important skills, that only active listeners possess. They are *sensing, attending and responding*. Sensing is the ability to recognize and appreciate the silent messages that the speaker is sending, that is facial expressions, intonation and body language. Attending refers to the verbal, vocal and visual messages that the active listener sends back to the speaker acknowledging the speaker and their message. This also establishes a receptive listening setting, away from distractions, private without invading the speakers "personal space." Responding is when the listener gets feedback on the accuracy of the speaker's content and feelings, tries to gather more information, attempts to make the speaker feel understood and encourages the speaker to understand themselves, their problems and concerns better.

Active Listening Techniques

There are several active listening techniques which assist us in utilizing our listening time to its fullest extent, as described by Newkirk and Linden (1982). They are: *paraphrasing, reflection, neutral technique, clarifying and summarization.*

The first technique, paraphrasing, is restating in your own words what the speaker means. This is valuable in testing our understanding of what the speaker means and lets them know we are actively listening. Reflection is slightly different from paraphrasing in that you tell the speaker what you believe their feelings are rather than the content of the message. This is particularly important when the speaker expresses strong feelings. The neutral technique encourages the speaker to continue talking. A simple nod of the head or "uh-huh" are usually effective signals that we are interested and listening. Clarifying is the

technique used when we need more information of a specific nature. It usually takes the form of a question. The final technique is summarization. This involves combining the speakers thoughts into a concise statement which focuses on the speakers key points. This is particularly valuable in a group discussion where several statements from different people need to be combined.

Empathic Listening

If we ask employees what behavioral skills distinguish great managers from okay managers, notes Axley (1996),near the top of every list will be the ability to listen empathically. This is true of all great communicators in general.

Steven Covey (1989) has this to say on the subject of empathetic listening:

If I were to summarize in one sentence the single most important principle I have learned in the field of interpersonal relations, it would be this: *Seek first to understand, then to be understood.* This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication (p. 237).

Empathy is the ability to understand someone or something from the other persons perspective reports Axley (1996). It is the sincere and sustained effort to get outside ourselves and into another person's head and heart, to appreciate how and why another person interprets things and to fully understand something the way that person understands it.

Atwater (1992) describes empathic listening as "experiencing another person's inner world as if stepping into the speaker's own shoes" (p. 57). He sees an empathetic listener as one who seeks to gain an accurate understanding of the other person from their personal frame of reference, and to convey that understanding back to the person. This involves more than the use of listening techniques, as valuable as they are. Empathetic listening and understanding also depend on our attitudes and relationships to others, and are therefore very demanding.

Very few of us ever practice empathic listening, the highest form of listening reports Covey (1989). To Covey, empathetic listening is not the utilization of the techniques of "active" or "reflective" listening. He looks on these techniques as "mimicking" what another person says, not listening with the intent to *understand,* to get inside another person's frame of reference.

When it comes to empathetic listening, Atwater (1992) identifies three things a listener can do to convey empathy. First, *show our desire to understand the person*. Second, *reflect the person's feelings or felt meanings*. Third, *pace the person's sensory and non-verbal behavior* (p.56).

Showing your desire to understand helps to maintain the relationship with the other person when our understanding falls short of the mark. This involves the use of both verbal and nonverbal responses. Using "active" listening skills such as clarification, paraphrasing and summarizing show in a significant way our desire to make sense of the speaker's inner world. In addition, the use of "attending skills" like minimizing distractions, appropriate eye contact, and proper animation all demonstrate our desire to understand.

Expressing our desire to understand others is especially crucial in situations where people are less likely to believe we want to understand. In these occasions which involve conflict or intense emotions, showing a desire to listen, rather than talk, demonstrates that we care about the person and that we are open to communication.

When we think we understand someone's feelings, acknowledging them is the next step in conveying our empathy. Reflecting back to the speaker the feelings being expressed is the most effective way to do this. *Reflecting the person's feelings* may serve several purposes. It helps people feel understood, especially when done correctly. Reflection encourages people to become more aware of their feelings and to express them. It also helps speakers discriminate more accurately among various feelings. Finally, reflection is especially helpful in expressing negative feelings such as anger or fear. A reflection response helps us express feelings more fully and facilitate communications.

Nonverbal behaviors are especially useful when they *pace the speakers sensory and nonverbal behavior*. Pacing means matching the speaker's nonverbal behavior in such a manner that they become aware of it, without mimicking. Listeners who respond in the same sensory and nonverbal mode as the speaker are perceived to me more empathic.

Atwater (1992) recaps listening empathically in the following way. When people feel deeply understood, they are more apt to feel accepted, cared for and valued by the listener. Much of the effect of empathetic understanding comes from the nonjudgemental quality of listening. That is they feel they have been given an opportunity to express themselves in their own words and be accurately understood. Empathy enhances cooperation and builds rapport with individuals in both personal relationships and groups.

As was stated earlier listening is hard work. It can be very tiring to listen in the manner described above, and requires continual focused concentration. Unless a leader understands the definition and importance of listening and practices it in their managerial and personal relationships, they will fall substantially short of being effective listeners and leaders.

Barriers to Effective Listening

In our society today, there are numerous deterrents to listening. Some are obvious and some are quite subtle. Without having a clear understanding that barriers exist, we can't possibly hope to overcome them in our quest to become a better listener. Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986) have identified nine of the these barriers, all of which will make us more aware of the physical, psychological behavioral and educational barriers to listening.

Motivation and attitude is the greatest deterrent to effective listening. We hear what we want to hear and we don't hear what we don't want to hear. Without the proper attitude or motivation there is no possible way we will hear, let alone comprehend what the other person is communicating.

Many people are ineffective listeners because of a *lack of concentration and attention*. One of the greatest deterrents to concentration and attention is the mistaken assumption that we can do two things at the same time. The classic example is the person who believes that we can read and listen at the same time. Naturally, nothing is further from the truth. Outside distractions such as phone calls, nearby conversations and people walking

by can all easily distract us. It is important to realize that to listening effectively we need to concentrate and ignore distractions.

Many people possess *negative attitudes toward listening*. To them, listening is a passive, compliant act. This is usually considered to be the most obstinate barrier to effective listening. The reason for this is that we are taught to believe that listening is a passive act. Something that other people do, but not ourselves. We believe that talk is power; when we have "the floor" we are in control. Ironically, the reverse is the truth. True power is in listening. When we truly listen to others, they tell us how to best approach them in meeting their needs.

Experience and background have a great bearing on how good a listener we are. As an example, in order to understand speakers with good vocabularies we must also have a similar vocabulary. If we don't we can either ask the speaker to explain the point or tune them out. Unfortunately, many take the later course.

Where we choose to communicate, that is the *listening setting*, has a great bearing on how effectively we listen. If we are trying to listen near sources of external distractions, our attention and concentration will be severely challenged. Another ingredient in a positive setting is allowing for an appropriate "personal space". If we are too close to the speaker, it will violate the listener's space. Finally, the environment is important. If it is too hot, cold or another affecting quality, the surroundings will distract from the speakers message.

Many ineffective listeners use their *emotions* to classify or prejudge the speaker. This tends to distort the message positively or negatively. Many of us prejudge the speaker solely on their image. The speaker can be classified as "one of us" or "one of them." Our beliefs

and values also determine how well and how objectively we listen to the message content. When we became too emotionally involved with the content of the message or the speaker, we will systematically distort the message.

Daydreaming and fantasizing are perceived by many psychologists and psychiatrists to be a healthy aspect of life. However if we can't control how often and when we do it, it can be extremely detrimental to our listening effectiveness and to our emotional health. As was noted earlier, the reason for daydreaming and fantasizing during the listening process is the fact that people think nearly four times as fast as they can speak. This disparity is used by the skilled listener to their advantage and as an opportunity to let the ineffective listener's mind wander.

Certain speakers have a much easier *delivery* than others. Listeners feel more comfortable when the speakers pace is compatible with theirs. There is a potential for obvious listening problems among people of different delivery styles and listening preferences. A standard response for speaker - listener incompatibility is for the listener to "tune out" the speaker or distort the message. The listener however, can train to increase attention and concentration when confronted with these styles.

Finally, Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986) suggest that one of the simplest barriers to overcome, but most ignored, is the *lack of learned listening skills*. Awareness and knowledge of the previously noted barriers as well as the motivation to overcome them. They report that above all, however, the most effective way to overcome the lack of listening skills is to increase motivation to become a better listener.

PROCEDURES

Research

The research for this project was initiated with an extensive literature review with the Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Fire Academy (NFA), in order to address the research questions posed. Finding only one article, the search was expanded to include the Internet, the University of Utah, Marriott Library, and Salt Lake County Library System. Data collected identifies the logic behind the use of empathetic listening skills by leaders, managers, and employees to increase their listening effectiveness.

This information provides a basis for comparison with the efforts currently in place within the Sandy Fire Department (SFD) and suggests some areas for improvement. It was also beneficial to see what other leaders and employees, in both the private and public sector, see as standards for effective leadership.

Population

Three surveys were given to three separate NFA classes in July 1998 to evaluate the perceived effectiveness of leader's listening skills. The first survey (Appendix A), was administered to determine the perceived effectiveness of empathetic listening of those officers responding.

The second survey (Appendix B), was given to the leaders (chief officers) of SFD, to determine how they perceive their listening effectiveness, and how they think, subordinates perceive it. A third survey (Appendix C), was given to the employees of SFD. This was essentially a mirror of the second survey. The questions for the third survey were

formulated directly from the second survey. The data from all of the surveys is summarized in the "Results" section.

Assumptions and Limitations

It was assumed that all respondents would complete surveys honestly, accurately and that they had some knowledge and/or experience with the subject. In an effort not to prejudice their perceptions, respondents were not furnished with any data on leadership or listening,

Limiting factors of the surveys were the small populations surveyed; and inability to determine, in the first survey, if the body of the respondents was as accurate sampling of fire service leaders.

Finally, the minimal data published and available in the LRC on listening, greatly reduced the ability to determine the fire service perspective on listening as it relates to leadership. The assumption is that the relationship between leadership and listening is the same across all organizations.

RESULTS

As noted by Axley (1996) the overwhelming majority of what we think of as leading and leadership, either depends on or is simply some variety of communication. Leadership is almost entirely a communication activity. Naturally, effective leaders communicate clearly, in a timely fashion, they keep employees informed and listen empathically. Effective leaders "walk the talk" by taking actions that are consistent over time and with what they say according to Rosenbach et al. (1996). Finally as stated by Davis et al. (1992), clear focus

and direction with the ability to communicate that vision is the "hallmark" of effective leadership.

There appears to be a positive relationship between effective leadership and effective listening skills by those leaders, as noted throughout the literature. Lucia (1997) proclaims that the message is clear, that effective leaders hear what others have to say and empathize with their issues. Cohen (1988) points out the same relationship, however he comes to that conclusion in a different way. He notes that managers who are bad listeners tend to be ineffective managers.

Actively listening to and empathizing with what people have to say are two of the important qualities of effective leaders. According to Lucia (1997), leaders know how to listen. They posses crucial qualities that promote positive work relations, inspire trust, and bolster the "bottom line." Effective leaders recognize people have a need to be heard. Empathy is as valued as the willingness to listen.

Surveys

Wylie and Grothe (1987) report that the two most common faults they hear from employees regarding their leaders are "my boss doesn't listen to me" and "my boss doesn't give me good feedback." Apparently a lot of bosses are terrible listeners.

TABLE 1

RESPONSES   **ISSUES**

	YES	%	NO	%	
1.	47	78	13	22	Listening part of agency culture
2.	35	58	25	42	Listening part of officer development
3.	27	45	33	50	Complete listening class
4.	48	80	12	20	Consider self a good listener
5.	7.0 average rating				Rate self on listening ability from 1-10
6.	6.27 average rating				Employee rating of leader's ability from 1-10
7.	59	98	1	2	Have an open door policy
8.	43	72	17	28	Manage by walking around
9.	6.56 hours/week				Time weekly spent listening
10.	55	91	5	9	Encourage "courage conversations"

Note: N=60

Two surveys were designed to determine a leaders perception of their own listening effectiveness. The first survey, (Appendix A) was given to three NFA classes during July 1998; the results are presented in Table 1. The second survey, (Appendix B) was designed for the leaders of SFD, and was administered in November 1998; the result are presented in Table 2. All of the questions in the survey, "target" one or more of the barriers to effective listening or personally rate their listening effectiveness.

As we can see from the questions in both surveys, they perceive themselves as effective listeners. They see themselves as attentive, empathic, available, non-judgmental and without prejudice. They feel they are motivated to listen and present a positive, open setting to invite communication even if controversial. They also believe they "walk the talk".

The third survey, (Appendix C) was designed to determine the employees perception of the executive leadership at SFD. The summary of this survey is combined with the second survey and found in Table 2. The surveys from the same organization make for an interesting comparison between what the executive leaders perceive there listening skills to be and how the employees perceive their skills, based on the same questions.

The survey data shows the perceptions by both groups are reasonably consistent with the literature. Naturally, there are some differences that are notable. The leaders believe they listen more than talk by 66% while employees feel there is no noticeable difference. Similarly, leaders report a willingness to dig into issues 100% of the time, while employees note leaders will not usually go below the surface of problems 62% of the time. Chiefs apparently are sensitive to external distractions. They documented distractions while listening 67% and 38% of employees reported leaders to be affected by external stimuli. One third of the responding

TABLE 2

RESPONSES   ISSUES

LEADERS   EMPLOYEES

	YES	%	NO	%	YES	%	NO	%	ISSUES
1.	2	33	4	66	5	15	27	84	Interrupting speaker
2.	1	17	5	83	9	28	23	71	Simultaneously listen and talk
3.	6	100	0	0	29	90	3	10	Supportive body language
4.	1	17	5	83	2	7	30	93	Lack of attention
5.	2	33	4	66	16	50	16	50	Listen and talk/interruptions
6.	2	33	4	66	11	35	21	65	Closed body language
7.	1	17	5	83	15	50	16	50	Talk rather than listen
8.	3	50	3	50	18	56	14	44	Prejudice and poor motivation
9.	6	100	0	0	12	38	20	62	Use active questioning
10.	0	0	6	100	6	19	26	81	Lack of sincerity in listening
11.	4	67	2	33	12	38	20	62	Poor listening setting
12.	3	50	3	50	10	31	22	69	Over power the speaker
13.	5	83	1	17	28	88	4	12	"Open door" policy
14.	6	100	0	0	21	66	11	34	"Walk around" management
15.	1	17	5	83	15	49	17	51	Prejudice speaker and listener

Note: N=6   Note: N=32

employees reported that the leaders do not manage while walking around, while 100% of the leaders felt they do. Finally, 83% of the leaders believe they are empathic and consequently open to significant input from their employees. Employees, however, reported that only 51% are empathic.

While leaders and employees had significant differences in perceptions of certain specific leadership traits, the perception of both groups in SFD was that leaders were effective listeners.

DISCUSSION

The research gathered from the literature review as well as the data gathered from surveys show that effective leaders are perceived to be effective listeners.

The present study identified several significant relationships worthy of further discussion. First, and most important is reconfirming the relationship between leadership and listening effectiveness. This study strengthens the contention that being perceived as an effective listener is significant in leadership effectiveness. Those individuals perceived as effective listeners were seen by their subordinates to be effective leaders. This was a moderate surprise in calculating the results of the SFD surveys.

Two possible explanations might provide insight into these responses. First, when delivering the survey to employees, part of the instructions were to "think of the department leaders as a whole when completing the survey". This allowed responders to neutralize their feelings. A second reason is that the Fire Chief mandated that all department chiefs would attend a Steven Covey, *7 Habits Course*. Over the past eighteen months, all

department chiefs and many company officers have completed this training. This may have made a difference in employees perception of their leaders ability to listen.

Reynolds argues (1984), that it might be that leaders take on enhanced listening skills only after assuming the role as a leader. Leaders typically receive more direct interaction from other members, and this may encourage them to listen more effectively. Leaders may respond to their role by increasing their attention, effort and participation. The sense of heightened responsibility may elicit improved listening behavior from those with otherwise normal skills.

Johnson and Bechler (1998) also found that leaders exhibit superior listening skills because of heightened interest in the group. That is, they have a greater desire to see the group succeed, for whatever reason, and as a result develop superior listening skills. They note that regardless of the reason, previous research clearly finds that individuals are eliminated from consideration for leadership positions base on undesirable attributes, whereas positive attributes increase the likelihood of emerging as a leader. Similarly, leaders emerge who have identified effective listening skills as a skill they need to be an effective leader.

Implications for our organization from this study include a continued awareness of the importance of empathetic listening by the department leaders. A second implication is that effective listening is not a skill useful only for the executive leaders. Listening is a skill valuable throughout the organization. This is true of emerging leaders and apparent leaders at all levels and, finally all empathic listening is a skill valuable for all department members both on a professional level and personally.

Our customers generally ask for our assistance in a time of crisis. Empathic listening is particularly valuable when interacting with our customers under these conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Although the relationship between effective listening and leadership seems strong, notes Johnson and Belcher (1998), it is not specifically known if leaders possess superior listening skills across contexts. It may be that they simply work harder than others at listening than others. In addition, listening may not be a singular attribute related to leadership. It may be part of a set of communication attributes. Leaders may also have superior verbal skills to effectively persuade others after using enhanced listening skills to identify central issues. Future research will no doubt consider this.

If we are really willing to learn how to listen, we can become more effective leaders. It will take hard work to learn the skills, content practice to keep the skills viable, and periodic retrospective analysis to check our progress. The key element is realizing that listening, and in particular, empathic listening, is as important as the other communication skills of reading, writing and speaking. Especially important is the understanding that listening should not take a secondary position to speaking, its verbal counterpart.

The opportunities available to develop listening skills are as close as the Internet or your local public library. There are a multitude of books, classes, and audio-visual training programs available to help us develop our listening skills. Hunsaker and Alessandra (1986) summarize their rules for being a good listener which naturally, involve courtesy and common sense. When conversing with another person, we must be aware and practice the following rules:

1. Remember that it is impossible to listen and talk at the same time. This most basic rule is broken most often.

2. Listen for the speakers main ideas. Specific facts are only important as they pertain to the main theme.

3. Be sensitive to your emotional deaf spots. Deaf spots are words that make your mind wander or go off on a mental tangent.

4. Fight off distractions. Train yourself to listen carefully to your employee's words, despite external distractions.

5. Try not to get angry. Emotions of any kind hinders the listening process, but anger in particular is detrimental to message reception.

6. Do not trust to memory certain data that may be important. Take notes.

7. Let your employees tell their own stories first. When employees explain their situations, they may reveal interesting facts and valuable clues to help satisfy their needs.

8. Empathize with your employees. Make a determined effort to see their point of view.

9. Withhold judgment. Judge the value of the message, not the speaker's delivery ability.

10. React to the message, not the person. Don't allow your mental impression of the speaker to influence your interpretation of his message.

11. Try to appreciate the emotion behind the speaker's words (vocal and emotional) more than the literal meaning of the words.

12. Use feedback. Constantly try to check your understanding of what you hear.

13. Listen selectively. Very often in conservation, your employee will tell you things that will help you identify his problems, needs, goals, or objectives.

14. Relax. When another person is speaking to you, try to put her at ease by creating a relaxed, accepting environment.

15. Try not to be critical, either mentally or verbally, of someone else's point of view, even if it is different from your own. Hold your temper and your emotional feelings.

16. Listen attentively. Face your employee straight on with uncrossed arms and legs; lean slightly forward. Establish good, gentle, intermittent eye contact.

17. To the degree that it is in your power, try to create a positive listening environment.

18. Ask questions. Ask open-ended, feeling-finding questions to allow your employee to express her feelings and thoughts.

19. Be motivated listener. Without the proper attitude, all the foregoing suggestions for effective listening are for naught (pp. 137-140).

Employees feel relieved when they find leaders who understand what they have to say about their problems. Once they truly try to understand their employees by empathically listening to them, they will hopefully, reciprocate by listening back.

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APPENDIX A

SURVEY OF LISTENING SKILLS

I am Greg Rynders, a Battalion Chief by profession, and a fourth year Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) student currently enrolled in Executive Leadership. Listening, a communication skill, is not only an important component of the fire officer's ability to lead, but is a skill that all members of the fire profession use daily.

Kindly take a few minutes to complete the following survey. Your responses are extremely valuable to my research of this issue, and will be kept strictly confidential. Should you desire a copy of the results, please record your name and address on the back of this survey.

Is your agency Career_____, Volunteer_____, Combination_____. The number of members in your organization is _____.

Is listening to others part of your organizational culture?
Yes_____   No_____

Is listening a component in your officer development program?
Yes_____   No_____

Have you completed a class in active listening?
Yes_____   No_____

Do you consider yourself a good listener?
Yes_____   No_____

On a scale of one to ten, with one being lowest how would you rate your listening ability?
Rating_____

On the same scale, how would your followers or colleagues rate you?
Rating_____

If you have followers, do you have an "open door" policy.
Yes_____   No_____

Is it the culture of your organization for leaders to "manage by walking around", that is do they go to their followers?
Yes_____   No_____

How much time weekly, do you dedicate to listening to your followers?
Time _____

Do you initiate "courageous conversations" which may result in differences of opinions with colleagues and followers?
Yes_____   No_____

APPENDIX B

SURVEY OF LISTENING SKILLS

I am Battalion Chief Greg Rynders, now in my fourth and final year of the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) at the National Fire Academy. The communication skill, listening, is not only an important component of the fire officer's ability to lead, but is a skill that all members of the fire profession use to varying degrees daily.

Employees talk often about their leaders. Written below are some of the more common statements employees make about their officers when it comes to listening. Kindly take a few minutes to complete the following survey. Your responses are extremely valuable to my research of this skill, and will be kept strictly confidential.

While reading the statements below, try to determine objectively what response most appropriately fits your style and check that answer. Do not write your name or in any way identify yourself.

1. When an employee is talking, do you interrupt and finish their statement for them?
        Yes_____No_____

2. When an employees approaches you with a problem, do you suggest solutions before the problem is fully explained?
        Yes_____No_____

3. Do you look at your employee and make intermittent eye contact with them when they are speaking to you?
        Yes_____No_____

4. Do you doodle, shuffle papers, wipe glasses, toy with pencils or some other items while an employee is seeking you guidance?
        Yes_____No_____

5. Do you take incoming phone calls or make phone calls while engaged in a serious conversation with an employee?
        Yes_____No_____

6. Do your facial expressions and general body language keep your employees guessing as to whether or not you are listening and following their message?
        Yes_____No_____

7. Do you spend a great deal of time talking rather than listening?
        Yes_____No_____

8. Do you misinterpret what was said (hear what you wanted rather than what was meant) such that the speaker corrected your interpretation?

    Yes_____No_____

9. Are you willing to get to the root of issues by appropriately going below the surface of the problem or conversation?

    Yes_____No_____

10. Do you create the impression that you have just returned from a seminar on listening to employees by overdoing it?

    Yes_____No_____

11. Are you easily distracted from listening to your employee's problem by external noise, passersby and employee statements that remind you or prior experiences?

    Yes_____No_____

12. Do you put your employee on the defensive when they ask a question or make a suggestion about improving things?

    Yes_____No_____

13. Do you have an "open door" policy for your employees?

    Yes_____No_____

14. Do you "manage by walking around", that is do you go to your employees and make yourself available to them?

    Yes_____No_____

15. Do you act as an expert and don't give the employee the benefit of the doubt to have meaningful input into their job situation?

    Yes_____No_____

APPENDIX C

SURVEY OF LISTENING SKILLS

I am Battalion Chief Greg Rynders, now in my fourth and final year of the Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP) at the National Fire Academy. The communication skill, listening, is not only an important component of the fire officer's ability to lead, but is a skill that all members of the fire profession use to varying degrees daily.

Employees often talk about their leaders. Written below are some of the more common statements employees make about their officers when it comes to listening. Kindly take a few minutes to complete the following survey. Your responses are extremely valuable to my research of this skill, and will be kept strictly confidential.

While reading the statements below, try to determine objectively what response most appropriately fits the styles of the chief officers. Do not write your name, make comments or in any way identify yourself. When completed, please put the survey in the envelope provided and return it to me through interoffice mail. Thanks.

1. When you are talking with a chief, does he interrupt and finish your statement for you?
       Yes_____No_____

2. When you approach a chief with a problem, does he suggest solutions before the problem is fully explained?
       Yes_____No_____

3. Does your chief look at you, seem interested and make intermittent eye contact with you when they are speaking to you?
       Yes_____No_____

4. When meeting with a chief, does he seem preoccupied by doodling, shuffling papers, wiping glasses, toying with pencils or some other items while you are seeking his guidance?
       Yes_____No_____

5. Does a chief take incoming phone calls or make phone calls while you are engaged in a serious conversation with him?
       Yes_____No_____

6. Does a chief's facial expressions and general body language keep you guessing as to whether or not he is listening and following your message?
       Yes_____No_____

7. Does a chief spend a great deal of time talking rather than listening?
       Yes_____No_____

8. Does a chief misinterpret what was said (hear what he wanted rather than what was meant) such that he corrects your interpretation?
      Yes_____No_____

9. Is a chief willing to get to the root of issues by appropriately going below the surface of the problem or conversation?
      Yes_____No_____

10. Does a chief create the impression that he has just returned from a seminar on listening to employees by overdoing it?
      Yes_____No_____

11. Is a chief easily distracted from listening to your problem by external noise, passersby and employee statements that remind you or prior experiences?
      Yes_____No_____

12. Does a chief put you on the defensive when you ask a question or make a suggestion about improving things?
      Yes_____No_____

13. Do the chief officers have an "open door" policy for their employees?
      Yes_____No_____

14. Do the chief officers "manage by walking around", that is do they go to their employees and make themselves available to them?
      Yes_____No_____

15. Do the chiefs act as experts and don't give the employee the benefit of the doubt to have meaningful input into their job situation?
      Yes_____No_____