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Translated from the texting dictionary, "Are you communicating?" Over the past decade, assessments have been introduced that identify our strengths and personality types. Research on gender, generations, and culture appears in the academic and popular press. Much of this information has been helpful in expanding our understanding of ourselves, other team members, and our organizations. But all of this focus on awareness of ourselves and others doesn't necessarily lead to improved communication or even predict how people will act in any given situation.

Communicating successfully in a workplace can be a complicated task. In order to be successful in roles from manager to team member to situation leader, we need to develop our ability to not only speak and listen, but to develop communication acumen. I like this quote from Alan Alda, who played the surgeon Hawkeye Pierce on M*A*S*H; he says in his recent book, *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed*:

At first, onstage and in life, I didn't really know what relating was. And listening was more a kind of waiting than anything else. I talk and then you talk. And then I listen for when I get to talk again. But relating, I came to understand, happens not just while I'm talking; it also happens while you're talking and in between.

It is easy to believe that there is only one right answer, mine. And I'll be happy to talk about what the right answer is. Additionally, if I have spent time talking with certain individuals before, I can come to think that I already know what they're going to say. "Listening" becomes the space between the times that I talk – time spent thinking about what I'm going to say next – the phrase that will allow me to dictate the right answer to you. In a group, this can look like a series of orchestrated monologues. This kind of communication is not helpful in almost every situation.

Another impulse that can undermine genuine communication is politeness. We are raised to be polite, considerate, and sensitive, to avoid being rude and overbearing. This can lead us to not say what we are really thinking for fear of standing alone, disrupting the group, or of causing a damaging break among the members. In my experience, politeness can lead a group to create

or move in general directions only – obscuring problems and maintaining the status quo. Politeness often quietly leads to stalemate or dissolution.

If we want to move beyond being right and polite, we need to create an environment where people are free to speak openly and honestly and be heard. Good communication is simply the exchange of being willing to open oneself to speak honestly, telling others what is inside of us, and then to open our hearts and minds to hearing the story from the other's perspective. From within this environment, we can take on even complex problems, immersing ourselves in the full complexity of the group, its dynamics, and the challenges it faces.

The challenge for leaders and managers who want to communicate effectively is to be willing encounter the full complexity. The group dynamic is changed when the conversation is opened not only to the experts and those in the center, but also those on the edges. Creativity and innovation can be brought to the group when the conversation includes not only what has worked in the past, but also new options that may be emerging. The community can shift and grow when the conversation includes those who disagree or see things differently as well as people we don't even like or understand.

To create new possibilities, leaders and managers must listen reflectively. Knowing that while we hear other opinions, we need to give our own. Knowing that while we must see the story from other perspectives, we need to see our own role. We must consider the possibility that the old adage, "If you're not part of the solution, you're part of the problem," . . . is turned on its head, "If you're not part of the problem, you can't be part of the solution." In other words, the only way to communicate if you're on the outside is by force or persuasion. You have to be on the inside to contribute to and be a part of the change.

To create new solutions, it is not enough to listen to facts and ideas, we must listen with empathy. Empathy is not sympathy, which is walking alongside someone. Empathy is communication that participates with others, encouraging them to reach their own potential as we reach ours. In doing so, we open the possibility that we can enter into a dialogue where we listen not only from within ourselves or to others, but from perspective of the whole system.

I will be the first to say that changing the way we communicate isn't easy. But it gets easier with practice. Vince Lombardi is often misquoted as saying, "Practice makes perfect." The quote is, "Perfect practice makes perfect." So, if you're thinking that this kind of communication isn't possible in your environment, just experiment with and practice pressing the "Mute" button on your internal conversation channel while someone else is speaking. Or consider a few phrases that might change your conversations:

"In my opinion..."

"Interesting! Tell me more..."

"What would make that possible?"

"Help me understand..."

Every day, in every encounter, we get to choose how we communicate and relate to others. And how we communicate determines what we will be able to create and contribute to the world and communities around us.

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First published in the *Kansas EMS Chronicle*.