

How to Listen Effectively as an Operations Leader | 126

Welcome to Lean Leadership for Ops Managers, the podcast for leaders in Ops Management who want to spark improvement, foster engagement, and boost problem solving - AND still get their day job done. Here's your host, Leadership Trainer, Lean Enthusiast, and Spy Thriller Junkie, Jamie V. Parker.

[00:00:29] Hey, ops executives and leaders. Jamie V. Parker here. And I just participated in Learn Fest with GE aerospace. Now, I know you've been hearing all about the GE Lean mindset event. I promise that's not what I'm talking about today. This is different.

This was actually an internal virtual learn fest that was open to all of GE aerospace employees, and there were several internal speakers that were either giving presentations or having dialogs. And I was invited to join as a keynote. But instead of doing a keynote style presentation, we did a fireside chat with Brett Smith. Now, if you're a longtime listener, you know that Brett and I have talked because I actually joined Brett and LaToya on GE's internal podcast. And on that note, they actually let us republish that episode here for you.

So we're going to put that link in the show notes if you want to go back and listen to it. And it was actually their internal GE podcast. It was season number one, episode number two. Right. So kind of like making waves there. The first episode was with Larry Culp and the second episode was me. It's actually one of their most listened to episodes, which is why they invited me back.

And I'm going to brag a little bit because I got a note afterwards and they said they've done more than 100 Learn Fest sessions over the last three years. They usually get a few hundred attendees and they need to have a big name, someone like Larry Culp to break 1000.

[00:01:56] Well, our session just set a new record with 1800 attendees, so I'm on cloud nine. So excited to continue to reach people live, all 1800 that were there live, as well as everyone that's going to watch that recording among the GE team. So feeling pretty good, feeling excited. But this learn fest fireside chat, it was an hour long, so I'm not going to go through all of it with you all, or at least not right now. Here in this podcast, there was one part of the conversation I really wanted to bring out and discuss with you as well.

Brett said that she is doing a lot of work with leaders, functional leaders on some different improvements,

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both from a standpoint of improving the operation, improving their work, but also improving from a leadership perspective and adopting kind of the GE leadership principles and culture that they're looking to build.

And so one of the opportunities she sees leaders needing help with is their ability to listen, to stop themselves from jumping in with answers and solutions, but really engaging people, listening to them, collaborating and coaching and through that, developing the individual and collective capabilities and culture. So in fact, the name of this learn fest fireside chat was stop, collaborate and Listen. And we had a whole 90s rap theme going. It was a lot of fun. Anyway, so let's talk about this issue that Brett Brett brought up.

[00:03:14] Right. Stopping and listening. And you know, I can be the best, most amazing listener when I'm on, I am on when I'm in an intentional coaching session or a one on one with the leaders on my team or trusted advisor sessions, I can really be on point. There are times where I can be on point. You know, my Trusted Advisor mentoring program used to start at three month intervals, and I would have folks sign up for three months and then stay on for three years. And part of that reason is because I could really listen and hear what they were saying.

So side note these spots don't come open often, but I do have one spot opening up. It's not an entry level hourly coaching. It's not going to be kind of entry level hourly. It is high level partnership trusted advisor program. So if you're interested, you can go to [Process Plus Results.com](https://www.ProcessPlusResults.com) and use the Schedule a Call button to fill out a form and request a call.

Anyways, so I do have the capability to be a great listener. I have studied it. I have gone to week long training about it. I have practiced it, but I can also be the worst listener. I get going in the day to day. I feel the pressures of delivering value. I experience the urgency. If we miss this window, we fail and I revert back into go, go, go. If I'm not intentional and aware of choosing to be a good listener, I can really suck at it.

[00:04:34] In fact, one of my worst habits is interrupting I. I have to physically sometimes, like put my hand over my mouth to stop myself and say I'm so sorry and like, hold my lips closed for like two seconds to,

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like, really get it into my brain to stop talking. Right? So Brett asked me, you know, what gets in the way of leaders trying to be good listeners? And how can we combat that?

And what I'm going to do is I'm going to share what gets in the way of me being a good listener. Right? Because while I can do it when I'm focused, I don't do it when I'm not.

So here are five things that get in the way of me being a good listener. Number one, I get distracted just like everyone else does. I can get distracted thinking about what's for dinner, thinking about the things on my to do list, what's next, all the things now I loved.

Brett actually shared that when she finds herself getting distracted like that, she likes to center herself on something in the room to stay. Help her stay focused and be able to listen because she finds something physical to focus on. But distraction definitely can be a problem. Number two, I want to help. I have ideas that I think can help. So what ends up happening is I focus more on my ideas and less on listening.

[00:05:48] You know, the classic version of this is the It's Not About the Nail video, and it shows like a husband, wife and a wife with a problem. And the husband sees the obvious answer and keeps telling the wife what to do. And she says, you always do this. You always try to fix things when what I really need you to do is listen. Right. It's very funny. Very good. You can go talk about kind of what happens in a lot of our relationships and not just in a husband wife relationship.

It can happen a lot of our relationships, but this idea that I want to help and I have ideas I think can help. And so I give you my ideas, right? Or I want to ask you the question. Even if I'm asking a question, it becomes, I want to help. I also want us to win. So I hear something and it's a great idea, or it sparks more thoughts, or I have more questions, and then I get excited and then I just can't help myself because I jump in and interrupt, because I had a thought that entered my brain. Right. So I want to help. I want us to win. I also want to get stuff done, and I want to get stuff done fast. And ain't nobody got time to sit around talking. We got things to do. Remember that meme that went around with there was a woman who had experienced a house fire or an apartment fire or something, and she had done an interview with the local news.

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[00:06:58] And at the end of the interview, she said, ain't nobody got time for that. It kind of became a meme that went around. It was like ten years ago, right? This is where I am on pop culture, talking about a meme from ten years ago, but it actually still captures my core when it comes to pace and urgency. You know, ain't nobody got time for this.

And that way of thinking can really get in the way of listening effectively.

And then I also tell myself stories and make assumptions. I'm listening but then something prompts me to go into storytelling mode in my brain. I'm assuming that the guy doesn't know what he's talking about, or he just cares about this. This is a waste of time. And then this whole thing happens in my brain that goes against the goal of wanting to listen, to understand, to listen, to learn, to listen, to connect.

Because now there's this, this like whole monologue running through my brain that's basically saying, you don't need to listen to this, right? Like you've already made up your mind. So if any of this resonates with you getting distracted, wanting to help, wanting us to win, wanting to get stuff done fast and telling stories and making assumptions. If any of that resonates with you, then cool, because we are in this together, my friends.

[00:08:07] I share all this because I don't have all the answers. I'm not here to say, just go do that. Like it's an easy thing. Like, oh yeah, just go do that. Just listen better. I'm really here to listen and connect, to share what I've learned, what's working, what's not. I'm here to give advice that might be helpful, to ask questions and coach when you need to find the answers within yourself, and to walk alongside where we learn together.

So I'm on this journey to be a better leader, to learn to improve my ability to listen and to balance the needs to create value while doing it in a way that respects and develops people. And part of my learning process is to learn from people who do it better than I do. And there is a cow at one of my client organizations that I think is a phenomenal listener.

Like even when he's giving me corrective feedback that I don't love, or even when he's giving me direction that I don't agree with, that's not the decision I would make. It's cool. And part of the reason it's

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cool is because I know that he has listened first. So I've been doing this little like creepy stalking kind of thing where I really watch him in meetings and conversations. There are meetings where I'm kind of losing my patience, or I'm getting a little hot headed or emotional, or maybe I'm just annoyed or bored, but I'm trying to watch him to see what he does.

[00:09:23] Like, what's the behavior that makes him a good listener? And there are two specific things that I have noticed on repeat, right? That I've noticed he's done multiple times. So the first is that he listens for longer than I want to. Like, right? Like when someone is talking and maybe they pause and allow for comments, right?

Maybe there's even some dialog happening. But when someone is talking and I'm ready to get into the two way part of two way dialog, right, I'm ready to respond. I'm ready to dig in. This good listener doesn't do that, yet. He listens for longer than is my natural inclination to listen. And because of that, I think he learns more about the way the person is thinking. I might listen long enough to get the what the person is saying, but he keeps listening.

He listens longer, and so it's more likely that he hears the cues and what's going on behind the what, like how they're thinking, why they're thinking that way, what led them to that conclusion, maybe even how they're feeling or what their fears are or things like that. So you may not always get that. Sometimes he listens longer and that just never comes out, but he gets it more often than I do because he listens for longer and because he's willing to do that. He learns more and he understands more.

[00:10:46] So that's the first behavior that I have noticed this good listener doing. Now. The second behavior is that when he does respond, he is more likely to ask a question than give a statement. So. If I'm patient and I'm waiting and I've waited that long, I'm ready to respond. Whereas he's ready to learn, he's ready to ask so that he can learn. Now, it might be a very specific question.

It might have like a tiniest bit of leading into it, because he may need to direct to a specific part of the conversation or a specific part of what they said. But it's not an I got you. He's not proving his point. He's not trying to, you know, do some like, magic Jedi trick to convince someone of something, right? He's still in that curiosity mode. He's still in the learning mode. He's still in listening to understand mode. But now

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that he's listened longer, he's figured out what it is he needs to better understand next.

And so those are the two specific behaviors I have observed in my creepy stalking of this, of this good listener. Right. So two two behaviors listening longer than is my natural inclination inclination to do so. And when he responds, he's more likely to ask a question than give a statement. Now I'm not saying every time 100%, but he's more likely to do that than what I do. So those are two of the specific behaviors that I am working on trying to see.

[00:12:08] Can I practice those behaviors and what happens when I practice those behaviors? Now, in the Q&A part of this Learn Fest session, I did get a question about what do you do when someone just goes on and on talking and they take up valuable group time because they're just, you know, long winded and da da da da da, right. And that might have been like my judgment on the long winded da de da da da since it was a question in chat.

But this really gets into our fears of why we sometimes avoid getting better at something because we fear what will happen if it goes the extreme. In episode one of the podcast of this podcast, we talked about respect for people versus delivering results. And sometimes people think I have to either choose one or the other, right? I can either have this great people focused, focused environment that allows everyone to contribute their gifts and be heard and collaborate, or I can get shit done and deliver results.

And we talked about shifting from or either or thinking to and thinking. So we shift from either or thinking to and thinking. We're kind of reframing that question into how do we have a great positive people development work environment and deliver results? So sometimes when we hear kind of my sharing about this good listening behavior of listening for longer than it's my natural inclination, I start to imagine the horror stories of people talking forever.

[00:13:33] Right? Or maybe we have some of that that we're experiencing in our real life, in our meetings. We're like, oh, like everybody's like, oh yeah, that's Rob Rob's. That's who we're talking about. In my company. It's Rob, right? My answer on Learn Fast really talked about leading people through feedback on an individual level and engaging people in effective group dialog.

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So let me ask you this question. If you were doing something that hurt the team or made their job harder, or made you less effective at your job, or maybe hurt your reputation at work, would you want to know? Yes, of course you would. Right? Of course you'd want to know. That way you could do something about it. When someone has a repeated pattern of being long winded, of wandering in their verbal communication, of talking so much, they don't give other people opportunities to contribute. We need to tell them that. As an operations executive or manager, you need to give that person feedback.

Let them know the impact of that behavior, that their message loses. Impact that people get lost and don't understand what their core point is that people tune out and it hurts their ability to influence. Let them know the negative impact of the behavior, and ask them if they're willing to work on improving their verbal communication. Offer to help them with ongoing feedback, advice, coaching if they'd like that help, and then follow through after a meeting or a one on one conversation with the individual.

[00:15:04] Ask them to self assess. I know you've been working on streamlining your verbal communication so that you can share clear messages and give other people a chance to contribute. How do you think that went in today's meeting? What'd you do? Well. What could you have done better? What do you want to try for next time? When we help people improve, we don't just give them feedback and then dump it on them and let them sit with it.

But when we give them feedback, help them understand the impact of why it's important, and then offer to help them so that it's more than just one interaction, it's multiple interactions. Then it's a great development opportunity and we get better with results because we improve our ability to have collaborative group discussions and decision making.

Now, on the other side, you may want to work together as a team to develop some ground rules for some of your dialogs and discussions, to share that we want a collaborative environment, and we need to make decisions to set the objectives at the beginning of the discussion. Here's what our objectives are for this conversation. To share. You know, people are going to have perspectives and we want to listen to different contributions. There may be times during this discussion that we have to hit the pause button so that we can stay focused on the objectives at hand.

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[00:16:27] We can help get people get better at communicating, while also working on improving our ability to listen. Like two things can be true at the same time. So I don't know where you fall on the scale of good listening skills. If you're like me, you probably can fall all over the scale depending on what's happening in these scenarios. You're a great listener. In other scenarios, you're a crappy listener.

My question is, though, what type of leader do you want to be and how often are you being that leader? Now? What type of leader do you want to be? And if you want to be that leader, how does that translate into behaviors? How do you want to show up? How do you want to behave in your communication with others? How do you want to listen, and how often does that show up today?

So when I think about reflecting back the work that I'm doing right now, it is not just like, let's just all sit around the fire or the like the outdoor fire and talk and chit chat and come to collaborative decision making. And let's just go at a nice camping fire pace. Like that's just not what the situation is. And so yes, we want to create value for customers to do that. We are on some deadlines and some timelines because if we miss this window, we miss it for the whole year. So we have some urgency. And so we we are here compelled to create results and deliver value.

[00:17:54] And we want to do it in a way where we can listen to people, and people can feel respected and valued, where people have an opportunity to contribute and people have an opportunity to grow. So at the end of the day, at the end of the week, reflecting back. How often did I show up as the leader?

I want to be behaving with the listening skills I want to use. How often did that happen? This week. And right now it might be 10%. I don't need it to be 100% all the time that I listen in that way, 100%, but maybe I want to get it to 30. And so when I reflect, I can better understand that. So that's kind of your reflection for you as well. And of course, this is a scenario where we all have different experiences and we can learn from others.

So if you have ideas that you think, oh my goodness, this is what I would share with other listeners, then feel free to send those to me. Happy to kind of collect some of those and put them together. But that's it for now. You can find links at our show notes processplusresults.com/podcast. Remember if you're

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interested in snagging that one high value Trusted Advisor slot when it comes open, you can fill out a form on our website to schedule a call with me. Until next time.