



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES



WORK MATTERS

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Masques, Ostriches and the Role of Listening

-Part Two

I once was privileged enough to visit a workplace in Copenhagen, Denmark. What struck me most was an absoluteness of silence that pervaded the entire room. The office was a single open-plan room, no dividing walls or cubicles. Yes, I was able to see every officer at his or her desk. Just beyond the entrance was a counter over which visitors were cordially and professionally attended to. Not only did that silence speak volumes, it specifically highlighted a workforce thoroughly engaged in the task at hand. The scene prompted me to further engage the person attending to me. His response to my amazement at the quiet, matched my own, but with an added display of his own mild, yet incredulous take on my question regarding the quiet in the room. In thick Danish accent he responded “Men de arbejder” (a quick google): “But they are working.” I listened to that silence as I did to the man, and thought of how much we could learn when we truly engage on a psychological level through listening. But listening is not automatic simply because we possess functioning ears.

Research has shown that we spend over 70% of our day communicating, and that 55% is spent listening; all the more reason for us to attend to how we listen. Listening requires a moving beyond hearing to a place where we listen to understand. Hearing is the physiological process of receiving sound, while listening is psychological. This means that we make a conscious effort to engage with the person speaking. When we truly listen, we are actively engaged with the other: we check our attitude; we pay attention and, we are willing to adjust our thinking as we engage. Workplaces are not idle spaces--or, at least, they ought not to be. Perhaps for this reason time is always of the essence, and there is no time to undertake any activity that appears at first glance to be a wasting of time. At surface level, engagement, checking of attitude, focusing, and showing a willingness to adapt one's perspective might appear hindrances to the business and busyness of workplaces. But here's the thing: employed correctly and at the right time, those three basic skills of listening can assist in creating a workplace that is not only

productive, but one where both employers and employees feel safe enough in each other's presence, enough to communicate without the need to cover up/hide. There would be no need for masques because the workplace would become a place where trust is engendered.

Think about it: When we meet people with a positive mindset, conversation is easy. When we give each other our full attention, with little or no limiting thoughts acting as barriers to effective listening, we are likely to get a person unmasked, one willing to share. When we give verbal responses and non-verbal cues, we show a level of engagement and care that is guaranteed to keep the speaker speaking. No head-in-the-sand; no pretense; no lack of engagement.

That open-plan office I encountered in Denmark was similar to a place I once worked. We were all able to see each other when we sat at our desks, for there were no cubicles or partitions, and we did 'see' each other in that we came to learn more about each other through a genuine sharing and a leaning-in to listen to each other. There was little privacy, but there was much camaraderie. We even shared a one-door entrance to a two-toilet area. We met each other at the wash basin and we chatted when we washed hands. We engaged. We all had our peculiarities and idiosyncrasies, but we functioned quite well as a unit. We became family. What I liked about that workspace had less to do with the space itself than with the people occupying that space. We were multiethnic, multiracial, of varying ages and religious backgrounds, grounds enough for ethnocentric behaviours and prejudices if we chose not to listen.

When we take time to listen, there is really no time to go searching for masques. When we engage in listening, we cannot play ostrich at the same time. A workplace that allows effective communication through employing active listening skills, such as those outlined above, is a workplace destined to grow and to produce. The only mask to be worn would be the one that protects. In an atmosphere of trust and ca-

maraderie, created by active listening, and where
masques are doffed, workplaces are sure to thrive.

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