

Leadership: Listening

A Harvard Med School doc by the name of Jerome Groopman wrote a lovely book called *How Doctors Think*. And he begins by saying, “When you are engaging a patient, what is *the number one source* of evidence about that patient’s problem?” And he answers the obvious answer—duh!—“the patient.” The patient won’t use the right technical language, the signal to noise ratio won’t be all that high. But in the course of a five, or ten, or fifteen minute discussion, you will pull out an incredible number of pearls. Okay, the best source of information about a patient’s ailment is the patient, *comma*. At that point, Groopman refers us, or leads us to a research study that asks and then answers the following question:

(But I’m going to halt for three seconds in here while you think of what your answer is.)

How long is it before the doctor addresses you, sits down with you, and how long is it before the doctor, on average, interrupts?

And if you said, “Eighteen seconds,” you got it exactly right. Eighteen seconds and the doctor has interrupted with his opinion. Now, am I doing this little piece for you to trash doctors? Absolutely not. I’m doing this little piece to trash *you*, among the bosses who are watching this, and any of us who are watching this who are experts or professionals or what have you. I bet you that among the bosses in the audience watching this that seven out of eight are eighteen-second bosses. That is, it is, “Oh my god, I’ve seen this before. This is what you should do,” before you even express what the problem is.

So here’s the segue. I have come to the conclusion, and you may argue that this is overstated, but I don’t care whether you argue that or not, I believe it. The single most significant strategic strength that an organization can have is not a good strategic plan, but a commitment to strategic listening on the part of every member of the organization: strategic listening to frontline employees, strategic listening to vendors, to customers.

Because you see, I mean, I really hate MBA programs, but some day I’m going to have my *own* MBA program. And the number one core course in Tom’s MBA program is going to be a two-part, half-year each course called Strategic Listening I, and Strategic Listening II. The reality is you can teach listening, you can get better at listening; there’s no issue about that. But guess what? It’s like playing the piano. It’s like becoming an actor. It’s like learning to be an artist. It is a profession that has to be learned.

And it is my opinion, that as a leader or as a team member, that to a significant degree your profession is listening. So think about it. Are you an eighteen-second manager? Bet you are.