



Judy Ringer

How to Keep a Good Employee: Look, Listen, Learn

Recently a client told me a wonderful story about how a change of attitude helped her to keep a valued employee.

Angry and grumbling about one of the provisions in the company policy, the employee asked for a private meeting with my client, the owner of a small sales company, and began to tell her in direct terms what was wrong. The client couldn't hear anything the employee was saying because she was too busy planning her own rebuttal strategy. It was important to let the employee know that the policy was a good one. On the other hand, she didn't want to lose her top sales agent. Physically, she could feel her body clenching and mentally, she was preoccupied with what she should say.

She Who Speaks First Loses

Fortunately, she remembered an old adage from her own sales days: when you are negotiating to close the sale and you've asked for the order, it is almost always true that "the person who speaks first loses." The client thought about this, took a deep breath, and listened instead. Almost immediately she felt the physical tension drain away, and found she was really listening for the first time since the employee had started talking.

Seek First To Understand

In Stephen Covey's *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, one of the most well known of the habits - and perhaps most difficult to achieve in difficult moments - is the 5th Habit: Seek First to Understand, Then To Be Understood. My client began to ask questions to find out more of what lay behind the outburst. She became curious, wanting to know as much as she could about her employee's point of view. She grew increasingly interested, and soon it became fun to learn how the policy appeared to this person. The more she listened, the more she could see the

situation through other eyes. As she sought clarity, she began to regain her own equilibrium and power. She saw that she could acknowledge and build on her employee's thoughts and at the same time speak what was true from her perspective as the company's leader.

Hard on the Problem, Soft on the People

She heard not only the employee's words but also what motivated the message - the employee was concerned about fairness, clarity of communication, and the reputation of the company. So was she. It seemed that they were on the same side of wanting what was best for all. From this common ground, the client explained her own view of how the company policy supported clarity, fairness, and company vision, and specifically how adhering to it might support the employee in the long run. She was able to stay open to some positive suggestions for change and, in the end, to reassert her role as leader and mentor. The company owner helped to position the problem as something they could work on and solve together, and the conflict became an opportunity to reinforce their relationship and their ability to handle future challenges.

Morihei Ueshiba, 20th century martial artist, philosopher, and founder of aikido, is quoted as saying: "Opponents confront us continually, but actually there is no opponent there." It is fascinating, rewarding, and an exercise in a different kind of power, when we can turn our opponents into allies. It is one thing to think we are listening, quite another to actually do it – to imagine ourselves in the place of the person we are listening to, and to position the issue so that it can be worked on as a mutual problem-solving endeavor. Try it. You will discover that when you have security in your own power, you will be able to step away from it temporarily and discover something even better.

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About the Author: Judy Ringer is Founder of Power & Presence Training, specializing in unique workshops on conflict, communication, and creating a more positive work environment. Judy is also a black belt in aikido, and is writing her first book on the connection between aikido, conflict, and living a more purposeful life. To sign up for more free tips and articles like these, visit

<http://www.JudyRinger.com>

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