

Welcome to the February 2004 issue of **Management Shorts**
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I. INTRO: The Power of Listening

This issue of Management Shorts is a short story about the power and importance of listening; a CEO who went out into the field as a symbolic gesture of visibility and came back with some unexpected insights that fundamentally changed the focus of his organization.

II. MANAGEMENT SHORT: A True Story

The New CEO

“Pierre” is one of the founders of “Neighborhood Development”, a national organization that seeds and supports nonprofit affiliates across the country. After 3 years his co-founder stepped down as CEO and the Board elected Pierre as the new CEO. Pierre obviously knew the organization well and had some clear ideas about where he wanted to take it strategically.

A Pause Before Acting

I spoke with Pierre right after his appointment was announced and he was ready to launch a major initiative as well as make some changes in his senior team. In particular he wanted to increase the level of training offered to the affiliates. Like many effective leaders, Pierre is action oriented and likes to make things happen. Once he has thought through something he moves quickly. But some instinct stopped him – he later told me he didn’t know where it came from but it must have been some angel that stopped

him from moving too fast and taking actions that he now sees would have been a big mistake.

The Grand Tour

At the time we first spoke Pierre wasn't doubting the wisdom of his plans, but he did want to make sure that his actions would have credibility. So he embarked on a 3 month journey to visit every single affiliate of Neighborhood Development as well as every Neighborhood Development employee across the country. He thought his main purpose was simply to be seen going out into the field so that the affiliates would know and trust him. But he came back from his travels with a radically changed perspective.

Surprises From the Field

Pierre told me that he learned from the affiliates that they didn't much value the services offered to them by Neighborhood Development and that they had some very pressing needs that Neighborhood Development didn't address at all, such as recruiting and fund raising. His plans to increase training would just be more of what they didn't want. He learned that the affiliates were seeing Neighborhood Development as a disapproving parent, rather than a helpful partner, and that certain actions by Neighborhood Development were setting up a destructive competition between the affiliates. He also got a new perspective on how members of his own team were seen by the affiliates. In particular, he had been on the verge of moving "Maria" off the senior team, because he found her so disruptive. After his trip to the field he had a new view of Maria as a tenacious voice for the affiliates – a voice he had almost silenced because it didn't agree with his own view.

Ready for Action

Pierre is back in the home office now and is engaging his entire organization in understanding the needs of his "customer" organizations. He has also taken quick action to set up forums and processes to give the affiliates a stronger voice inside Neighborhood Development. He told me with surprise, "I've been inviting affiliate leaders to serve on panels and advisory boards and join us at offsites and conferences and, as busy as they are, not one of them has declined the invitation!" Over the next few months Pierre and his team will be rethinking all of their programs and services, looking at how they can provide real value to their customers.

III. MORAL OF THE STORY: Listen Without An Agenda

Lots of executives go out into the field to talk with customers and come back with nothing more than increased good will. This could be because they have been doing a good job all along of getting honest input from their customers. But often it is because they go with the intent of selling their point of view, even in the guise of inviting input. We can talk or we can listen, but it is hard to do both at the same time (and there is a reason we have two ears but only one mouth!).

Even though Pierre thought he knew what was happening far from headquarters, he was wise enough to, as he put it, “really listen, without my own agenda or hoped-for conclusion”. And he asked real questions: “How do you see us?” “What needs are we meeting and what needs are we missing?” “What would you do if you were the new CEO?”

For me, there are two morals to Pierre’s story:

1. No matter how well I think I know my customers, there is always something new to learn; and
2. If I’m not hearing something new, I’m probably not listening hard enough.

IV. GETTING STARTED: Listen For Something New

Think about your recent interactions with customers and partners. What was your agenda in those conversations? Were you trying to learn or trying to sell? What do you remember about what they had to say? (Anything?) Did you hear anything new or surprising?

By the way, listening is equally powerful at home. Give your spouse or kids a shock by asking them what they think and really listening to the answer!

Warm regards,
Andrea

About Management Shorts

Management Shorts is a free newsletter for senior managers on leadership, management and teamwork – the key leverage points for improving the speed and quality of decision-making and execution.

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