

Case Study

Using the *Personal Listening Profile*[®] with a Social Service Agency

Poor communication doesn't always result in open conflict or passive-aggressive behavior. Sometimes, people honestly want to understand one another and work together, but they flounder and just wind up feeling defeated.

How does a consultant or trainer identify such subtle clues of discontent? Pauline George, of PG Training & Consulting, says that one hint is when employees unintentionally work against each other. At least that's one of the first problems she noticed at a client's organization.

"Nobody ever knew what the other person was doing there," George says. "People were limiting each other."

Putting an end to these limitations was a goal of George's client, a social service agency that provided mental health services. The organization had been in business for 20 years, and they had recently expanded very rapidly. Despite their years of experience and impressive growth, however, the agency was riddled with problems.

"They had a mission and a vision, but they had no values," George says. "And employees felt that they were never listened to or involved in dialogue."

Again, there weren't loud arguments or seething hostility on display, so George had to look for less-dramatic signs of communication problems. She discovered that productivity was down and turnover was up. George also observed that the employees were dissatisfied with their jobs and were unclear about their responsibilities.

This lack of clarity also extended to management. George says that the agency's leaders had no idea how to manage people. This poor leadership translated into unclear expectations and an inarticulate set of organizational values.

"I asked the managers, 'When a person is doing a given job well, what does that look like?' They couldn't answer that," George says. "They really did not have a clue how to lead."

George believed that the managers' lack of planning and poor communication skills were chief reasons for the employees' lackluster performance. And although they generally got along, the workers rarely collaborated and did not really trust one another. The employees did not feel accountable, and the leaders had not set up a solid infrastructure for their subordinates.

"For example, the managers didn't know anything about leadership practices and competencies," George says. "They needed to learn those things, and they also needed to value communication and listening."

To convince the managers and employees of the importance of such values, George turned to the *Personal Listening Profile*[®]. She says that the profile helps individuals understand how they are wired and how others may be wired differently. George adds that the *Personal Listening Profile* is particularly effective at teaching people that communication skills can be developed.

"Whenever I use the profile, I make clear that everyone has room for improvement and no one is at fault," George says. "They understand how they can adapt and help others to adapt."

Getting the managers and workers to relate to one another was one of George's goals for her sessions. She especially wanted to help the agency develop a shared-leadership environment and feedback culture.

"If they do that, they can produce a higher level of dialogue," George says. "It won't be just defensiveness, anger, and frustration."

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Before the organization could achieve that level of change, however, George had to show the managers and employees how their different listening methods complemented or clashed with those of others. She began by dividing the large group of participants into smaller sections, so that people could talk and listen to each other better. Then, she administered the *Personal Listening Profile* to the individuals.

During the discussion of the profile's insights, the participants learned about their own listening preferences and those of their colleagues. To emphasize the differences, George printed the listening approaches on tent cards and distributed them to the participants.

"Everybody knew everybody else's listening preference," George says. "No guessing was required."

One worker took the opportunity to speak up to her manager about how undervalued she felt during her last performance review. The manager had no idea she felt that way, and the two of them talked about ways to avoid such issues in the future.

"They now know that they had differences in perception," George says. "They see how their differences in listening styles may have led to frustration."

A similar insight for the participants was the identification of tension areas in their relationships. George asked the participants to talk about their biggest communication breakdowns and the reasons for them. The workers linked past conflicts to their listening styles and discussed how to avoid similar problems in the future.

"I got them to think about their biggest rub, their least effective interactions," George says. "After they found out where that tension was coming from, I asked them what they were going to do about it."

The participants learned that adapting their listening approaches would be most effective with specific people, rather than in certain circumstances. This concept was an essential part of the workers' action plans.

"They came up with things like, 'When I talk to a person with an Empathic approach, I will tell her that I support her before I evaluate her,'" George says. "They now realize that the objective of communication is to understand and to be understood."

With the *Personal Listening Profile* as a guide, the participants changed their perspectives on some of their interactions. This helped the employees and managers smooth out what had often been a rocky relationship. As a result, the staff members improved the quality of their working lives, leading to lower turnover and higher productivity. George says the participants are happier and more energetic, and she adds that their knowledge of what entails good communication is a priceless benefit.

"They know that communication is not a checklist," George says. "They know that it's forever. But they love it."