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Bernie Marcus, one of the founders of Home Depot, who has served on several boards of directors for various organizations, said, “Whenever a new CEO is hired, we all tell him or her, ‘Don’t do *anything* for the first three months other than shut your mouth, open your ears, and go around listening.’” That’s spot-on counsel for any CEO, and listening is equally important for everyone in an organization, whether it’s individuals listening to one another, the organization listening to its customers, or management listening to their people.

*Listening to one another.* In many instances, people are proud of their ability to multitask. They may be typing or filing something while someone else is talking to them and consider themselves to be listening, but in reality, they’re not. In fact some will interpret their multitasking ability as rude behavior. Or if someone is texting, do you think they’re listening to you when you talk to them? People don’t truly listen to someone else when they’re focused on another task.

Yes, I admit, I multitask too. I imagine most everyone does, but that doesn’t make it right—or wise. One of my mentors once said: “The mind can only hold one thought at a time.” Because our minds move so quickly from one thing to another, it’s easy to fool ourselves into believing that we really are doing many things well all at

once. The reality is we do a disservice to others and ourselves when we try to concentrate on too much in one moment. In fact, I would suggest that when we do that there isn’t much concentration going on at all. People really need to put distractions aside if they really want to listen to one another.

*Listening to the customer.* Kim Ramage, a territory human resources director at Best Buy says, “Our best employees are curious about the customer. They ask lots of questions so they can have rich dialogue and build relationships with people who visit our stores.” Kim has it exactly right. Listening to the customer is all about being genuinely interested in what they need and want. If you step into a Best Buy store in her region, be prepared to answer friendly questions and to be guided in the right direction for what you want or need.

An organization that doesn’t listen to its customers risks losing them. I knew a restaurant owner who failed to listen to customers about menu items. They made suggestions and he changed nothing. Eventually the restaurant went out of business when its customers migrated to nearby chain restaurants that served what they were looking for.

*Management listening to their people.* Here’s an idea: Let’s do a survey so all the employees can give their opinion, and then once we, the organization, have compiled the data, we’ll do—*nothing*. I know that sounds cynical, but it happens

every day. Or at least people have the *impression* that it does. Through the years, when I filled out a survey I’d think: *This is terrific! Things are gonna get better now!* Then months went by and I never heard about that survey. Did they, the powers to be, learn anything from the information contained in it? Did any real changes, somewhere, anywhere, come from it? From my vantage point at the time, it turned out to be a total waste of time.

Whether you’re a small business owner asking a few employees some questions or a large corporation doing a formal survey, my advice is this: If you’re not going to study the information gleaned and communicate the results back to the people and then make some changes, then *do not ask the questions!* When I was an Air Force superintendent, I made doubly sure I provided back answers with explanations, both in writing and in person, to people’s comments, questions, suggestions, and complaints on organizational surveys. And in some instances, real change occurred because of received input or feedback.

So make *listening* an integral part of your organizational culture. All outstanding organizations do! The more you listen, the more you pick up on. And that’s when you begin to understand what’s really happening. As Mr. Marcus said, sometimes it’s good to “go around listening.”

~ The End ~