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How to Keep People from Tuning You Out

You've experienced it: that glazed over look when you are speaking to others. Or perhaps, it is not quite a glazed over look, but you can tell that although people are in your presence they are not really hearing what you have to say. They might even be able to repeat back what you have said, but it is clear they are not giving it any weight. To some degree or another, they are tuning you out.

When this type of tuning out occurs, it is downright crippling within an organization or in a relationship. If we are going to experience healthy organizations in which important information and values are transferred quickly and if we are going to experience healthy relationships in which two people can operate on the same wave length, we must learn to communicate in a way in which people do not tune us out.

To that end, I want to share with you six ways to keep people from tuning you out. I expect that each of you are already following a number of the "rules" that I will set out today, but I also expect that for each of you there is a rule or two that you break and as a result you are causing people to tune you out. So here we go, six ways to keep people from tuning you out:

1. Speak Truthfully

Most are familiar with Aesop's fable about the boy who cried wolf. Watching sheep was not a particularly glorious job and so to get a bit of attention the boy cried wolf. He did this several times until eventually people tuned out his voice because of the lack of any real danger. His practice, however, became fatal when one day a wolf did indeed show up, and no one came to his defense.

Now, I think most of us recognize the error of the boy in the fable, but we should also recognize that like it or not we can fall prey to the practice of the shepherd boy. To get attention, we can make a bigger deal of the things than they are really are. We exaggerate what we have accomplished or what needs to be done. And each time we do that, we inoculate people to our words. We give them reason to tune us out.

2. Do What You Say

These days, virtually every organization of considerable size has stated values that get placed in a frame somewhere in the office or that get posted on a website. But how many of you have been in meetings in which the values are spoken about and you tuned out whoever was speaking? I think, we've all done it. Why do we do that? Why do we tune out others when they tell us about this value or that which we should uphold. I would suggest that the number one reason is that the people who are telling us about the values don't live up to those values themselves. In fact, the greater the distance between what you do and what you say directly impacts, the degree to which people will tune you out. This, of course, is just as true in our personal lives as in the corporate context. If you want people to sit up and listen, we have to live out what we say.

3. Don't Offer Excuses

You know the person: the one who always has a ready excuse. The project was due yesterday, but it didn't get done for this reason or that. A product was to be delivered to certain specs and it did not happen, and an excuse is quickly offered. There is a proverb in the Bible that describes these people. It reads like this:

The sluggard says, "There is a lion outside!" or, "I will be murdered in the streets!" (21:13)

In other words, "You can't possibly expect me to get that done and to get it done right."

When we are people who regularly offer up excuses for why we did not get things done, we will find that people tune us out. Even if there is a situation that is truly going to impact performance this time around, people don't want to hear it. They have heard too many excuses.

4. Avoid Negativity

I love all of my children. They each have wonderful qualities, and they each have those things in which they need to grow, even as I do. One of my children struggles with pointing all the negativity about something.

We will come home from an event and this speak of all the things that weren't liked or didn't go well with friends. Now, what's interesting about this tendency is that most times I am quite certain that this child actually liked being a part of the event.

Now, here is what I have noticed about myself in these situations. When we are driving home after I have picked my son or daughter up and I begin to hear all that wasn't liked about an event, I find myself tuning my child out. I am the dad and I still tune my child out. I don't tune my children out in these situations because I don't love them or because I am not interested in what they have to say, I tune them out because it's what we all do to those whose words are largely negative. In fact, you probably have even found yourself avoiding such people. You have tuned them out so much, that you make a point of avoiding them. Well, if this is true when we consider others' negativity, then we must learn the lesson for ourselves and avoid it ourselves if we want to keep people listening to us.

5. Reduce the Fluff

Now, when I say reduce the fluff I do not mean to say that there is no room to share a story, or to shoot the breeze as we often say, or to provide some interesting detail connected to what we are talking about, but the truth of the matter is that on many occasions the more stuff we add to what we are trying to get across, the more likely it is that people will tune us out. If when telling people about the project you are working on, you must always give a blow by blow account of why you made every decision you did, or weave in some story from a project twenty years ago, or explain how your uncle did something in the same town, and that your uncle is a really nice guy, people just won't tune in when you do say something valuable. Some of you have not read through the books that cover Jesus' life as found in the Bible. I would encourage you to do so. One thing I think you will notice is just how few words Jesus used, and yet how powerful and effective they were in transmitting something worth listening to.

6. Ditch Dogmatism

Last year, my family and I traveled to Washington, D.C, and had the opportunity to be in the gallery of the House of Representatives during

a live debate. What was interesting was that on the floor of the House, there were about eight people. The two speakers, one on each side of the aisle, and about three people on either side listening to them. You heard me right there were only about six people on the floor that were even listening to the debate. There are 435 elected officials and only 6 were present for the debate.

Now after listening to the debate, it did not surprise me that there were so few present. Because although the debate was supposed to be about drilling for minerals on public lands, there was very little talk about that actual merits or demerits of doing so. Instead the debate ended up being a platform for the standard dogmas of the Republican and Democratic Parties. There was all kinds of discussion about the poor and how Republicans were hurting them, and there was all kinds of discussion about creating jobs and how Democrats were against that. The same old thing we hear from week to week, with almost no talk about the actual advantages or disadvantages of drilling on the particular public lands in question. And so what was the result? No one was there to listen. The speakers were just tuned out even by their own party members.

If you want to keep people from tuning you out, stick to the issue at hand, don't make everything an issue of your favorite dogma. It does not mean that what you stand for is not worthy of being talked about, but we don't help people listen to us when every issues somehow becomes an opportunity for us to bash a political party or to cry foul regarding the environment or to commiserate about the state of our country or our world.

So, there you have it. Six ways to keep people from tuning you out. We can see that when others violate these rules we have a hard time listening to them, but if we are honest, there is at least one of these rules on which we tend to trip up as well. And it's at that point that I would say we are undermining our own efforts of communicating. We are giving reason for people to tune us out.