

Our Perspective: Primary Sense Is Common Sense

Written by Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor
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Ken Bannister, Contributing Editor During a five-hour flight to the West Coast, I had depleted the battery life of my laptop computer. Needing some type of diversion, I was forced to delve into the marsupial wonders of my front seat pocket. Settling on the airline's in-flight magazine, I was delighted to find an article discussing the neglect of basic communication skills in today's workplace.

The premise of the article was about how our educational system focuses primarily on only three of the four human interaction skills required for effective communication. The author went on to explore and quantify the time spent on the development and honing of reading, writing and speaking skills, at the expense and virtual total neglect of listening skills. Surprisingly, the article further claimed that listening skills are believed to contribute approximately 40% of the skill required to achieve effective communication!

Reflecting on my own education, I was surprised to realize I had never received any formal instruction on effective listening. I have, however, benefited from learning how to listen effectively during some industrial training in which I was taught how to use a mechanic's stethoscope to listen for bearing wear and the "whirling" effects of over-lubrication.

Auditory, or hearing, is the primary sense we use to develop listening skills—listening being the effective interpretation of what we hear. Until a couple of hundred years ago, listening was an essential life skill used in hunting and for alerting us to danger. On the other hand, listening has been poorly exploited within the industrial environment.

Perhaps one of the most effective examples of how our primary senses are used to communicate effectively can be found in the automotive repair industry.

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What typically happens when an automotive service advisor asks you to describe exactly what is happening to your vehicle? As an operator, you know instinctively when your vehicle is not running as it should by sensing small differences in its behavior. A good advisor will get you to articulate those differences by asking you to describe and emulate any noises, smells, vibrations and visuals. By listening carefully and understanding the context in which these observations occurred (at what speed, under acceleration or braking, etc.) an experienced advisor usually can accurately diagnose the problem and formulate an immediate repair strategy. This same common-sense approach to problem-diagnosing using listening and primary sense evaluation is fundamental to effective communication between operations and maintenance.

Like the car driver, an equipment operator understands exactly when his or her equipment is not running in the "sweet zone." If we, as maintainers, are to respond effectively to machine failure, we must learn to listen effectively to the operator instead of just blindly pulling the machine apart. Using similar tactics to the automotive service advisor, we can question what noises they heard (Auditory); what they saw; (Visual); what they smelled (Olfactory); what vibrations they felt (Tactile); what they tasted (Taste); and what they perceived (Intuition, the sixth sense). Understanding the context of a failure and knowing that over 70% of mechanical problems are directly or indirectly caused by ineffective lubrication, a maintainer is already well on his/her way to diagnosing the repair, and also understanding the root cause of the failure.

How well are you listening? Good Luck!

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