More leadership literature exists than you and I could ever read! Some sources are more engaging than others. Most books and articles make a case for something—how to think, how to interact, how to decide, and so forth. Other books are fun. Through analogy they make points about leadership. I am amazed at the number of animals that have been used to tell these tales—frogs, starfish, chickens, and donkeys and elephants (sometimes unrelated to U.S. politics!) are among my favorites. Many books and articles amount to personal success stories. Think of a well-known leader and it is highly likely that a book corresponds to his or her name.

Several themes emerge and form the basis of our need to develop leaders in our organizations and programs. Those skills are ones that we don’t often address, and they can be challenging to teach. I am going to address two skills that we all think we know about and yet sometimes do not execute well. They are listening (sometimes described as the most important leadership skill) and persistence (often described as the difference between achieving success and not achieving success).

Listening is a habit we learn from birth. Yet, as we mature, we sometimes receive messages that suggest that we need to talk to be social, understood, respected, or perceived as a leader. Although talking is important, the receiving end of communication is the critical piece. If the receiver didn’t get the intent of a message, then the communication was ineffective.

How do we teach people to listen? Those who are “talkers” are unlikely to suddenly understand the importance of listening and change their behavior. This kind of change takes practice! We have at our disposal a highly effective technique that we underutilize. The act of reflection causes us to rely on what we heard in a given presentation or interaction. There are implications for teaching and for evaluation of learning. For example, educational endeavors must consistently build in time for learner reflection. Perhaps this activity might be more effective than group work, but we won’t know if we don’t evaluate the outcomes of each strategy. Allowing time for reflection produces silence and allows learners to listen to themselves. Perhaps the opportunity to listen to oneself promotes the skill to listen to others. We will know only if we deliberately evaluate this strategy. Think of the commonly used educational activities and consider what portion, if any, is devoted to reflection (or listening) about the learning that occurred.

Persistence is the “hang in there” strategy. The literature consistently indicates that willingness to remain committed to work is what leads to success. Yet, how do we teach persistence? And how do we know that learners will be able to see that persistence leads to a payoff? For example, authors sometimes give up when they receive feedback that doesn’t result in acceptance of a first draft. Yet, many publications are the result of a second, third, or later draft. If we give up too easily, we won’t know our potential. How many of us persist in trying a new technique if we aren’t successful the first time?

Teaching skills such as listening and persistence is a challenge. Yet we must be prepared to address them. We need to know what our aim is in taking on these challenges and then we must act. We can’t simply state that listening and persistence are important skills. We must build in opportunities for learners to hear about these skills and practice them (more than once). Whether these skills are focused on professional colleagues or on those who receive health care, they are critical to influencing others and to the state of the country’s health.

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