



Validation in the Workplace



I couldn't understand why one of my secretaries of the past kept going over my head with her complaints to my supervisor. I had talked with her a couple of times and affirmed to her that I was approachable, friendly, and desirous to know what it was she needed or what was important to her, yet she kept leapfrogging over me to my boss.

Finally, in frustration I asked why she felt that it was necessary to go to him first. She said that when she brought her concerns to me I didn't validate her or seem to take her seriously, so she went to someone who would really listen.

The straw that "broke the camel's back" on this was that I was preparing to do a workshop and she panicked when two of my facilitators at the last

minute couldn't make it, and I said something to the effect of "it will all work out, no problem, it will just be fine," then I went to lunch!

Who is it that you have a hard time understanding in the workplace? There is a good chance that there hasn't been a time where either of you have validated each other's perspective on a given matter.

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Common Results of Not Feeling Heard at Work

There are several demoralizing results when staff or management is not feeling understood or listened to. As cited above my secretary kept going over my head. Other reactions might be:

1. Increased gossip and speaking to the wrong sources with your concerns.
2. Starting to feel like management or co-workers don't care.
3. Inner frustration increasing due to unresolved issues.
4. Never feeling like your concerns or insights are taken seriously.
5. Going over your co-worker or manager's head to upper management.
6. Losing trust in those who you vent to because of a lack of response.
7. The same problems keep resurfacing because there is no resolution.
8. People start to feel that their concerns are minimized or judged for having the concerns they have.

What is Validation?

If validation is the key to listening and understanding then what does it look like and how does it work? Here are a few facts that can be helpful:

- ▶ Validation seeks to understand what the other person is REALLY saying. Getting behind their eyes and seeing it from their perspective only.
- ▶ When you validate another's concerns you don't have to agree with them, but you do have to strive to understand where they are coming from.
- ▶ Validation only seeks to get the person's viewpoint at that moment, not to state their own rebuttals or be dismissive.

Now back to the above stated case concerning my secretary who didn't feel heard. What could I have said to her when she told me the facilitators couldn't make the workshop?

How about "that must have been frustrating," "this must have added more pressure to your workload," "how can I be helpful," anything but essentially saying deal with it.

But stating that "it will work out, no problem, it's fine," may have been true on paper, but it still doesn't reflect that I understand what she is going through—which is the key to validation. Consequently she walks away



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more frustrated than when she approached me for a solution, and ends up telling my supervisor instead, which made matters worse.

I was once working with a group of men whose wives had experienced very difficult childhoods. We were going through the chapter on validating your wife when she would recount some of the difficulties she was facing. So I got out a white board and asked the men what would be some validating things they could say to their wife when she is frustrated.

All I remember was the silence and “deer in the headlight” looks that they unanimously had. So we came up with phrases that would work when anyone’s emotions were running high and the husband was having a hard time understanding the wife’s perspective.

Validating Phrases that Work

- ▶ I can see this must be frustrating to deal with.
- ▶ You have mentioned this many times so I know it’s huge for you.
- ▶ I’m trying to understand how this is impacting you.
- ▶ I know I have minimized this in the past, but I really want to hear you now.
- ▶ Is there anything I can do to help?

Consequently the opposite is true as well. When someone is trying to convey to us what is bothering them, it is essential that we hear them out and try to get where they are coming from in order for them to truly feel heard. But if they feel they are a nuisance again and are blown off, their frustration increases.

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Below is a list of phrases that rarely work:

Non-Validating Phrases that Never Work

- ▶ **It is what it is.** Now although this might be completely true since we can't change things, it does absolutely nothing for the person who needs to be heard as they process their disappointment.
- ▶ **You shouldn't feel that way.** That's nice counsel, but it's too late now. Actually trying to explore how they arrived at their feelings has a better chance of helping them change them for the better.
- ▶ **What about you.** This form of deflection is completely deaf to the possibility that the other might have a valid concern and deserves to feel heard.
- ▶ **All you need to do is...** Another quick fix that takes away any further discussion or shows sensitivity for their situation.
- ▶ **Get over it.** Now that really helps. You have just added a second problem to the situation. Now they have to deal with your lack of understanding in addition to their initial concern.

Final Thought: I once had a management team request training on listening skills for leadership, and they specifically stated that they had already been to trainings on basic listening skills a few times before. They stated that they already knew the basics such as: good eye contact, repeating back what you've heard, and leaning forward and showing interest. But they said they wanted to go to the next level.

Learning how to “really hear” where someone is coming from, when there is frustration building in that relationship at work, is the key to going into the next level of listening skills.

Just a quick sidebar: Whether the need for better communication and validation is in the workplace or home, once it is practiced and implemented, you will see a drastic drop in argumentation and frustration almost overnight! And workers or family members who have been at odds for months and years can break the demoralizing cycle relatively quickly.

The lesson that I learned from my frustrated secretary that day was that when I would take the time to validate and understand her perspective, our communication channel improved and her game of leapfrogging over me was over!



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Bill formed TeamWorks in 2001 to help organizations achieve their goals for establishing high morale and client satisfaction. TeamWorks currently specializes in offering one-on-one surveys and evaluations for management and staff to assess the current culture's needs and recommended trainings going forward.

In addition to conducting a variety of workshops and in-services on workplace issues, Bill mediates conflict among partnerships and staff relationships, speaks at conventions, facilitates management retreats, and offers personal consultation and counseling for staff.

Bill's strengths are in public speaking, mediation, and understanding the complexities of relational dynamics in the workplace. He lives in Medford, Oregon, with his wife Jenny, and enjoys spending time with their five children and five granddaughters.