



Secret #1

Nancy & the Green Cabinet: The Power of Listening

It was the summer of 1998, and I was on cloud nine. I always enjoy anticipating a new school year, and while each year brings the excitement of a new beginning, this one was extra special for me. I was opening a brand-new school and was going to serve as its principal. So much made that opportunity truly special, but one of the best parts was that I got to hire the entire staff. Yes, you got it: hire the entire staff! The school was built to accommodate the growth in a community north of Houston, Texas, called The Woodlands. Because the area was, and still is, a very desirable place to live, work, and raise a family, it was growing rapidly. As a result, the school district, Conroe Independent School District, was opening new campuses frequently. No students were being transferred to the new school, and so no



teachers were being transferred either. Therefore, I single-handedly interviewed and hired the entire staff for the opening year.

What made that particular aspect of the job even more exciting was that I was able to take several teachers with me from the school where I had been serving as principal. One of the teachers I chose to go with me was a first-grade teacher named Nancy. Nancy was the first-grade teacher every parent wanted his child to have—the one who had exactly the warmth and skills that make a great teacher for that all-important first-grade year. I was so glad that she'd agreed to come to the new school with me, and she was as excited as I was.

Part of what had all of us so thrilled was the new school building itself. When this building was constructed, it was equipped with the latest in technology; the latest in interior-design colors; built-ins and furniture to die for; and an exterior that you'd notice when you drove by. In short, this new building was equipped to the hilt and physically beautiful inside and out. Everyone was so excited to be moving into this bright new physical plant.

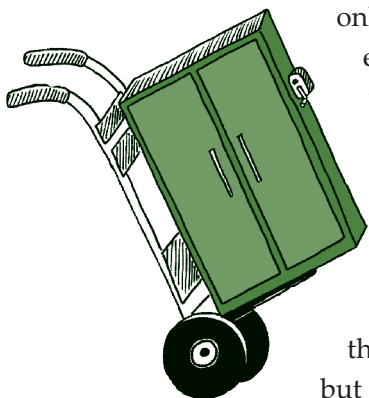
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One day I was waiting at my old school, along with the teachers who were moving with me, for the maintenance crew from the district to arrive and start loading all the boxes we had packed to take to the new school. At the last minute, Nancy rushed into my office. She looked panic-stricken. "What's the matter?" I asked. I thought maybe something tragic had happened in her family. She was near tears as she



pleaded, “Betty, I need the maintenance crew to pack the green cabinet in my room. It has to go with me to the new school.”

“What?” I had to laugh as I answered her. “Nancy, you have to be kidding me! That lime green cabinet” — and I mean really lime green — “can’t possibly go to the new school. If anything, it should be thrown away. Not only will the lime green clash with the subtle earth tones of the new school, but it will look totally out of place surrounded by beautiful new built-ins! Why in the world do you feel you need to take that cabinet?”



I questioned her further, and then she really started to talk. She told me that the cabinet meant so much to her. She knew that she probably could pack the items it held, but that cabinet had been in her room all the years she’d been in the school. She said that she even loved the pencil sharpener that was attached to it — so many first graders over the years had used it to sharpen their brand-new, big fat pencils. It even had a hole in its wheel for those fat pencils.

At that point, I didn’t bother to remind her that the new school had electric pencil sharpeners. You see, it was then that I realized this conversation was not really about that lime green cabinet. It was about Nancy. It was about her letting go of the tremendous success she’d had over the years at the old school and, in many ways, forging a new identity at the new school. It was change, the human side of change, and she was scared.

At that moment I had a choice. The path had forked, and I had to make a leadership decision. The choice was between what I call the “Human Doings” approach to leadership and the “Human Beings” approach.



The Human Doings approach would have been to tell Nancy that she absolutely could not take that cabinet with her. After all, my reputation as the leader of the new school was on the line. The community where the school was being opened was very affluent, and I had carefully considered how I would come across to the parents in that community. I had made special attempts to dress the right way and say the right things at all the parent and community meetings leading up to the opening. I had thought carefully about every decision regarding colors and decorations for the school. I also knew that real estate agents would be coming through the school all the time as they took prospective home buyers on tours of the beautiful new school their children would attend if they purchased a home in that school zone. And here was a teacher telling me that she needed to take an ugly old green cabinet and plop it in the middle of a brand-new first-grade classroom! “No way!” the Human Doings part of me was saying.

Well, guess what? I chose what I call the Human Beings approach. I told Nancy that she could take the green cabinet. She hugged me and thanked me and practically danced out of my office.

This conversation was not really about that lime green cabinet. It was about Nancy.

Anyone can take the Human Doings approach—get those scores up, narrow those achievement gaps, get those reports done. Anyone can lead a group to do the work (Human Doings). A slave master can do that. It takes an uncommon leader to influence and inspire those she leads to find meaning in their work, lives, and relationships so that they can be effective. That’s what I mean by the Human



Beings approach. The uncommon leader helps others become whole human beings so that they can optimize their performance. As a leader, you want effective action. Therefore, your goal is to influence those you lead so that they can be effective. This is best accomplished not only through technical knowledge but also through emotional wisdom. In this case, I took the Human Beings approach to dealing with Nancy's concerns. I didn't downplay her emotional needs.

Believe me, at the time I wasn't so much doing that consciously. It was just that I had come to a fork in the path. I had to choose between the Human Doings way and the Human Beings way. I chose the Human Beings way mostly through sheer instinct. Somewhere inside myself, I realized at that moment that leadership is all about tapping into the energies and emotions of others, inspiring them to move in the right direction with enthusiasm and hope. It's about making others be better people and creating the conditions in which they can shine. This kind of uncommon leadership is what I think sets the best educational leaders apart from the rest. I am convinced that if you always opt for the Human Beings way of leadership, you will never go wrong.

The Human Doings Approach

The leader who takes the Human Doings approach ends up with a day that's caught up in the "stuff" of being principal. You know what I'm talking about: attending endless meetings, examining test data, observing in classrooms, dealing with discipline issues. Don't get me wrong; all of these things are important. Yet it's not a good idea to fall into this style of leadership exclusively. The Human Doings



leader may think about helping others get into and stay in the optimal shape for working to the best of their abilities, but she knows that doing that takes time and energy. She thinks of the Human Beings approach as “dessert,” not part of the main meal. She just can’t find room for it on her already full plate. The Human Doings version of leadership is more about being the boss in charge of getting those lagging test scores up.

The Human Beings Approach

The Human Beings approach means finding ways not only to deal with the “stuff” of being principal but also to inspire and enable others to do excellent work and realize their potential. The Human Beings way of leadership is not so much about being the boss as it is about caring for people and creating a place where others can do their best work. It’s an approach that can build successful, enduring schools.

The HUMAN BEINGS way of leadership . . . is about caring for people and creating a place where others can do their best work.

If you, like me, are a fan of Michael Fullan, you probably have read some of his work on the subject of change. In *The Six Secrets of Change*, Michael Fullan writes that the first secret is to “love your employees.” He explains this using an example from education. I found it so interesting that he uses the piece of legislation that you’re very familiar with—No Child Left Behind—and its implication that children always come first.



Now if you know the work of Michael Fullan, you know that he has always been a champion of the “moral imperative,” as he calls it, of closing the achievement gap and raising the bar for all students. However, in *The Six Secrets of Change*, he suggests that the concept of always putting children first is both misleading and incomplete. He argues, using several examples, that we must love our employees just as much as we do our other stakeholders (the children and parents).

He then goes on to write that “one of the ways you love your employees is by creating the conditions for them to succeed” (Fullan 2008, 25). “Aha!” I thought as I read that. “That’s the uncommon leader. That’s the Human Beings approach!”

In the following chapters, I’ll talk more about Human Doings vs. Human Beings. But for now, let’s continue our exploration of uncommon leadership by focusing on the first important secret of a Human Beings leader. Let’s talk about the power of listening.

Tips for Listening

Shut Up & Listen

There was a country song a few years ago titled “Shut Up and Kiss Me.” Here’s a new song title for you to put in the back of your mind and hum to yourself as you go through the day. The song is “Shut Up and Listen.” Get in the habit of humming it all the time. You see, each and every day presents you with many situations that call for understanding the emotions of those you lead. When you understand where people are coming from, it’s easier to consider the Human Beings approach. The way you do that is by studying other people’s needs.



We spend a lot of time talking *at* teachers and not really asking questions and listening to what they're saying. We don't inspire others to go in the direction we want them to by ordering them to do what we say. Think of Nancy. The only reason I was able to respond with a Human Beings approach was that after I asked a question ("Why do you want to take that green cabinet?"), I was able to listen to her as she answered (and answered and answered).

My husband represents investors who want to buy companies. His job is to find companies that might be good matches for the investors he represents and that are owned by people who might consider selling. He looks for privately owned, medium-size companies—ones the owners have built from the ground up and are emotionally invested in. He told me that for the first few years, he spent too much time trying to convince the owners to sell and too little time helping the owners recognize that they might *want* to sell. He found that when he heard their stories and really studied their needs, that information helped him get them to consider selling. He learned that the best way to study their needs was to listen and ask questions. These days the first question he asks an owner is "What is your situation, and what would you like to do?"

As you work with teachers, make it a habit to find out everything you can about them: what they like to do; what is important to them; what they fear, love, and hate; what their aspirations are. You will stand a better chance of getting what you want out of those you lead if you first find out what *they* want. This is done through shutting up, asking questions, and listening. If you listen long enough, you will find out how to take the Human Beings approach with those you lead.

Here's a puzzle for you: can you take all the letters in the word "listen" and make another word that sums up what this tip is all about? Try it.



Answer to the puzzle: The word is “silent.” Maybe there is a reason each letter in the word “silent” is also in the word “listen.” Think about that!

Turn Off Your Blackberries, Blueberries, Cranberries & Other Distractions

Multitasking their way through the day is the norm for many principals unless they want to leave school at 10:30 or 11:00 at night. (I know that you may stay that late anyway.) But consider this: all that multitasking can be costly. When you temporarily shift your focus, even for only a couple of minutes to answer an e-mail or take a phone call, you increase the time it takes to finish the task you left—sometimes by as much as 25 percent (Schwartz 2007). A better way to manage your tasks might be to quit doing so much multitasking and to fully focus for a set amount of time on one activity before going on to the next one.



This can pay off for you personally, and it can pay off with your staff. I remember that at that new school I opened, we were so high-tech that we had every gadget known to man. Yet sometimes I felt as if we had every *distraction* known to man. Often when I was talking with a teacher in my office, I would interrupt our conversation to respond to a beep on my pager or to take a phone call. I really wasn't modeling the critical role of listening when I did that.

You know what stopped me? The look on one teacher's face when, in the middle of our conference, I took a call. I will never forget it: she looked devastated. I decided right then and there that I would never do that again. I decided



that whenever anyone was talking to me, I would devote my full attention to that person. To pull that off, I had to force myself to get some sort of ritual going. So I decided to check my e-mail only twice a day—once in the morning and once in the evening before I left school. That was hard to do, because I was addicted to e-mail. (I certainly didn't want to miss out on anything.) Yet it paid off in more quality time with others, and I actually got more done.

The Three R's: Recognition, Rewards & Rituals

An important corollary to listening to your staff is *showing* them that you're listening—and really paying attention. Here are some simple but effective ways to do that.

- Pass out paychecks to teachers instead of putting them in teachers' mailboxes. When giving a paycheck to a teacher, personally thank him for his hard work.
- Give each teacher a certificate of time. The certificate is good for three hours of your time teaching the recipient's class anytime during the school year.
- Keep note cards handy and follow a schedule for writing a positive note to each staff member on a regular basis. Start your notes with "While I was in your classroom, I saw . . ."
- Use candy to create a reward. For example, periodically pass out candy with a motivational message. You might give each person a PayDay candy bar with a note that says, "You deserve an extra payday." Or a Milky Way bar with a note that says, "You are out of this world. Thanks for what you do." Or a Mounds bar with a note that says, "Thanks for the mounds of work you do." Think of the possibilities!



- Institute a ritual of providing food at faculty meetings. Food is always a welcome treat, and it certainly helps get people to show up on time!
- Host a monthly “Breakfast of Champions” for the staff. Either cook it yourself or have it catered, but either way, serve it yourself to staff members.
- Host a monthly “Whine and Cheese Reception.” Offer teachers the opportunity to air their concerns, then truly listen to them. (The key to this isn’t the whining. It’s the listening—followed by an attempt to come up with a constructive solution together.)

A Tool for Listening

IN & OUT LISTENING

Purpose:

Part of what the uncommon leader does is to give teachers the knowledge and skills they need in order to be effective when working on a team. Sometimes structures such as common planning times or professional learning communities aren’t enough. The purpose of this activity, which you can use with teachers, is to impress on them what a critical skill listening is in any kind of communication—whether it’s listening to peers during a meeting of a professional learning community or listening to students in the classroom.

Materials:

Chairs arranged in circles of six

Time:

15–20 minutes

Procedure:

1. Participants sit in circles of six and identify themselves by calling out alternating letters: A, B, A, B, A, B.



2. All the A's lean in toward the center of the circle, while the B's scoot out a bit, creating inner and outer circles.
3. Give the A's a question to talk about for approximately four minutes. An example might be "What are some interventions that you've used in your classroom to help all students succeed?" The A's are to have a conversation among themselves as if no one else were listening.
4. But of course the B's *are* listening. Their role is to take in everything the A's say and how they say it without talking or interrupting.
5. The A's then lean out, and the B's lean in. Give the B's two minutes to report what they saw and heard. They may not judge or interpret—just report.
6. The B's stay leaning in. They're about to respond to the same question that the A's responded to. However, the role of the listeners is about to change. Before the B's respond to the question, each A identifies out loud a specific B that he'll be listening to.
7. The B's respond to the question for four minutes in the same way that the A's did—as if no one outside the group were listening. Each B knows who is focusing on her, but she does not address any comments to that person.
8. After four minutes, each A stands up and tells his B what he thinks he heard B say.

Processing This Activity

Ask the participants in the whole group these questions:

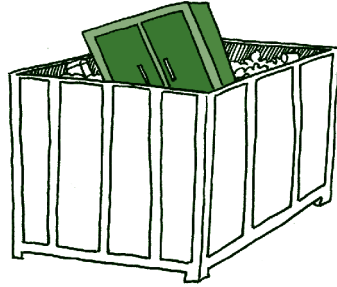
- What did it feel like to be listened to carefully?
- Do you listen as well during the day to students, other staff members, and parents?
- Is listening important for a teacher?
- Could listening improve how well you do your job?

Challenge all participants to listen to others during the rest of the day as well as they did during this activity.



One More Note

Remember Nancy from the beginning of this chapter? A month into the school year at the new school, I looked up one day and saw Nancy in my office. With a sheepish grin, she asked if the secretary could do a maintenance order. I asked her what needed fixing when we were only a month into the school year at a brand-new school. She replied that nothing was broken. It was just that she wanted to have the green cabinet hauled away. She realized that she didn't really need it after all.



A Pearl to Ponder

People will forget what you say. They will forget what you do. But they will never forget how you made them feel.

—Carl W. Buechner

