

## **THE POWER OF PAYING ATTENTION**

**By Susan Marshall, President**

**Executive Advisor, LLC**

When you were a kid your mother told you, “Pay attention.” When you were a student your teachers told you, “Pay attention.” If you’ve ever been involved in a personal relationship, your partner has likely told you, “Pay attention.” It’s great advice.

In fact, if there is one skill at your disposal today that is absolutely free and holds the key to amazing potential success, it is the skill of paying attention. What happens when you pay attention? You learn little bits of things that most people ignore. You understand more and at deeper levels than before. You hear more, see more, and have more tools at your disposal as a result.

Here’s a quick illustration. Bob and Dave were sitting in a meeting of department leaders when the president made a comment about something he saw recently. He said he’d like to explore it. Bob turned to Dave and whispered, “How did you know he was going to say that?” Bob was totally surprised by the president’s interest in that particular subject and amazed by the fact that his buddy Dave, just a few days earlier, had said he suspected this interest.

In Bob’s mind Dave was just a regular guy like himself—smart, but not exceptionally so, and not one to stand out at work. But in this particular instance, Dave had understood, even anticipated, what the president was thinking. Dave was an insider!

What Bob didn’t realize is that Dave had simply been paying attention to the president and to the working environment. He listened closely to the president’s comments and questions in meetings, and had learned to “read” the president’s mannerisms. Dave understood which behaviors typically coincided with which emotions, and the situations most likely to trigger them. Certainly, Dave could not read the president’s mind, but he had learned a great deal about him by quietly observing him. Best of all, Dave hadn’t needed special training or an advanced degree to gain some very important information. All he’d needed were his eyes, his ears, and... his attention.

Outstanding leaders, futuristic marketers, and visionaries are often thought to possess special intelligence. While some of these people are truly gifted, many of them have simply paid close attention for sustained periods of time to a whole host of things that eventually linked together to form change.

New product development, a mystery to many, combines a customer need, information about materials and production processes, sensitivity to pricing, and knowledge of distribution networks to create something brand new. There are many intricacies involved in each of these aspects, and within the intricacies often lie the innovations.

Putting things together in different ways yields new results, new questions, and new ideas. These in turn spawn others. Creative people exploit the snowballing effect this process creates, and they throw nothing away in the early stages of innovation.

A wonderful book called *Recombination*, written in the 70s, discusses change and innovation by recombining old things into new forms. (As an aside, as I searched the web for the authors' names—two psychologists wrote it, a man and his wife—I was unable to find either the book or its authors. I was left with an eerie feeling. If something is too old to be on the web, maybe it is no longer relevant to our society?)

At any rate, by placing familiar things in unfamiliar places to see how they look and behave, who notices them and why, and what new ideas are triggered as a result is a simple, but powerful, way to innovate. It requires one to know the characteristics of the familiar things and to pay attention to the entire process.

Paying attention to what's around you is good and sound advice. But what about overload, you might ask. There's too much going on to notice everything. That's true, and a good way to begin increasing your awareness is to pay attention to what's going on around you *now*.

When you are in a meeting, for example, who is with you? Why are they there? Why are you there? For what purpose have you gathered? Who sits where? What does this suggest about alliances or habits? Is deference paid to anyone? Are you surprised by anything that happens during the meeting?

When you're talking with someone on the telephone, pay attention to the person's voice. Notice the pace of conversation. Notice pauses. Notice throat-clearings. Notice when the voice gets either louder or softer and try to figure out why. Is there noise in the background? What is causing it? Where is the person calling from? By piecing together the surroundings of your caller, you get clues to deeper meaning.

For example, if Stan calls you from a client's office to request information on a new machine you sold them, you know there is some urgency to the request. If you hear the client in the background, you may be able to judge the tenor of the situation. Are they tense? Or just curious? Is there a problem? Or are they simply experimenting with the new equipment?

If, on the other hand, Stan calls from a coffee shop with the same request, you can ask more direct questions about the nature of his request. Is he preparing a presentation to his client? Has he had requests for information that should be incorporated into their sales and service literature? Is he uncertain about some features of the equipment and simply trying to fortify his own expertise?

While the phone is used in both instances and the identical words used to make the request, you can see how the situations may require very different responses from you. By paying attention to the surrounding circumstances, you gain valuable insight. By responding to these varying circumstances, you set yourself apart as someone who is smarter and more responsive than most.

When you visit another organization, pay attention to how people behave. Is there a great deal of activity? Or is the overall atmosphere fairly subdued? Do people hail one another down hallways or do they approach each other's offices in a quieter, more formal way? Are people smiling or glum? Do they appear energetic or restrained? When you pay close attention to these details, you can adapt your own behavior to match the environment. It is not unusual for business partnerships and supplier agreements to be determined based on these types of nuances.

In the same way, prospective employees are wise to gauge the atmosphere of the companies they'd like to work for. You can be sure that many of today's best companies observe candidate behaviors and adaptability skills while selecting their newest workers.

Take heart that with so many things to pay attention to, there are some things you can safely let go. In-depth information on a wide range of subjects is generally not necessary. Scanning headlines and articles for main points and major news is sufficient. Maintaining a broad-based sense of what is going on in the world is helpful in providing a continuing stream of recombination material without bogging you down in data.

Similarly, analyzing every word spoken by co-workers who disagree is largely a waste of time and energy. So, too, is reading between the lines of most routine memos. While you need to pay attention to what others are saying and doing, you also need to consider the context and timing of them. Just like the illustration about Stan's phone call, the same words can have different meaning depending upon what else is going on.

How can you sharpen your attentiveness? Work at actively engaging your mind in whatever you are doing. Listen to understand what someone else is saying. If the viewpoint is very different from yours, you will be challenged to keep an open mind and to truly hear what is being said. The hard work of staying open and focused shows in your demeanor, and people will respect you for doing this work.

When you read a memo that confuses you, call or visit its author. Ask the questions that come to mind in a way that demonstrates your desire to understand, not to argue. Take notes, tell the author what you understand so both of you knows the intended message is received. This process, incidentally, helps memo writers to be more concise.

Finally, be watchful. When you are tempted to zone out during a boring meeting, remind yourself to watch and listen. Note little things you hadn't before. Tone of voice. Method of presentation. Order of speaking. Strength of alliance or disagreement around the room. Length of meeting. Number of topics discussed. Number of decisions made.

When you pay attention, you will learn a great deal more than you knew before. You will begin to understand why some things happen. You will develop new insights into people, situations, and solutions. Best of all, others will start seeing you a bit differently—as someone active, aware, and interested; maybe even as someone whose opinion matters. All this because you learned to pay attention.

