THE ART OF LISTENING

Good listening is an art that, if properly applied, becomes a general attitude. Day in and day out, the leader who is willing to listen to the other fellow’s point of view and who tries to take it into account before taking action will find the role easier. The problems of making change work and of handling supervisory problems will not be so traumatic. In addition, if the supervisor has worked hard to earn the confidence of associates by consistently showing them that their feelings and ideas are valued, that supervisor’s role is more effective.

Leaders who are well accepted and viewed as good counselors must be cautious to avoid getting involved in the personal lives of associates. They should restrict themselves to listening; and they should avoid giving advice. Even when the advice is successful, there is a risk of forming a dependency relationship with the associate. Above all, a supervisor should never play amateur psychologist with someone with a deep-seated personal problem.

Understanding others is a difficult art that can be learned best under practiced supervision. Each individual may have a different style. In general, here are a few summary points to remember.

1. Encourage the other person to talk. This means the listener must curb the natural impulse to talk. In addition to listening, the listener must concentrate - must be interested in what the other person is saying and try to understand.

2. Reflective summary. An effective way of encouraging others to talk is by summarizing the person’s feelings, and disregarding the facts.

For example,

Speaker: “Yes, I’m thinking of quitting. I don’t seem to be getting the hang of the job. At least that’s what people around here seem to think.”

Listener: “You feel people are sort of down on you?”

A reflective summary serves a number of purposes: (1) it shows the other person that the listener understands and is fair; (2) it allows the other person to restate an attitude if under the impression that the listener did not understand; (3) it highlights what has been said. People often are surprised to learn what feelings were behind their words when their words are reflected back to them.

3. Probe. The listener’s role is to understand. If one does not, one should feel free to solicit information by asking questions.
4. Weighing alternatives. The listener wants to help the other person make a decision, but does not want to make the decision for the person. The other person may even make a very poor decision. The listener does have the responsibility of helping the other person make a good decision by asking questions when the decision is made, such as:

“What probably would be the effect of that?” “Is that the only solution?”

“How would that help?”