

CONNECTIONS

~ a quarterly newsletter from Careers In Nonprofits ~

Listen Your Way To Success: A Fresh Look at the Skill of Negotiation

Q & A with Ellen Woods, Director, Certifying Board Services, American Osteopathic Association

Listen your way to success . . . really?

To many of us, listening seems too passive an exercise to launch us forward in our careers. But that's precisely the piece many of us are missing according to our featured expert. Listening is an active exercise, part of negotiating our way to greater understanding and participation, and it can have a profound impact on supervisor-staff, fundraiser-donor, interviewer-interviewee, and other key relationships.

Meet Ellen Woods: nonprofit professional, project manager extraordinaire, and lifelong learner. With her diverse background in association management, medical practice, and higher education, in positions ranging from fundraising to physician certification, Ellen has a unique perspective on the tools necessary to succeed in working with others, be they donors, volunteers, or staff.

Currently, Ellen is Director, Certifying Board Services for the American Osteopathic Association, a post she has held since January of 2006. She manages six of the organization's 18 certifying boards, working with seven volunteer physicians and subject matter experts on each board to develop fresh exams, maintain legal matters, and market the value of board certification. She also serves as Vice President of Sullivan & Associates, a small, family-owned company that designs and builds green tank car cleaning facilities, with her primary roles being research and brainstorming. In her spare time, Ellen is

pursuing continuing education in project management through the University of Chicago, where she recently completed a course on the topic of negotiation. To use Ellen's own words, the class was "a revelation." What she learned about the skill of negotiation was just the gem she was seeking in this new learning venture, and now she shares her insights with us.

Q. *What is your "Project Management" background, and how does negotiation factor in?*

A. I was attracted to project management because I have a natural ability, and I have also been learning along the way. I like the beginning, middle, and end of a project, seeing things through to fruition. Completion is exhilarating, and I think that's what attracted me to fundraising. In fundraising, you will never be without something inspiring and challenging to do.

Project Management is an undervalued skill. It's becoming sort of a buzzword, something people like to see on paper but don't fully appreciate. In reality, all of the activities we get into are projects, and a project needs a team. That means we have to engage other people for at least a portion of the time. The question is, how do you persuade people to help you in your projects? That's where negotiation comes in.

"The skill of negotiation is finding out what interests the other person."

Negotiation goes deeper than conflict resolution. The skill of negotiation is finding out what interests the other person. In many cases, people work with us because they are coerced for one reason or another, and they just do the bare bones to support a project. When you get participa-



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tion that is passionate and committed, it has a huge impact. The difference is finding out what people are interested in and inviting them to be involved because *they* want to. This is a valuable skill whether you are a boss working with staff or a fundraiser engaging donors.

The negotiation class has me thinking about my graduate work in the science of communication. As communicators, we tend to think of ourselves more as artists, yet there is always this aspect of science inside most really good work. Even a painter has to understand the qualities of the oil in order to use it effectively. Both the art and science of communication are at work in this skill of negotiation.

Q. *What are two or three actions someone can take to improve their negotiation skills?*

A. One important principle is to separate the *people* from the *problem*, the problem being whatever project you are working toward. Then, most importantly, we need to listen, truly listen, to the other person and find out what interests them.

In fundraising, for example, the fundraiser has a really great responsibility to separate what he or she is doing and why from the interests of the funders. We look at people as the solution, and to some extent they are; but they are only part of it. Extremely good fundraising, and good management for that matter, comes from knowing every aspect of the problem and realizing that there are a number of solutions. Often, when a fundraiser is in a meeting, it feels as if that donor is the only person who can offer a solution, and that in itself is a big problem. We should go in knowing that this is not the only answer.

It's counterintuitive, because we think our main purpose is to persuade donors or staff into doing what *we* want. As a result, we don't spend enough time getting to know them apart from our own interests. But the best way to achieve buy-in and build strong partnerships is to focus on what is important to *them*. The lasting quality of any project is in getting people involved because they absolutely

want to be. This is why negotiation hits me as a major fundraising challenge. It's also why *listening* is so important.

This rare quality of listening to the other person's interests is something we need to hone. We don't spend enough time getting to know people separate from the thing we need them for. This is true whether we are interviewing for a new job, listening to our staff, or engaging with potential donors, and is possibly the core of all of the problems we have with relationships! When people make significant contributions to a project, it is because they feel heard and appreciated for who they are aside from the need.

A third action I would suggest is to literally write out, ahead of time, at least two to three sentences about what you want to happen in each meeting or encounter. It is a good practice to think through alternatives, to have what the business world calls BATNA--a Best Alternative To a Negotiated Agreement--so that you can go into a conversation prepared for various outcomes. A lot of times we write about what happens *after* a meeting, as a form of reporting. Being proactive, writing about an encounter *before* it occurs, helps us to focus and enables us to adjust to the natural flow of conversation.

Q. *Why are these skills important to entry-, mid-, and senior-level nonprofit professionals?*

A. Leaders of organizations should be practicing the art of listening in interactions with their own staff and empowering fundraisers to go in and simply get to know their donors. Negotiating agreement by listening to the other person's interests allows us to foster alliances based on trust and to manage projects with solid buy-in, even from people who must participate because they are on staff.

As a general rule, I can't imagine any skill that is necessary to the senior level that I wouldn't want to see at least seeds of in junior-level staff. I would not hire anyone who doesn't demonstrate excellent listening and asking skills in an interview, and that comes in the form of

people who want to make a difference and really do care. The interviewer has to be looking for those two traits. To foster strong negotiation skills in entry- and mid-level staff, nonprofit executives should model them themselves and compliment their employees when they see them in action. That is something I am really trying to do more of, to be emphatic about the good job my staff is doing. Too often, we are quiet about the things we notice in people, and that is not good.

Q. *What books, articles, or exercises help you that you would recommend to our readers?*

A. I highly recommend the book we used in the negotiation class. It is a national bestseller by Roger Fisher and William Ury, [Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement Without Giving In](#).

A great magazine that I never miss reading is [Fast Company](#). It is an excellent resource to familiarize with donors and some of the most creative people in business. It offers insight into what is happening and wraps around all topics.

[Harvard Business Review](#) spends a lot of time on good business stories and fundraising. It is expensive but available at the library. [The New Yorker](#) offers some of the best writing out there, and fundraisers should be great writers. I'd also recommend www.odemagazine.com for Intelligent Optimists and anything by Daniel Pink, who writes about the workforce today and how creative people are going to be landing some of the better jobs.

As you can tell, I love to read. Fundraisers and people who raise resources, as I do, should read a wide variety of materials. It is important to be well-read when we are spending time with people who travel and have fascinating, varied interests. Plus, it's fun to be well-informed!

Careers In Nonprofits would love to hear from you regarding topics of interest and interview subjects for future newsletters. Email us at CNP@careersinnonprofits.com.