

A Partner's View of KEP's Leadership Journey

A three-part series

An honest, up close look at our partnership with Kent Elastomer Products, an American manufacturer committed to transparency and growth.

By Darla Klein

Principal and Owner
of **LeaderSHIFT**



Part 2

**Leadership
Markers Help
the Team Become
Better Partners
to Each Other -
and to Clients**

Preface

by Bob Oborn
President, Kent Elastomer Products

I was the VP of Operations when Kent Elastomer Products began our Lean transformation in 2008. Shortly afterwards, our supervisors began working with business coach Darla Klein, who continues to this day helping us face and solve challenges.

I recall one session with Darla. We all had to tell everyone on the supervisor and management levels - what do you well and what you do poorly. That was tough - saying that to my boss at the time (the company president). But Darla taught us how to communicate effectively. Ever since then, we encourage respectful but direct dialogue across the organization chart. This helps us reduce ego, creatively solve problems and grow both the business and individual careers.

Darla tells how our team addressed Leadership Markets to become better listeners, build trust and embrace accountability. This gave us the foundation to later measure progress and see real results, which she will share in Part III of this series.

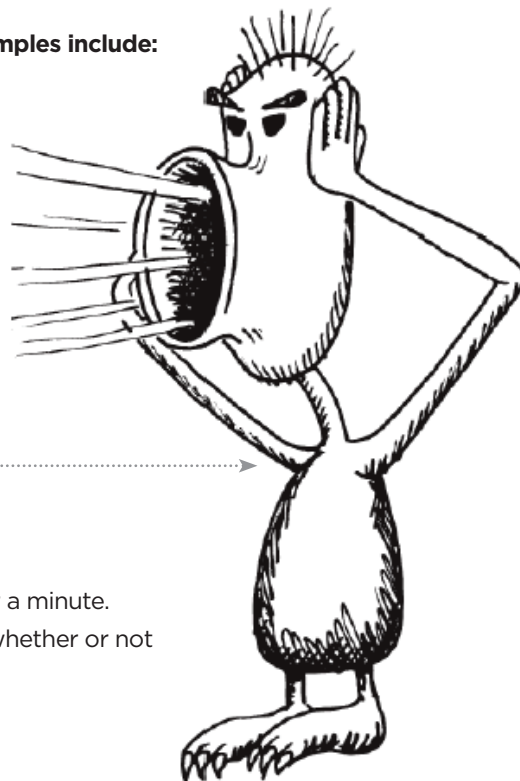
BEPPUMOIDs - Understanding Listening Barriers

Listening barriers are the things that get in the way of listening **despite your best intentions**. True listening involves giving the speaker your full attention by taking in his or her message, both physically and mentally. Listening barriers prevent that from happening; even when you want to listen, sometimes you find you just can't..

So, what exactly are listening barriers? Some examples include:

- **B**ored
- **E**motional
- **P**hysically Tired
- **P**reoccupied
- **U**ninterested
- **M**entally Tired
- **O**rganizing Your Thoughts (so you can reply)
- **I**nterrupting
- **D**istracted

Our **BEPPUMOID** looked like this



We used the BEPPUMOID to inject some humor into what can potentially be a conversation fraught with danger. Pause and think about this for a minute. How does it usually go for you when questioning whether or not someone is listening? Exactly.

The BEPPUMOID was another tool KEP team members could use to challenge each other. By observing that “we may be infected with a BEPPUMOID” or asking “what BEPPUMOIDs do we have?” they could open up their conversations. Listening is more of a mindset than a checklist of do’s and don’ts. By using the BEPPUMOID we could focus on creating the right mindset to embed listening in the culture.

The payoff? When the senior management team was willing to challenge each other, to engage in constructive conflict and creative debate, they achieved stronger commitment to ideas, strategies and goals. The term BEPPUMOID may not be used much at KEP anymore, however, the benefits of listening, of accepting the legitimacy of other people’s points of view and learning from these multiple truths are lasting legacies of our BEPPUMOID.

Leadership Marker #2: Strong Cultures Have a Foundation of Trust

Many people are familiar with Patrick Lencioni’s model for building team relationships:

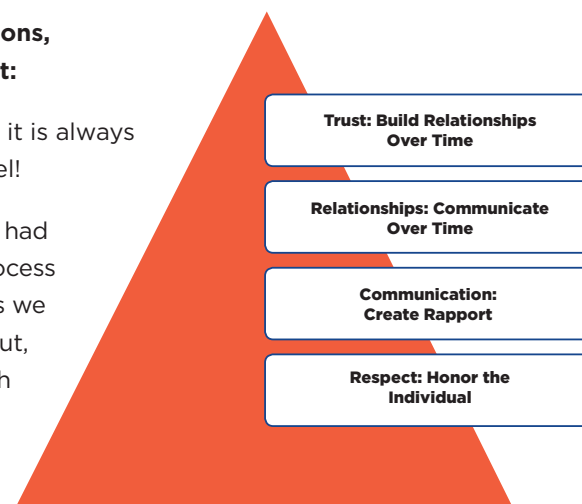
Lencioni is clear that “the first and most important behavior is to build trust.” And there’s the problem many leadership teams encounter and are unable to overcome. While it is easy to feel the absence of trust, many teams are at a loss to know how to begin to build trust. This is where all the hard work of creating a shared common language comes in to help.



In my work across a wide variety of organizations, I’ve discovered a straight-forward path to trust:

While this is a simple model, that doesn’t mean it is always an easy path forward – just like Lencioni’s model!

KEP’s senior management team used what they had learned in Leadership Marker #1 to begin the process of building trust. I was in awe of their courage as we worked on trust together. Two exercises stand out, both in terms of how much they challenged each person and the team and in terms of the value gained¹:



¹ Both exercises are described in greater detail in *Overcoming the Five Dysfunctions of a Team: A Field Guide for Leaders, Managers, and Facilitators* by Patrick Lencioni. Jossey-Bass, A Wiley Imprint, 2005.

1. Personal Histories

Team members shared where they grew up, how many children were in their families and – here is where the payoff comes in – the most difficult or important challenge of their childhood. By going through this exercise, team members learned a bit about how everyone became the person he or she is today. As a result, empathy and understanding could begin to rise above apathy and judgment. This exercise was a perfect follow-on to the team's work on behavioral preferences.

2. Team Effectiveness

Team members opened up with each other about how they were impacting the effectiveness of the team, both positively and negatively. What this exercise offered the team was a chance to honor each person's strengths and to collectively hear face-to-face what they all needed to do to improve so the team could grow.

The payoff? When senior management team members could understand where others were coming from, they could respect each other – even if they didn't always agree with each other. Creating rapport and communicating over time allowed them to build stronger relationships and create a foundation for trust.

Leadership Marker #3: Strong Cultures Understand Accountability

Accountability is being answerable for specified tasks or outcomes, being answerable for one's behaviors and results. There are two key dimensions to this: the first is to hold yourself accountable and the second is to hold others accountable.

The first time KEP's journey was illuminated by a better understanding of accountability happened around safety. Like many organizations, safety at KEP was held up as everybody's responsibility. While that sounds good, what's the problem with safety being everybody's responsibility? If it's everybody's responsibility, well, then in reality, what happens is that it's nobody's responsibility. Everybody assumes someone else will take care of it.

Once this concept came alive for the senior management team, the switch to safety is my responsibility began with them and then cascaded throughout the workforce. And once it started with safety, the transition began in other areas as well.

Great, right?

Well, except when that happened, the senior management team ran into another bump in the road – the lack of role clarity.

Role clarity is a critical success factor in achieving desired performance. People can be totally committed and motivated, they can have all the ability in the world and, if they don't know exactly what it is they are supposed to do or where their responsibility begins and ends, high performance is impossible to achieve.

This became apparent to the senior management team when we began work on defining their roles and the roles of the managers and supervisors (remember back to “fix my supervisors?”). In one of our sessions Bob even questioned how he had made a move in creating manager positions and challenged the senior management team to help him give those roles real meaning.

The lack of role clarity made it impossible to know where one function's responsibilities ended and another one's began. There were places where people were overstepping their bounds, as well as places where things were getting dropped because people thought someone else would handle it. As a result, finger pointing and blaming were the logical defaults.

This lack of alignment highlighted yet another issue. In addition to the silos created between functions and roles, there was a focus on location-centric thinking. Instead of determining what the organization needed as a whole, each facility concentrated on what was best for that facility. While not an outright civil war, and certainly not done maliciously, this location-centric thinking was definitely contributing to less collaboration and attention to the overall KEP mission and success.

With this new insight, KEP's senior management team invested the time and energy needed to define roles and responsibilities, ultimately illustrating this work with a re-designed organizational chart. While this new organizational chart might have been simply names and places on paper, it represented a *SHIFT* in the senior management team's perspective on accountability.

The payoff? While I would like to say that as soon as we illuminated the lack of self-accountability and role clarity we were immediately able to permanently fix those issues, that would not be true to KEP's leadership journey. Progress was made, however, these both remained issues with which the team continued to struggle. It wasn't until we got to the next leadership markers that we were able to make more lasting progress on this part of the journey.

END OF PART TWO.

Postscript

by Bob Oborn
President, Kent Elastomer Products

Darla led our team to communicate more effectively. Her direct, down to earth approach brilliantly got to the point: *You have to listen to each other. Trust each other. Be accountable to yourself and to your team.*