

Better Leadership Means Better Listening

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If you want better market intelligence, greater creativity or more profits, listen up. That's right — if you want loyal customers, dedicated employees or the extra edge to make your business more successful, you need to hone your listening skills.

Leaders know they need to listen. Most know that they don't listen enough. But most leaders don't really understand what better listening can ultimately do for them. Further, most don't realize just how poorly they listen, much less why they don't listen better.

Take the leader who keeps typing on his keyboard when an employee tries to ask a question. Or the leader who waits for a team member to finish talking just so she can jump in with what she has to say. "Go on," each of them might say, "I'm listening." But they are not. And they are missing the amazing results that can come from doing true, honest-to-goodness listening.

Real listening produces remarkable outcomes such as:

- Provide deep learning — even those "ah-ha" moments — about people, their motives and their motivations.
- Reveal critical intelligence about business, competitors and the marketplace.
- Directly impact actions and relationships.
- Help facilitate the openness that is required for a learning organization.
- Permit access to what customers, prospects and employees really think.
- Increase employee and customer satisfaction and engender trust.
- Allow leaders to ground their suspicions with real data for effective decision-making.

It just isn't possible to accomplish all this with superficial listening. Real listening to learn involves listening to what is being said, as well as what is not being said. It often involves asking clarifying follow-up questions and then listening to the answers with openness and curiosity. Real listening requires a leader to let go of advocacy in favor of understanding. Real listening engages people and allows them the freedom to tell their truth.

So why don't leaders listen?

Despite the obvious benefits of listening, most leaders do far more talking than listening. Most of us don't recognize what stops us from listening in the first place. To improve your listening skills, first understand the barriers to listening and work to overcome them.

There are many physical barriers to listening:

- **Hearing loss.**
- **Noisy environments**, often due to ambient noise or loud conversations.
- **Visual distractions** including something outrageous or unexpected that suddenly catches our eye or even normal events such as birds, kids or traffic outside of a window.
- **Physical discomfort or fatigue:** Hunger, illness and lack of sleep. Even bright sunlight in your face or an uncomfortable room temperature can negatively affect listening.

Most leaders are quick to recognize physical barriers and to make adjustments. But another type of barrier — the psychological barrier — is much more insidious because it is so much more difficult to recognize. There are three types:

- **Internal Conversations:** These are the unspoken conversations that play in a leader's head. Sometimes they relate directly to the speaker or their message, for example: "I so wish she would stop using that word," or, "I just know that, any minute, he's going to start complaining."

Other internal conversations, which are equally distracting and prevent the listener from focusing on what is being said, may be entirely unrelated to the speaker or their message. For instance: "I've got to get the team moving on the other project implementation before it gets too late."

- **Paradigms:** Those ingrained beliefs that represent our "truth" can easily become filters for everything that we attempt to hear. Our paradigms tend to be taken for granted and can become the context for all of a leader's listening if care is not taken. It is critical for leaders to recognize their paradigms. A few examples include:

"It is essential that everyone comply."

"The only way to be successful is to _____."

"Humans are essentially good."

"People really can't be trusted."

- **Background Stories:** These are the unspoken conversations, labels, stories, history, and attitudes that precede the conversation and are in play before the conversation starts. They serve as a filter through which listening occurs. (Note that background stories may be positive or negative, and each is equally dangerous.)

Both physical and psychological listening barriers can block out hearing new information, and impact leaders' decisions, relationships, and effectiveness. To reap the benefits of becoming a better listener, become conscious of your physical and psychological listening barriers and then use your newfound awareness to cultivate a more open and curious listening style.