

Common Sense Leadership

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Why Listening is the Most Important Leadership Skill and How You Can Improve Yours

Working as a leadership consultant and coach with highly successful CEOs, I've learned that of all their business acumen, the key to their effectiveness is their ability to listen attentively to their employees. Not emailing them, as so many of us do when pressed for time, these CEOs make the time to meet face to face. This simple act is transformative.

In the coaching world, it is often said that **listening is our gift to someone**. So true! **Intentional listening is a gift of respect to others**.

We must recognize that while everyone *thinks* they are good listeners, many are not. Results from 360 assessments and other surveys I have administered on behalf of my clients most often point to a need for improved listening:

- “My boss needs to be a better listener.”
- “She/he needs to listen to our ideas.”
- “She/he doesn't listen to me, which indicates to me that he doesn't really care about me.”

In fact, surveys reveal that we remember only 20% to 50% of what we hear. A Harvard Business Review article cites research that indicates within 48 hours, we retain only 25% of what we've heard.

Effective listening is a skill that can be learned. Georgetown University's leadership consulting program emphasizes **active listening** as essential to our success. Active listening is having a clear mind, not judging the other person, and not thinking about whether we agree or what we're going to say when the speaker is finished. It requires that we quiet our mind, which is not easy. Most of us listen with a problem-solving mind, “Oh, I know what she should do.” We are not really focused on the speaker. We're focused on ourselves and our reactions.

Active listening is work. It is definitely a skill we need to practice to master.

With specific self-observation practices, you can improve your listening skills. And you can be assured that good listening will improve your leadership and your overall success.

For example, one of my clients, an executive with a financial services company, was frustrated and felt stuck. She believed her career within the company had plateaued and sensed that her direct reports were not engaged with her, that she had lost them. In our work together, I gathered feedback from these team members and learned that they sensed she was not listening to them. Her employees noted that she tended to jump to conclusions before they finished speaking, and that she even finished their sentences.

Before she received this feedback, my client had no idea that she wasn't listening well. As we worked together to develop active listening skills, she noticed a difference in the spirit and

enthusiasm of her team members. Her improved listening was definitely appreciated, and her team members became more engaged. This was reflected in the team's financial results, which exceeded goals.

During another coaching session, a marketing executive told me that she planned to call a prospective client that afternoon. I heard what she was saying, but I also noticed that she seemed to dread making the call. To be helpful, I asked "What would make it easier for you to make that call?" We spent a few minutes discussing that, and she concluded that the person would probably respect her for making the call. Later that day, we exchanged text messages, and she was thankful to me for my question probing her commitment to that call. I would not have asked that question if I had not been attuned to her nonverbal communication, the hesitancy in her voice.

From personal experience, I can confirm that **the practice of attentive listening makes a difference in overall happiness and the quality of relationships**. When I committed myself to improving my listening skills, I began by observing myself as I listened to clients, colleagues, family, friends, and even strangers in store check-out lines. After these conversations, I took a minute to think about how well I listened, how I felt about that, and how I sensed the other person felt. I jotted this down in a dedicated notebook.

Within a week, I definitely improved. In meetings with executives in a consulting firm and a public policy firm, I was complimented for my attentive listening. Also that week, a family member thanked me for listening to her with interest.

Now that you can appreciate the importance of improving your listening, here are five tips that can instantly sharpen your listening skills:

- **Decide that you want to become a better listener.** Having an attitude that you want to become an intentional/attentive listener is the first step. By making this conscious decision, you're instantly more aware of when you're listening and when your mind is wandering.
- **Quiet your mind.** Although difficult, make every effort to suspend assessing, judging and problem solving. Do not think about what you'll say. Let those thoughts and others float out of your head as if they are clouds.
- **Focus of what the other person is saying or not saying, and their feelings.** Pay attention to the tone of voice and body language. Such clues can be indicators of non-verbal communication.
- **Lean in towards the person and have comfortable eye contact.** Smile and nod when appropriate. These are signals of affirmation and that you are listening to understand.
- **Ask questions about what is being said.** Clarifying and follow-up questions show respect and a genuine interest in understanding the person.

I assure you, if you commit to practicing the art of active listening, your employees will appreciate your dedication and respond with renewed commitment and positive energy. Your organizational culture will be invigorated and your business will thrive!

About The Author



John Keyser is the founder and principal of Common Sense Leadership, www.commonsenseleadership.com. He works with executives helping them develop organizational cultures that will produce outstanding financial results year after year, and a striving for continuous improvement, theirs and their team's. His contact information is john@johnkeysercoach.com and 202-236-2800.