

## Can You Listen Too Well?

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Listening is something all good leaders do. Sure, leaders have vision and they frame issues and they make hard decisions, but listening is what distinguishes leaders who care about the people with whom they work from leaders who are only concerned about getting the job done. Good leaders solicit input, they welcome feedback, and they take the time to hear what is being said. But is it possible to listen too well? Can there be a cost to being too good of a listener?

Please don't misunderstand me. Good leaders must listen. But with listening, like just about everything else, there can be too much of a good thing. How can too much listening be counterproductive?

First, *good leaders listen* and recognize that listening too well sometimes makes a vocal minority seem louder and more powerful than it is. Listening can fan the flames and cause the minute minority to feel like the meaningful majority. Leaders are able to distinguish between what Nate Silver calls "the signal and the noise"; they recognize the smoke without assuming there's a fire.

Second, *good leaders listen*, but they know that seeking unanimity isn't realistic. The support that's needed for success varies by situation, and a key part of leadership is recognizing when you have the support that you need—from the influencers and sufficient others in the group—and then charging ahead. Waiting for everyone to be on board means you'll spend more time waiting than doing. (Indeed, you may be so busy waiting that you never start doing!)

Third, *good leaders listen* and make it clear that listening doesn't mean agreeing. If we're not careful, our good listening techniques (eye contact, affirmative nodding, and a singular focus on the speaker) are interpreted as agreement. The speaker rails on about an issue, becoming more animated and intense, and unless we clarify, he or she may interpret our silence as support. It is difficult to say, "I can tell how bothered you are, and I'm sorry that you feel this way. When we talk next, I want to share where I agree and where I see things differently," but it's important to do it.

Finally, *good leaders listen*, but they don't take things personally. A principal friend of mine was known for being approachable and a good listener. When I complimented him on this, he rolled his eyes and replied, "Yeah, but it means that everyone complains to me. People are *too* comfortable sharing their frustrations and unhappiness, and that includes complaints about what I have or haven't done." He felt that he received more criticism because he was such a good listener.

One of my teachers used to occasionally begin a conversation with me by saying, "I just need to share this. I want you to listen and not feel that you have to do anything or even help me solve the problem." That kind of listening was hard for me, but I grew to understand its importance. Sometimes people need to vent, and good leaders know when this is the case. Now, when I sense that the speaker just needs a listening ear, I ask, "Before you go any further, is there something you want me to do or is this just for me to know? I want to be

clear." Agreeing on the purpose of the communication certainly increases the chances that it will be effective!

Hearing is only the first step in listening. Sometimes, in the middle of a rancorous debate, I wonder how talented and caring professionals can see a situation so differently. An important aspect of leadership is stepping back and understanding the perspectives that people bring to a situation. Why do they see things this way? Leaders need to understand the perceptions that inform what people are saying.

Good listening is also aggressive. Good listeners don't wait to hear; they solicit information and seek perceptions. This is more than asking "How's it going?" although it is that. Good leaders also appear *unhurried* so that others are comfortable in initiating a conversation. They formally seek the thoughts and opinions of their faculty members, their students' parents, and possibly their students.

I don't listen nearly as well as I should (doing better at listening is always one of my annual goals), but I routinely survey my teachers. I ask for their thoughts about the August in-service training, I periodically touch base during the year to see how things are going, and in the spring I request their feedback about my performance: "What should Tom stop, what should Tom start, and what should Tom continue doing?"

Likewise, I often solicit parents' thoughts about their children's education. Each spring, parents receive a survey of a dozen questions, including some that ask whether I have been friendly and supportive and whether they feel their child's individual needs have been met. For me, listening is part of a dialogue. It's a continual conversation with my staff, students, and parents, but it's also a conversation that I have with myself: Am I asking the right questions and listening enough, or am I listening too much?

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