

How to be a conscious listener — what it means for us and others

By John Keyser

I am a huge fan of SmartBrief; great articles about leadership. I was very pleased that my article “Listening is our Most Important Skill” **was posted on the site recently**.

Almost right away, I received lots of e-mail responses to the article. So many readers said they totally agreed about the importance of listening, they wanted to improve, and they asked for more information. It made me realize there is obviously a significant need for more information about conscious listening. So I decided to expand on this.

Here’s when I first became aware of just how important listening is to our success in business as well as in our personal lives.

I gained my coaching certification at the Georgetown Leadership Coaching Program, a rigorous eight months of learning and practice. The very first morning, after each of the 29 in our cohort introduced ourselves, explained our backgrounds and why we enrolled, our amazingly accomplished faculty members, Julie Shows and Kate Ebner, described the journey ahead for us and immediately discussed the very key quality of listening. They were passionate about how important our focus is on what a person is saying — and not saying — and how to sense what the other person is feeling during a conversation.

Julie and Kate described how few are really accomplished listeners because most of us have problem-solving minds. We may think ahead to what we’ll say, judge the other person, or be partially thinking of our to-do list, and on and on. Well, I am guilty as charged. I know my mind is too busy and that I could and should be more present when listening, and that I wanted to commit to learning how to improve.

As a group, we discussed training ourselves to be present, to let our thoughts float out of our minds as if they were clouds. I absolutely agreed with this message. I remember thinking at the time, “This is so true, listening is a critically important skill! So why am I only learning this now? Why wasn’t this discussed in school, or by the companies for whom I worked?”

That night, I went online, Googled listening books, found a few. (Interestingly, there are thousands of books about management and leadership, but just a few about listening!)

I read a few books, stories about business people who became successful, highly effective leaders because of their attentive listening. I read about the people who worked for them, who felt appreciated and motivated to work hard for them. I also read about people who were not good listeners, and how disconnected people felt in their presence, how ineffective these managers were in sustaining their results.

I'd like to share with you the resources, which benefited me in my own quest to improve my listening. I read a book ordered from Amazon, **“Listening Leaders: The Ten Golden Rules To Listen, Lead & Succeed.”** It definitely motivated me. And I also found a 32-page booklet published by the Center for Creative Leadership especially informative, as it's packed with good tips. Go to CCL.org, then click Leadership Development, then Bookstore, then Guidebook Series. The guidebook's title is “Active Listening.” Just \$12.

As I like to emphasize, every business is a people business — our relationships matter greatly. Solid relationships help us gain the respect and trust of others, our clients and our colleagues. It is important to be easy to work with, to have productive working relationships. People must sense that we genuinely care about them; this is how they feel inspired to work with and even follow us. Here are a few helpful practices to becoming an accomplished listener.

- First, our attitude: We must commit to listen to understand and learn.
- Put the other person at ease, maybe by sitting side by side rather than across a desk.
- Lean forward, comfortable eye contact, a slight smile.
- Quiet our mind — and stay fully present!
- Give affirmations: “OK,” “I see,” “Makes sense.”
- Ask clarifying questions.
- Maybe ask if we may repeat what we've heard to assure we have it right.
- Use silence, don't rush to fill the space, likely the person will then continue, and we'll deepen our learning. It is said, “Let silence do the heavy lifting.”
- Take notes, it will help us remember, and even more important, it is a sign of respect to the other person and will be appreciated.

Please remember, it all begins with our willingness to understand and learn, and our effort to be patient and fully present.

Conscious listening is difficult, especially in our crazy busy world today with so many urgencies and distractions. As author Leo Babauta says, “We are drinking from a fire hose of information, with no idea of how to reduce the flow.”

Practice, practice, practice. That’s what I learned during the Georgetown Leadership Coaching Program. I knew my listening was just OK and that I wanted and needed to improve.

My practice was to make it a point at least once a day to go into a conversation mindfully intent on listening attentively and patiently. I did this during the week in business conversations, at home at dinner, and I even practiced in checkout lines while doing errands. I’d ask, “How is your day?” Well, I actually stopped and listened, to let the person know that I was genuinely interested.

I kept a notebook, and right after these selected daily conversations, I briefly rated how I did and noted what I observed about the other person, what they were saying and how they might have been feeling. Sometimes I was pleased with my listening, other times I wasn’t. But I believe what gets measured gets improved, and over time my listening definitely improved.

I continue to work on my listening, staying quiet and patient, trying not to jump ahead to conclusions, staying fully present.

Recently, I facilitated an attentive listening workshop for Billy Casper Golf, the leader in the field of golf course management. One of the regional general managers shared, “Good listening is what our regional senior vice president, Joel Gohlmann, does. He is the very best listener I know.” Many in the room joined in with agreement. It was high testimony! Clearly, Joel’s conscious listening skills are a big reason his team members have such high regard for him. They said they’re always ready to make sacrifices and go the extra mile, as they sense Joel truly cares about them.

I asked Joel for his thoughts about effective listening and what he tries to do. He shared:

1. A lack of patience leads to the lost art of good listening.
2. Follow up is critically important.
3. We must put the other person’s interest ahead of our own while in conversation, or, at least, put ours on hold.

Let’s just remember that conscious listening takes our commitment and practice, but our improvement will definitely increase our effectiveness as leaders. It will also deepen our relationships, and that greatly benefits our quality of life!

One more resource for you: A friend, Cary Larson, an amazing leadership coach, wrote a wonderful paper called “Being Heard.” I’d be happy to send it to you. Being heard is so deeply appreciated by others when they sense we are genuinely interested. Cary describes it this way, “Being truly heard is hard to describe, but you know it when you feel it, like love.”

I hope this is helpful, as I do believe that listening is our most important skill in business and our leadership.

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