

# I'm All Ears

## *Why managers must develop effective listening skills*

By Richard K. Bommelje

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The best leaders share a common secret: They successfully lead because they effectively listen. Good listening, however, seems to be a rare management skill. Unfortunately, many people work with leaders who interrupt, are rude and boorish, and devalue their direct reports. Imagine how their negative behavior damages the morale, productivity, and effectiveness of their organizations.

Manny Steil and I have devoted more than 50 years of combined work to researching, writing, consulting, teaching, and training in the areas of listening and leadership. During the past three years, we've interviewed more than 100 leaders around the globe, including CEOs and front-line leaders, educators, entrepreneurs, pastors, military officers, pilots, celebrities, and homemakers. No matter what role they play, these people understand the definition of listening leadership: to guide yourself and others to positive results for the betterment of all by enhanced sensing, interpreting, evaluating, storing, and responding to messages.

Based on our research, we've developed 10 golden rules for effective listening. Here, we'll focus on the first rule, which is critical key for both listening and leading: building a solid foundation.

### **Do you hear what I hear?**

Listening leaders recognize that listening and leadership are inseparable and that listening is the best way to learn about the true needs, expectations, and desires of their followers. Peter Nulty, an inductee in *Fortune* magazine's National Business Hall of Fame, aptly observed, "Of all the skills of leadership, listening is the most valuable, and one of the least understood. Most captains of industry listen only sometimes, and they remain ordinary leaders. But a few, the great ones, never stop listening." <Richard: What does Peter Nulty do?>

As you focus on building a solid foundation for success, understand these five universal listening facts:

**Listening is our primary communication activity.** More than half a century of research in the field of listening proves that we spend 80 percent of our waking hours communicating. At least 45 percent of that time is spent listening. For leaders, the total time invested in listening is even higher. Numerous studies identify listening as the most critical leadership success skill, and employers consistently rate it as one of the top five skills they expect of employees. As leadership responsibilities grow, the importance of listening increases dramatically.

**Listening is an innate, learned, and improvable behavior.** Listening is driven by a combination of instinctive, inherent, and innate forces. Listening, in its full complexity, is also a measurable, observable, and improvable behavior.

Research reveals that most individuals don't listen well. Immediately after listening to a 10-minute presentation, the average listener has heard, correctly understood, properly evaluated, stored, and appropriately responded to approximately half of what was said. Within 48 hours, that drops to a final effectiveness level of 25 percent. Evidence shows that with effort, however, listening effectiveness can be improved.

As a result of guided effort, listening leaders have enhanced their awareness and attitude, increased their knowledge, and improved their listening skills.

**Poor listening is costly.** Although listening is central to all leaders' success, few have received training on how to be good listeners. As a result, many have developed counterproductive and costly listening habits. The costs are staggering. Ineffective and inefficient listening results in extraordinary losses of time, money, productivity, customer service, self-esteem, reputations, opportunities, and more. On the other hand, effective, efficient, and productive listeners profit in a multitude of ways.

**Responsible and active listeners are productive listeners.** Unfortunately, most leaders operate on the assumption that it's the speaker's responsibility to ensure successful communication, thus they become passive listeners. Our experience clearly demonstrates that the passive listener is always a poor listener and an ineffective leader. Conversely, outstanding leaders assume responsibility for the success of all communication to and from them. When listening, these leaders display an attitude of responsibility and exhibit concrete behaviors of productive and involved activity.

**Listening can be commanded only to the degree developed.** Many listeners deceive themselves with the assumption that they can listen well whenever they really need to, want to, or have to. Nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, listeners can only "will" themselves to listen to the level they have developed such skills. Second, the assumption that you can do more if needed interferes with the investment necessary to focus, grow, and get better. Productive listeners understand their strengths and limitations and constantly strive to achieve higher levels of performance.

### **Listening leadership in practice**

John DiBiaggio, one of the many listening leaders we interviewed, has spent his career in higher education administration and served as president of several institutions, including Michigan State and Tufts universities and the University of Connecticut. "I've often said you show your intelligence not by what you say, but what you ask," DiBiaggio says. "If you're a good listener, you'll focus on what the other person is trying to tell you."

For example, when seasoned managers see certain situations reoccur in the workplace, they must be willing to listen to other staff members and consider unique approaches.

"If students on campus begin a protest, for example, you might say to yourself, 'I've seen protests before and I know what to do,'" DiBiaggio says. "However, other staff members who also are experiencing the protest might have some other ideas as to what you should do in that situation."

I had to teach myself to listen to what people were saying in each situation and not immediately come to a conclusion.”

Listening and leading are synonymous. Exceptional leaders focus intensely on the value of building solid listening and leadership foundations. Build lasting foundations, and you’ll join their ranks.

*Currents Magazine*, “Managers Portfolio: I’m All Ears”, Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE), April 2005