

How Do I Demonstrate I Am Listening ?



- by Gary B. Cohen, Executive Coach

I have spoken to many leaders and the consensus is that listening to the answer is more important than asking the perfect question. Listening intently builds trust between you and the speaker. With that in mind, here are some tips to improve your listening:

1. Don't let your mind wander. Zen masters can keep their minds completely focused on one thought or conversation, but most of us can not. We might, for instance, latch onto one piece of information that the speaker has said. We grip it tightly and plan our response, rather than simply bookmarking this information and continuing to listen. In doing so, the speaker will see in our eyes that we have tuned out. Trust, confidence, and motivation will spiral downward.
2. Don't interrupt after asking a question. Leaders often have Type-A personalities, so they want to complete others' sentences. In all likelihood, they could probably do a better job of relaying the information, but that is not the goal of listening. Out-thinking your subordinates or showing off is not leadership. Patience is. Allow the speaker all the time in the world to provide you with an answer and to ask follow-up questions. Doctors at the renowned Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota pride themselves on spending a lot of time listening to their patients. Many practitioners ask questions and filter out most of what the patient says (listening only for symptoms they believe to be present), paying little mind to the patients' questions. Those questions can be very revealing especially if the patient is suffering from a rare disorder. Good doctors and good leaders have patience and make better decisions as a result.
3. Don't ask a question then give an answer to see if you were right. I was in a coaching exercise with a CEO. He summoned his accountant and asked her, "What are our revenue and net profits going to be this year?" Before she could answer, he said, "\$5 million and \$1 million respectfully." He clearly wanted to demonstrate that he was aware of the numbers to me and to her. This was about ego and it did nothing to build his leadership within the organization. Each time we do one of our team members' jobs our leadership power is taken away. What's her incentive to try to answer his questions in the future? Wasn't he communicating that her time must not be valuable if she was going to be called into the office just so he could ask and answer his own question? Does she now think he has nothing better to do with his time? Actually, these are not assumptions. This is what I discovered when I spoke with her afterward.

Ask, Don't Tell by Corey Sauer



Sometimes a Leader needs to "listen" with their eyes.

4. Be attuned to body language-your own and the speaker's. Maintain eye contact. Sit up straight and lean forward. Don't communicate disinterest or impatience by tapping a pen against the desk. And try to pick up on nonverbal cues that the speaker is transmitting. John Urban, Former CEO, President and Chairman of Pioneer Hi-Bred International looks for "Dissonance." When there is a disagreement or a gap between the work that was performed and the work that was expected to be performed, he pays particular attention to body language-failure to make eye contact, lowered or trailing off voices, etc. He then tries to imagine the question the speaker least wants him to ask. Then he asks it.

Interestingly, John finds it easier to listen for dissonance and ask the right questions if the organization's vision, plan, and goals are clear. It makes sense. After all, if you know what key the symphony is in, it is much easier to detect a wrong note.

If you follow these four tips, you will be a good listener. And you will be pleasantly surprised to find out how prepared you subordinates are for their meeting with you.