

Three Ways Leaders Can Listen with More Empathy

by Christine M. Riordan

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Study after study has shown that listening is critical to leadership effectiveness. So, why are so few leaders good at it?

Too often, leaders seek to take command, direct conversations, talk too much, or worry about what they will say next in defense or rebuttal. Additionally, leaders can react quickly, get distracted during a conversation, or fail to make the time to listen to others. Finally, leaders can be ineffective at listening if they are competitive, if they multitask such as reading emails or text messages, or if they let their egos get in the way of listening to what others have to say.

Instead, leaders need to start by really caring about what other people have to say about an issue. Research also shows that active listening, combined with empathy or trying to understand others' perspectives and points of view is the most effective form of listening. Henry Ford once said that if there is any great secret of success in life, it lies in the ability to put oneself in another person's place and to see things from his or her point of view -as well as from one's own.

Research has linked several notable behavior sets with empathic listening. The first behavior set involves recognizing all verbal and nonverbal cues, including tone, facial expressions, and other body language. In short, leaders receive information by all senses and not just hearing. Sensitive leaders pay attention to what others are not saying and probe a bit deeper. They also understand how others are feeling and acknowledge those feelings. Sample phrases include the following: Thank you for sharing how you feel about this situation, it is important to understand where

everyone is coming from on the issue; Would you share a bit more on your thoughts on this situation; You seem excited (happy, upset...) about this situation, and I would like to hear more about your perspective.

The second set of empathic listening behaviors is processing, which includes the behaviors we most commonly associate with listening. It involves understanding the meaning of the messages and keeping track of the points of the conversation. Leaders who are effective at processing assure others that they are remembering what others say, summarize points of agreement and disagreement, and capture global themes and key messages from the conversation. Sample phrases might include the following: Here are a couple of key points that I heard from this meeting; here are our points of agreement and disagreement; here are a few more pieces of information we should gather; here are some suggested next steps—what do you think?

The third set of behaviors, responding, involves assuring others that listening has occurred and encouraging communication to continue. Leaders who are effective responders give appropriate replies through verbal acknowledgements, deep and clarifying questioning, or paraphrasing. Important non-verbal behaviors include facial expressions, eye contact, and body language. Other effective responses might include head nods, full engagement in the conversation, and the use of acknowledging phrases such as ‘That is a great point.’

Overall, it is important for leaders to recognize the multidimensionality of empathetic listening and engage in all forms of behaviors. Among its benefits, empathic listening builds trust and respect, enables people to reveal their emotions—including tensions, facilitates openness of information sharing, and creates an environment that encourages collaborative problem-solving.

Beyond exhibiting the behaviors associated with empathetic listening, follow-up is an important step to ensure that others understand that true listening has occurred. This assurance may come in the form of incorporating feedback and making changes, following through on promises made in meetings, summarizing the meeting through notes, or if the leader is not incorporating the feedback, explaining why he or she made other decisions. In short, the leader can find many ways to demonstrate that he or she has heard the messages.

The ability and willingness to listen with empathy is often what sets a leader apart. Hearing words is not adequate; the leader truly needs to work at understanding the position and perspective of the others involved in the conversation. In a recent interview, Paul Bennett, Chief Creative Officer at IDEO, advises leaders to listen more and ask the right question. Bennett shared that “for most of my twenties I assumed that the world was more interested in me than I was in it, so I spent most of my time talking, usually in a quite uninformed way, about whatever I thought, rushing to be clever, thinking about what I was going to say to someone rather than listening to what they were saying to me.”

Slowing down, engaging with others rather than endlessly debating, taking the time to hear and learn from others, and asking brilliant questions are ultimately the keys to success.



Christine M. Riordan is the Provost and professor of management at the University of Kentucky. Her research focuses on labor-force diversity issues, leadership effectiveness, and career success.

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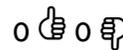
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WENDALL PIETERSEN 9 months ago

Good and usefull article Christine, Thanks! I have noe small suggestion though. When you suggest acknowledging phrases with "thats a great point", I have noticed how my american colleagues get criticised when we work with an international audience. Perhaps "good" is enough. European audiences reject these comments even if they are sincere.

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