

SIGMA

Leadership Series



Great Leaders Listen



GREAT LEADERS LISTEN

“ **Most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.**
– Stephen Covey

While many leaders seek to improve their ability to communicate in the workplace, it is often easy to overlook an essential part of communication – listening. Listening is one of the most important components of communication, and is related to increased employee commitment, greater frequency of helping behaviors from employees, and lower turnover among employees¹. Research has also shown that leaders who listen have more positive interactions with their employees, and in turn, employees are more likely to be favourably influenced by these leaders².

There are two dimensions of listening that a leader should be aware of. First, listening skills involve a willingness to take the time to listen to others. This ranges from listening to any issues or concerns employees have, to gaining their input and feedback on workplace changes or conflicts. Second, when leaders listen, they need to display understanding to the person who is speaking. This involves showing you understand what an employee is saying by identifying the relevant information they are communicating and accurately conveying this information back to the employee. Furthermore, this shows that a leader is not only providing their employees a chance to speak; they are actively engaging in the opinions and ideas of others.

In assessing your ability to listen effectively, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do I give my full attention when someone is speaking?
- Have I given employees designated time to share their thoughts or ideas?
- Am I easily distracted by my other obligations during conversations?
- Do I make judgements about the speaker’s goals or intentions before they have finished what they are saying?
- Have I provided a safe space for employees to express themselves?
- Do I demonstrate to others that I am listening?
- Do I ask questions to ensure I understand what someone is trying to tell me?

Improve Your Listening Skills

Understand your biases: Given that listening is as much about understanding and actively processing information as it is about listening to others speak, biases can quickly seep in and color your interpretation of what an employee is saying. For example, the same message from two employees may be understood and received differently, depending on who is delivering the message. Any number of filters might affect the way a leader interprets input from others. Some common biases include affective variables, such as a leader's current mood, how hectic their schedule is, or how much stress they are facing from deadlines. Another bias is interpersonal variables, like if the leader and employee have similar styles of communication, or the strength the interpersonal relationship, respect, and liking the leader has for their employee. Avoiding all bias is nearly impossible, so it is best for leaders to understand their biases. They should take the time to evaluate if they are interpreting the message and tone of an employee accurately. They should also understand whether their perception is based largely on what they expect to hear.

Provide a safe space for employees to speak up: Some organizational cultures do not encourage employees to bring issues, concerns, or feedback forward to their leaders. Provide a safe space for employees to voice their input by asking for feedback, providing one-on-one time between leaders and employees, and encouraging individuals bring up new ideas. Over time, as employees see that their leaders listen to their ideas, they will become more trusting of their leader and more comfortable expressing themselves in the workplace.

Listening is about more than words: In improving a leader's communication, the idea of "more than words" is often covered, with suggests around maintaining certain body language or eye contact. Similarly, when it comes to listening, leaders can look for clues in how an employee communicates that can help them better understand the message or feelings behind their words. Look beyond simple body language, and listen for how an employee expresses themselves. Do they sound excited? Interested? Hesitant? Are there obvious or important things they are *not* saying? What do they put emphasis on when discussing their concerns or ideas? Taking the time to not only listen to what an employee says, but to listen to what they are not saying. Listening to what they are emphasizing or overlooking is key to active listening, and to understanding employees' thoughts and feelings.

Start Doing These 3 Things Now to Become a Better Listener

The following steps can help you become better at listening to others:

1. **Build listening in to your daily activities.** The kind of active, attentive listening discussed here can be both time consuming and tiring, making it a tempting choice to avoid. Leaders who are looking to improve their listening skills should try to schedule in extra time in meetings to gain employee feedback. Preparing extra time to listen can help avoid issues of competing time demands, where leaders feel pressured to move on to the next task rather than listen to their employees. Leaders might also consider

scheduling meetings with employees who have input to give, showing them both your interest and your dedication to their ideas and concerns.

2. **Give your full attention.** Leaders often have many obligations, deadlines, and demands on their attention. This can make it difficult to focus on one conversation, even if the information being portrayed is interesting and relevant to the leader. When listening to employees, try to avoid looking at your phone, email, calendar, or clock. Remember, there is a difference between a leader's perception of their ability to listen and the employee's perception that they are being listened to. It is this perception of being heard that influences employee outcomes².
3. **Show engagement in the conversation.** Aside from giving your full attention, there are other ways to demonstrate that you are listening and understanding what another individual is saying. For instance, one strategy is to ask clarifying questions. This not only shows that you are paying attention, but that you are interested in truly understanding what that person means. Another key strategy for active listening is to summarize what you have heard, and to repeat this information back to the employee. This way, you can uncover any misunderstandings while showing your employee that you respect what they have to say. Both asking questions and summarizing information are good ways to communicate with the employee without taking over the conversation. Note that succeeding in being an effective listener often means improving the way you communicate effectively in your role as a leader.

Resources



[The Power of Listening](#)



[6 Ways Effective Listening Can Make You a Better Leader](#)



Develop your ability to listen effectively by taking advantage of SIGMA's coaching services.

Contact SIGMA for coaching on developing your skills as a leader.

SIGMA Assessment Systems, Inc.

Email: support@SigmaHR.com

Call: 800-265-1285

References

¹Van Vuuren, M., de Jong, M. D. T., & Seydel, E. R. (2007). Direct and indirect effects of supervisor communication on organizational commitment. *Corporate Communications: An International Journal*, 12, 116-128.

²Ames, D., Maissen, L. B., & Brockner, J. (2012). The role of listening in interpersonal influence. *Journal of Research in Personality*, 46(3), 345-349.