

The Power is in the Listening

The Dilemma: People don't listen. No one, not one of us, really listens. It's who we are and who we've always been. **WE DON'T LISTEN, AND WE WON'T LISTEN.** We pay the price for this failure.

Instead of listening: We can be convincing as we establish eye contact. We even manage to smile and nod while someone is yammering on. But we're saying to ourselves:

**We listen less,
not more,
when we need
information
the most.**

"You talk and while you're stating the obvious, I will

- WAIT until you're finished hitting me on the head with your bad ideas, so I can share my superior ones.
- WORRY about my child's soccer game.
- WONDER why you insist on wearing that ridiculous bowtie."
- WISH you would listen to me as much as I listen to you.
- OBSESS about all the work I have to do."
- RESENT you for taking my valuable time."

Under stress we lose up to **10 IQ points, and we listen less, not more, when we need information the most.**

How does failing to listen rob us of power?

KNOWLEDGE IS POWER. We do ourselves a disservice when we don't listen to what our colleagues, friends and family have to say.

It's impossible to listen and talk at the same time.

When we don't listen to learn

- **We get dumber, not smarter.** I already know what I'm thinking. I may or may not know what you're thinking.
- **We fail to meet goals.** I facilitate a highly interactive business simulation. During the exercise, participants realize how much further ahead they would be had they paid attention to instructions, to their customers and to each other. Instead of listening, they act, usually with inadequate information.
- **Our decisions are less effective** because they're based on limited points of view and come from a narrow knowledge base. We make more mistakes and are less prepared to solve problems.
- **Our best ideas get lost in space.** I have watched work groups fail because everyone talks, and no one listens. **It's impossible to listen and talk at the same time!**

- **We suffer a loss of trust and morale.** The greatest way to motivate people and make them feel valued is to listen to and act on their ideas. The greatest demotivator is to ask for someone's ideas, then not listen to what they say.

What can be done? If we really DON'T listen, and we WON'T listen, what hope is there?

First, let's extend the mantra:

I don't listen, and I won't listen - unless I make a conscious, willful decision to listen.

Here are some suggestions for how to be a powerful listener. Take what makes sense to you and design your own listening process.

- **Clear** your mind of clutter. Be present in the moment. You can worry about other responsibilities later.
- **Focus** on the issue, not the person. Depersonalize and concentrate on the discussion, problem, or decision at hand.
- **Decide** to listen in order to learn. Too often we listen in order to correct, find fault, debunk. Decide to find out what the other person knows that you don't know. Learn about their concerns. The more you know about their hopes, interests, doubts, and fears, the more equipped you are to find common ground and solve problems.
- **Monitor** your listening filters. We have filters for all our interactions, some positive, some negative:
 - He's always complaining.
 - He's too sensitive.
 - We don't have time for this.
 Filters come from past experience and shade the way we process information. Learn what your trigger points are. When you feel yourself getting bored or defensive or angry, recognize the filter and refocus.
- **Clarify** points where you disagree or seek to understand. Invite the other person into your thinking process. Ask the following questions:

- **Help me understand your thinking.**
- **Here's how I see it. Poke holes in my theory.**
- **What do we know for a fact?**
- **What would happen if we did X instead of Y?**
- **How will that impact Y?**
- **I'm having trouble understanding X. Help me think this through...**
- **What can we do to break this stalemate?**
- **What if we come at this from another direction?**

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➤ **Inquire** into the other person's thinking. Ask the following questions:

- Have you considered ...?
- How did you arrive at that conclusion?
- What shaped your thinking?
- What evidence do you have for X?
- What do you need from me in order to...?

The Bottom Line

When you think about the people you respect the most, I guarantee one quality that stands out from the others is their ability to make you feel important. How do they do this? By listening to you.



Effective leaders are powerful because of their ability to listen to their people and move them toward a common goal. They cease to be effective when they stop listening.

Consider the power, intelligence, and wisdom that come with listening to learn. And remember, the best conversationalists are the ones who say the least.