

Why great business leaders are great listeners

“The art of conversation lies in listening.” Malcolm Forbes.

How often do you ask yourself: ‘Am I a good listener?’, ‘Am I a great listener?’ To what extent are you a great listener? Yes, exactly, a *great* listener. This is what makes the whole conversation a success and helps to create a positive relationship with a person.

Some of us may think that listening is all about being quiet when the others are speaking, nodding encouragingly and answering back when necessary. When remaining passive in the conversation, we think we are showing respect to the other person, letting them feel significant. But this is actually not true. There is one crucial factor that matters a lot – a successful conversation is all about activity: ‘active listening and active speaking’. No one is passive, but both are equally contributing to reaching this incredibly important communicative balance of mutual value, respect and appreciation.

‘You have no idea what it meant to be listened to like that’

“One of the most sincere forms of respect is actually listening to what another person has to say,” says Bryant McGill.

A historical ‘great listener’ was Sigmund Freud (main image). His unique manner of listening is described in a Dale Carnegie book: “He had qualities which I had never seen in any other man. Never had I seen such concentrated attention. There was none of the piercing “soul penetrating gaze” business. His eyes were mild and genial. His voice was low and kind. His gestures were few. But the attention he gave me, his appreciation of what I said, even when I said it badly, was extraordinary. You have no idea what it meant to be listened to like that.”

Former Harvard president Charles W. Eliot was a master of the art of listening. He said that there is no mystery about successful business communication. What is very important is exclusive attention to the person who is speaking to you.

“Dr Eliot’s listening was not mere silence, but a form of activity. Sitting very erect on the end of his spine, making no movement, he faced his interlocutor and seemed to be hearing with his eyes as well as his ears. He listened with his mind and attentively considered what you had to say while you said it,” says McGill.

There is indeed no mystery or secret about a fruitful conversation, but merely a strong desire to focus on the other person, rather than on ourselves.

The deepest urge in humans

The desire to be great and the feeling of importance is what John Dewey, one of America's most profound philosophers, calls 'the deepest urge in human nature'. And this is undoubtedly true, as we are all eager to be appreciated.

When we listen to people with exclusive, undivided attention, we let them feel significant, valued and respected. We are building this invaluable atmosphere of trust and support with the person, and contributing to the mutually beneficial long-term relationships.

There is no doubt that listening with exclusive attention and the most significant focus is extremely important. But 'great listening' requires something more.

Jack Zenger and Joseph Folkman analysed the behaviour of 3,492 participants in a development program meant to help managers become better coaches. The primary goal of their research was to identify the main differences between great and average listeners and to determine what behaviours make outstanding listeners. As a result, they came up with fascinating findings.

First of all, great listening is much more than remaining silent and nodding from time to time, but entirely to the contrary. Good listening promotes profound discovery and insight by asking relevant questions and striving for additional information. Active participation ensures that the person is definitely listening and comprehends the topic. Moreover, some items might even challenge the speaker's assumptions, adding exceptional value to the conversation. It can be described as 'a two-way dialogue, rather than a one-way "speaker versus hearer" interaction.'

Listening can be a very intense activity

Interestingly, outstanding listening is all about building self-esteem by constant interaction. We are always eager to make a conversation a positive experience for the other person, to create an atmosphere of trust and support. We cannot do so remaining passive listeners. It may sound surprising, but listening can be a very intense activity with lots of interaction, as we are supporting the other person verbally and non-verbally, conveying confidence and self-esteem. We are doing our best to create that particular positive environment, where all the issues are discussed openly, and the other person is willing to be open.

Do you listen to understand or just to reply?

Great listening is not a competition, but cooperation. In positive interactions, both persons accept feedback smoothly. Even if they might challenge some assumptions and disagree, they are not willing to win an argument but are eager to help. To the contrary, some people are listening to debate. They are looking to reveal wrong reasoning or logic and preparing for a response. They are more interested in proving their point of view, rather than understanding the other person.

Above all, how often do you make your own suggestions while listening? And how often do you think your opinions will make no sense and after a while you continue sitting silently? It might happen to all of us from time to time. You might remember the feeling when you have come up with some fascinating suggestion, that would probably be a revelation to the speaker and a significant contribution to the topic. But you remain sitting quietly, with a fantastic idea in your head, but with intense fear to speak up.

As good listeners, we are making assumptions and are not afraid of saying something irrelevant. Because in the conversation we reveal what is more and what is less relevant for us. We can achieve this by listening, speaking and making assumptions.

Finally, a good listener is the one who focuses on nonverbal cues in the conversation, such as facial expressions, the tone of voice, gestures, posture, tactile stimulation such as touch, and body movements and other nonverbal signals.

It is significant that, according to the most recent studies on nonverbal communication, 93% of all daily contact is nonverbal. It was found that 7% of any message is conveyed through words, 38% through certain vocal elements, and 55% through nonverbal elements (facial expressions, gestures, posture and so on).

Nonverbal cues are crucial for successful communication, especially while being attentive and focused listeners - observers of the conversation.

Be a great leader, listen well

Why is active listening so critical for good leaders? We can understand the other person entirely only when we are listening. We can build a harmonious relationship only when we are attentive listeners. We can create an atmosphere of trust and support, let the other person feel significant, appreciated and respected only when we are giving them our exclusive attention, when we actively participate in the conversation, showing our particular interest in the topic.

By being active listeners, we will succeed in motivating people.

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