

## *When there is no leadership ...*

Nobody listens. Nobody pays attention.

People stop doing good work.

Teamwork disintegrates.

The workplace gets nasty.

People pick on each other.

Quality goes out the window.

Some employees quit and leave.

Some employees quit and stay.

Customers leave ... often in a hurry!

Business dries up.

(The rest – what little there is – is obvious.)

*So ...*

# Listen and Learn from others

**H**ave you ever been in a situation where someone in authority starts talking about the workplace, and you think “This person has no clue!” because his words bear no resemblance to reality?

Well, you’re not alone. All too often we forget one of the basics of leadership: **Listening**. Of all the leadership attributes, listening may be the most important. You can have all the other leadership skills, but if you don’t listen to people, it’s all for naught.

The leader who listens knows what’s going on around him or her because listening opens the doors to genuine communication. It demonstrates respect and caring for others.

But listening only gets you part way to better leadership. You must also **learn** from it and use that learning to guide your actions. It’s only through learning that we are able to change, grow, and prepare for the future.

Listening and learning help make a leader credible because they compel the leader to put people first. And that’s when really good things can happen.

The following pages provide ideas and techniques to help you be a better listener ... and a better learner.

**1.** Know the difference between hearing and listening. To hear means “to perceive by the ear.” To listen means “to pay attention.” There’s a big difference!

**2.** Get into the ACT of listening. Employ body language. Look at the person who is speaking. Make and keep eye contact. Position your body in a way that shows you are open and receptive to what the person is saying.

**3.** ADOPT THE 2/1 RULE: Listen twice as much as you talk. Why do you think we have two ears and one mouth?

**4.** Play the “concentration game”! Focus on what the speaker is saying. Try not to jump to conclusions before the speaker is finished talking. Pretend that you will be tested on what the speaker says. Make mental notes (or take written notes) on what is said.

*Every person I work with knows something better than me. My job is to listen long enough to find it and use it.*

– Jack Nichols

**5.** While listening, ask questions as a way of demonstrating interest as well as soliciting more information (e.g., “Can you tell me more about...?”). Or, use questions as summaries (e.g., “Let me see if I understand ... Is that correct?”).

**6.** Listen to what people are NOT saying. If someone isn’t talking to you, it may mean they don’t respect, support, or trust you. Or, it could mean they’re afraid to tell you something. If you notice this happening, find out what’s going on. Share your observations and concerns with the person. And, of course, really listen to what they tell you!

**7.** Learn to listen with your eyes as well as your ears. Watch how people react to what you say. If they look away, or seem distracted, it may mean they don't care to listen to you. Or if they seem fidgety or distracted when they speak to you, it could indicate that they don't really believe what they're saying.

**8.** Welcome ideas that are NOT your own. Be open to what others have to say without getting defensive. Make it okay for others to share their ideas – even if those ideas conflict with yours.



**9.** Likewise, be open to the truth. Ask others to tell you the facts, especially when things aren't going well.

**10.** PRACTICE THE “ALL-SIDES RULE”! Listen to all sides of an issue before making a final decision. The more you learn about a situation, the better prepared you'll be to act fairly and appropriately.

**11.** Make a habit of letting others speak first. The leader who presents his or her ideas first risks cutting off discussion or, worse yet, stifling good ideas.

**12.** ENCOURAGE PEOPLE TO DUMP ON YOU! Welcome people to share their issues and concerns. If you're not hearing about problems, it means you're out of touch and need to find out what's going on. Pronto!

**13.** Set the example for others. Show them that listening is a means to further learning. When they see you engaged in the listening process, they may emulate your behavior. Pretty soon you'll have an entire organization of listeners.

**14.** HAVE A WEEKLY “RIGHT/WRONG” DISCUSSION! Schedule time to discuss what went right and why, as well as what went wrong and why. When you lay things out on the table for discussion, you create an opportunity to learn from one another and do better the next time.

**15.** CREATE AN “E-GRAPEVINE”! Use your intranet or website as a place to collect and post ideas, opinions, and suggestions for improvement.

**16.** Remember that experience is often the best teacher. Get in the habit of inviting people to share their problem-solving experiences. Listen closely and you may find some ideas that you can put to use right away!

**17.** Be a dialogue master. Spirited discussions with frequent interruptions do have a place. But in general, we need to let people speak without interruption. As a leader, you may need to intervene to allow someone to finish their thoughts.

*A good listener is not only popular everywhere,  
but after a while he knows something.*

– Wilson Mizner

**18.** TAKE A LESSON FROM “THE ENEMY”! If your competition is doing something better than you, look at adopting it, or even improving on it. There’s also a lot to learn from what your competition does NOT do well.

**19.** Make time to learn from customers. Pick up the phone and call them. Ask them how they like your product or service. Listen for things they like as well as things they don’t like.

**20.** DON’T FORGET “THE ONES THAT GOT AWAY”! Sometimes you can learn more from those who declined to be your customers! Find out *why* they decided not to do business with your organization. Was it price? Features or benefits? Your people? Delivery?

**21.** Schedule “agenda-less” meetings. Invite people to come and just talk about whatever is on their minds. It shows that you care about them and that you value their opinions.

**22.** Get to know the people you work with. Ask questions about what’s going on in their lives, about their spouses, their kids, and their outside activities. Don’t worry about prying. If people don’t want to tell you something, they won’t.

**23.** Learn from front-line employees. Invite them to meet regularly to share what’s new with customers. After all, those who have the most contact with the customers are often the first to learn about changing tastes and what needs to be done to provide more effective service.



**24. LEARN FROM FAILURES!** That’s right, sometimes the idea is good, but the execution is poor. If people believe that failure is a learning opportunity rather than the cause of a “witch hunt,” they’ll be more encouraged to try the plan another way and see what happens.

**25.** File it! When someone on your team comes up with a good idea, document it and keep it in an “Ideas File.” Then you can implement the idea when the time is right. People feel good when they know their ideas are worth keeping ... and they’ll know you were really listening to them!

**26.** KEEP A “LEARNING LOG”! Write down interesting things that you learn from books, other people, the web, etc. Pretty soon you’ll have a whole journal full of good ideas.

**27.** Promote a “culture of learning” by sharing best practices. Help individuals and teams learn and grow so that they become wiser, more competitive, and better prepared for future challenges. For example, if an individual or team does something well or discovers a better way of doing things, ask them to share their ideas and success with others in the organization.

**28.** Listen to *yourself*. Listening to your “inner voice” is the key to reflection. And it is through reflection that we gain insight into ourselves and perspectives on the world around us. What are your deep feelings about what’s right and what’s wrong? When in doubt about what to do, sometimes the best thing you can do is “go with your gut!”



*I don't think much of a man who is not wiser today than he was yesterday.*

– Abraham Lincoln