What characteristics in your opinion define an outstanding listener?

If you ask a group of leaders, ‘What do you do to be a really good listener?’ most of them will say, ‘Well, just quit talking.’ That is sort of good advice, but when my fellow co-founder at Zenger Folkman, Jack Zenger, and I did an article on great listeners for the *Harvard Business Review* last year, we focused on whether sponges or trampolines are better listeners. Sponge listeners just sit back and absorb information, while trampolines bounce back. Our sense is that the best listeners are trampolines. They take the information you give them and they respond to it; they don’t just sit there and nod their heads and say, ‘Uh-huh.’ So be a little bit more like a trampoline than a sponge.

We have also found that really good listeners are excited to listen, and in doing so they build the self-esteem of the person they are listening to. You oftentimes find people who listen well enough to create an argument against you, and we see that in the news dialogue. But good listeners aren’t debaters. Good listeners are skilled at asking wonderful questions that can stop you in your tracks and get you to think completely differently about an issue by helping you uncover insights you hadn’t had before.

Why these characteristics?

We found compelling evidence to suggest that people who prefer to listen are actually rated significantly more positively as leaders than people who have a preference to talk. We examined 200,000 assessments of 20,000 leaders to understand what we called the differentiating competencies; that is, if a leader was really effective, what was it that stood out? We boiled it down to 16 competencies that seemed to be the best at differentiating great leaders from poor ones: developing others, building relationships, practicing self-development, communicating powerfully, having integrity and honesty, being innovative, practicing collaboration and teamwork, establishing stretch goals, inspiring and motivating, implementing a strategic perspective, having technical expertise, taking initiative, connecting to the outside world, driving for results, championing change, and analyzing issues and solving problems. And if you look across these competencies, the listeners get rated higher on every one. The data that we have
suggest that if you want to make a really good impression, if you want to be perceived as being competent and capable and as building positive relationships and communicating, you need to listen. People perceive people who listen much more positively.

3 Why is listening—truly listening—important at work?

We all get into these situations where problems occur and people come into your office and ask what they should do. We looked at leadership effectiveness and people who gave advice versus people who asked questions. We found a significant difference between the two because so often when people ask us for advice, in our willingness to help we don’t really understand the problem. The other thing is that people don’t necessarily listen to advice if they haven’t thought of it themselves. So if you can listen and if you can get people to talk about issues, you can help them discover solutions they will remember and be more committed to doing because they came up with the idea themselves. It’s not every conversation and it’s not all the time, but it’s more than you think.

4 How can managers create good environments in the office and in meetings to help their staffs listen?

People want to know that there is a safe environment and that it’s OK to speak up. Sometimes in a meeting, try asking the question, ‘What’s the issue that nobody is bringing up here?’ You can even have people write it on a piece of paper and give it to a neutral person and have him or her raise the issue. It will create that safe environment where people are willing to raise issues. You think as a senior leader that people are open and telling you all the bad news, but they’re not—you just get the tip of the iceberg.

The other thing that can help is to develop the habit of asking for feedback. People who ask for feedback are courageous and get enormous amounts of respect, and it’s incredibly predictive of leadership effectiveness. Most effective leaders ask for feedback. And again, that creates this two-way dialogue, this openness, this safe environment that allows for listening.

5 Do the rules change when clients are involved?

They shouldn’t, because I think our best sales efforts come about when we take time to listen to our clients’ concerns and learn what they need.

6 Any tips on how one can become a better listener?

When you have something to say, just get in the habit of waiting a minute. Ask good questions, because good listeners are participating in the conversation. They are not sitting back and just soaking it in. Ask for feedback because it changes the nature of the relationship and creates a more equal environment. Be curious. Good listeners are curious, but you need to be aware of what your face is doing. If you’re saying to people, ‘Help me understand this issue,’ but your face is conveying, ‘I hate this conversation and I’ve got to go do some work,’ that face is going to mess it up. And then the last thing is to trust that listening will help and will have a positive effect on collaboration and teamwork.

7 Finally, do you have any helpful advice for people who don’t listen?

Everybody talks about how we need good coaches and how coaching is a great thing to do, but what about if the coach is pushing back and making it difficult? That side of the conversation starts with humility. We all come to life feeling a bit inadequate, that we need to prove something, and that we don’t want to admit mistakes. What’s fascinating about it is the reality that everybody already knows your faults. If you think that there is some secret fault out there that other people don’t know, they do! The only person who is confused about this is you. What is really refreshing is for people to approach things in a humble way and acknowledge and be open to input from others. It boils down to what Carol Dweck, a psychology professor at Stanford University, refers to as a prove versus improve attitude, and the attitude of improving gets us so much more in life. If people have this improve attitude and are also listeners, they are sure to benefit. If you think about the times when you refused to listen, most of the time you were in that proving mode. You felt you had something to prove versus being open to improving. The people who are sitting there and saying, ‘I’m God’s gift to the world. People are lucky to have me!’ will find that life is going to be tough for them because they are going through life trying to prove that point, versus the person who goes in and says, ‘You know what? I could possibly do better.’

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