

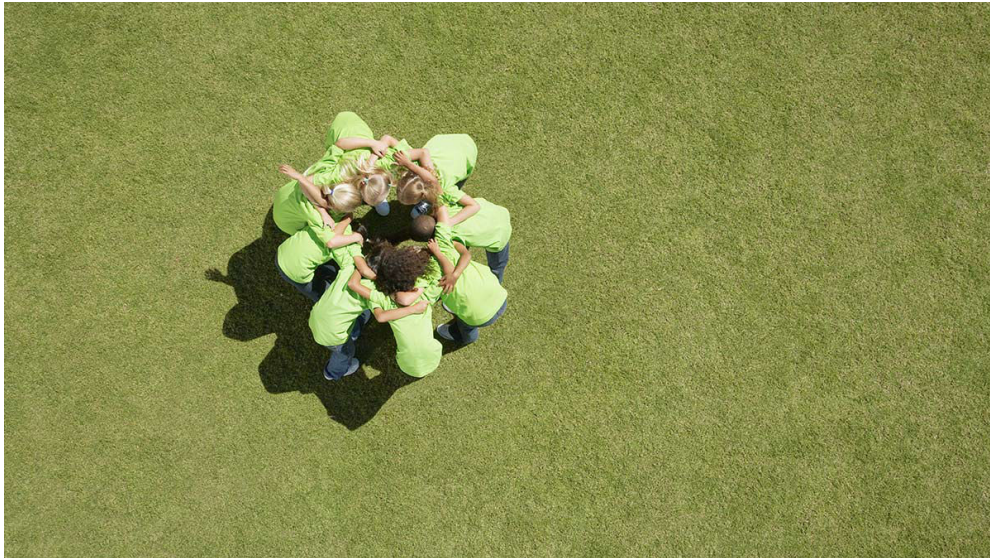


Digital Article / Listening Skills

4 Listening Skills Leaders Need to Master

Excellent listeners foster cultures in which employees feel heard, valued, and engaged. *by Debra Schiffrin*

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When people describe a good communicator at work, they're usually talking about a great presenter — not a great listener. In fact, few business school courses focus on building listening skills and most employee education and training sessions don't either.

That's a mistake.

Leaders who listen well create company cultures where people feel heard, valued, and engaged — and employees who experience high-quality listening report greater levels of job satisfaction and psychological safety. Listening is also ranked as the most important oral communication skill in the workplace, above conversing and presenting, respectively.

This is why listening is core to the curriculum I teach MBA students at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, as well as global business teams and military leaders. It's a trainable skill and a game-changer for anyone in a leadership position. If you're interested in becoming a better listener yourself, here are four techniques you can use to get started.

Technique #1: Listen Until the End

You're likely familiar with poor listening skills: planning what to say while the other person is still speaking, interrupting with a solution, or jumping in with a similar story ("That happened to me, too! In my case...").

These moments often occur when the listener is trying to find a way to connect. They can also be the result of social anxiety, when the listener feels nervous about how they'll contribute to the discussion and tries to think ahead.

The problem is that, when you speak too soon or turn the conversation back towards yourself, you diminish the quality of the exchange. For many people, it takes a minute to communicate the main point of their message. If you interrupt them or stop listening before they're done, you may miss their meaning entirely — making your response moot.

A better approach? Be wholly present.

How to Do It:

Pay attention to your behavior during conversations and try to notice when you turn inwards — when you start thinking about what you'll say next, get excited about sharing a solution, or reminisce about all the ways you can relate to the other person's story. In these instances, pause and remind yourself to "listen until the end."

Once the other person finishes, take a moment to think about what you've just heard before responding. The other person will likely appreciate a slower, more thoughtful response than an immediate and possibly irrelevant one.

How This Looks in Practice:

Let's say you're in a one-on-one meeting with your direct report. They tell you about their struggle meeting a deadline, and part way through the conversation, you're tempted to stop listening and start thinking of solutions. Using the "listen until the end" technique can help you counteract the pressure you feel to reply right away. It will force you to slow your mind down, relax, and be present. You may be surprised by all you're able to absorb this way.

By listening until the end, for instance, you might learn your direct report's struggle is linked to a disrespectful client and not an inability to prioritize their to-do list (which you might have assumed). Had you stopped listening in the middle, your input would have been irrelevant, and your employee's main issue would have remained unaddressed.

Technique #2: Listen to Summarize, Not to Solve

"Listening to the end" is a valuable skill, but it's not enough on its own. You also need to be aware of *how* you're listening. Namely: Are you listening to solve or to understand?

While it may be tempting to solve every problem that's brought to you — particularly for leaders trying to build trust with their teams — you'll get further if you first focus on understanding the problem at hand. That's when this second technique can be useful.

How to Use It:

As you practice being present, keep in mind that you don't need to remember every single word the other person says. Instead, focus on trying to understand the big picture. You will naturally absorb the most important details as the conversation progresses. When the other person has finished speaking, again, pause to reflect on what you've heard. At this point, a useful way to move the conversation forward is to gut check that you understand the speaker's meaning correctly. You can say, "What I heard you saying is..." then summarize or paraphrase their words. Follow up by asking, "Did I get that right?"

This shows the speaker that your intention is to get on the same page. It will also clarify the concern they're bringing to you and help build that foundation of trust you may be looking to establish. If your summarization is wrong, that's okay! To gain more information, you can just say, "Please tell me more," or "Tell me what I'm missing."

How This Looks in Practice:

Sticking with our original example, your direct report shares they're having trouble meeting a deadline because their client continuously gives them contradicting feedback. Every time your direct report makes the requested adjustment, the client seems even more unhappy, and the deadline is approaching.

You could paraphrase, "It sounds like you're not getting clear feedback from the client and are having some anxiety about delivering a final product to them by the deadline. Did I get that right?" If your direct report says, "yes," you can then ask, "Let's talk about some ways to

approach them to get on the same page.” This shows your employee that you understand their concerns and helps further build a foundation of trust and support.

Technique #3: Listen for Both the Relationship and the Content

If you’ve got a hang of the first two techniques, you’re ready to dive a little deeper into what it takes to become a great listener. A part of mastering listening as a skill is understanding that most conversations have two dimensions:

- **The Relationship:** your connection with the other person
- **The Content:** the information or problem they’re communicating

When it comes to the relationship dimension, being fully present or “listening until the end” (technique #1) is key. It fosters connection and helps people feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns with you.

When it comes to the content dimension, “listening to summarize” (technique #2) is key. This part of the conversation is often more transactional in nature. It involves quickly absorbing information, demonstrating that you understand the issue, and working with the other person to figure out what to do next.

Great listeners are aware of both dimensions and can adjust their focus depending on the needs of the person they’re speaking with.

How to Use It:

When you’re listening, pay attention to what extent you’re focusing on the relationship versus the content. Many people have a habit of leaning into one dimension and excluding the other. But focusing only on “content” may shut down the other person, especially if they feel like you care about their work more than their well-being. On the other end,

focusing only on the “relationship” may lead to conversations that circle around any real solutions. It’s important to balance them both.

If you find yourself leaning too far in one direction, make a note, and adjust the balance.

How This Looks in Practice:

Back to our example, your direct report is having trouble with a demanding client. Listening for the relationship will allow you to build trust and show your employee you care about understanding their issue. Listening for the content will enable you to clearly hear the challenge so you can make informed suggestions for next steps.

But let’s say you begin the conversation by leaning too much into the former. You hear your direct report’s concerns and respond with empathy to show them that you value and care about them. After a few moments, however, you begin over-indexing. You realize that your goal of creating a stronger connection (which is a good thing) has led you to linger too long in “relationship mode,” and is keeping you from acting as a strong thought-partner in brainstorming solutions. You put yourself in their shoes but you’re now trying to walk *for* them. You can course-correct by shifting your focus to the content — asking the tough questions, talking through options, and ideating next steps.

Technique #4: Listen for Values

This last technique is perhaps the most difficult, but it will be easier to learn once you’ve gotten a handle on the foundational steps above. It’s all about building your intuition and perception skills when listening to better understand what the other person values. Whether they’re ranting about something small or sharing something emotional or complex, it’s an opportunity for you to learn more about what’s important to them.

Understanding how people's values manifest and impact their behavior at work is a leadership superpower. This is because our values often influence what situations we perceive as challenging and how we respond to them. If you have insight into what situations, tasks, or projects might trigger your direct reports and why, you can use this knowledge to help them solve problems and set them up for success.

In the workplace, common values might include honesty, achievement, sense of belonging, responsibility, respect, stability, or loyalty.

How to Use It:

When a direct report approaches you with a challenge, practice paying attention to what they're saying below the surface. Perhaps they're concerned about being left off an email chain, which they suspect is deliberate. Or maybe they're upset about the printer, which is always broken. Ask yourself: "What story is my direct report telling themselves? How do their values impact their perception of the situation? What else might be triggering them?"

In the first scenario, your employee may value a "sense of belonging" and being left off the email chain makes them feel like an outsider. In the second, your employee may value efficiency, and the broken printer is constantly disrupting their workflow. This might diminish their trust in the efficiency of the entire enterprise.

Remember that, while values evoke strong emotions, people don't always recognize when they're triggering their behavior. If you can tap into your team's varying values and see what is being honored or not honored, you can make more informed decisions about how to mentor and guide them. You may not be able to solve every issue in the moment, but acknowledging their values is a supportive response that can help create an engaging environment.

As a caveat, bear in mind that not all problems or challenges lend themselves to listening for values. For instance, perhaps the broken printer is just an annoying technical problem. This is why it's important not to make assumptions. Have your antenna up, but don't deduce before talking it out with your direct report.

How This Looks in Practice:

Returning once again to our example, thus far, implementing good listening skills has enabled you to help your direct report with the challenge of working with a difficult client. You have "listened to the end" to understand their issue and make them feel heard. You have summarized the problem for them and checked in to make sure you're on the same page. You even figured out when to shift from the relationship to the content.

Now is the moment to contemplate the values you heard during your conversation. Beyond the surface-level issue of the approaching deadline, what about this client interaction is triggering your employee emotionally? How is it destabilizing them or making it difficult for them to productively move forward?

For instance, you might check in with them by saying, "I hear that you value respect and stability in your interactions with clients, as well as achieving excellence in your work. Is that right?" By naming and honoring your employee's values, you've attempted to give them a new sense clarity. You've also reaffirmed the excellence of their work, irrespective of this single client. If you're incorrect, or they have different values, you've opened the conversation up for them to share.

Finally, remember that you can use the knowledge you gained through this interaction in the future — when considering which assignments will most fulfill this employee and when anticipating their potential challenges.

Mastering the art of listening is not just a strategy — it's a transformative leadership force that elevates interactions into meaningful moments of growth and connection. Every conversation is an opportunity to practice listening effectively and to deepen your understanding of your team. Prioritizing listening skills using these powerful techniques will strengthen your communication toolkit while increasing your team's engagement and productivity. Listen better to lead better.

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