

# ACTIVE LISTENING

Having the humility to really pay attention is the first step

By Jay Perry

Once, during the question-and-answer period at a speech I was giving, I was asked by an audience member what was the one thing great leaders had in common. My answer was humility.

There are many different styles of leadership that are effective. Part of what I do is help my clients identify which one will work best for them and their organization. However, if they do not exercise humility, they will not be able to practice the most powerful leadership technique I know, that of listening.

other situations as well, but active listening, really absorbing the information, is crucial for leaders.

The second thing that gets in our way when it comes to active listening is that humans have been conditioned to rapidly come up with the right answers. Think back to your formative years and the times you would receive recognition and be rewarded. It was often when you came up with the right answer, and came up with it as fast as possible. The rewards for active listening aren't as tangible.

## ACTIVE LISTENING IS BRINGING ALL YOUR FOCUS TO BEAR ON THE PERSON SPEAKING TO YOU.

That may sound easy, but it takes humility to practice listening at what is sometimes referred to as the active listening level. Active listening is bringing all your focus to bear on the person speaking to you, to the point of being able to repeat or rephrase back to that individual what they just said to you.

Being able to do this is important. To be totally effective while listening, you have to pick up on every nuance of the thought the speaker is expressing.

One of the challenges in practicing active listening is that of the human mind. Our minds can think at an average speed of about 400 words per minute. To put this in perspective, the average person speaks at about 120 words per minute. Do you see where the potential problem lies?

Of course you do! The mind of the listener will wander, as it's going faster than the message it's receiving. From an evolutionary perspective this was a survival mechanism, helping us take in and process as much information as possible so we could see where potential danger was lurking. Today, however, it gets in our way when we're trying to be efficient and effective leaders. It gets in our way in

What I commonly observe is listeners start thinking about what they are going to say to the speaker once it is their turn to talk. When their minds are busy, coming up with alternate lines of thought or solutions that they know this individual should take, they actually stop listening to the content and probably lose very important aspects of the conversation.

Active listening helps you resolve that problem by forcing you into intensely focusing on and considering all of the words of the person who is speaking, and preparing to repeat or rephrase their own thought back to them. I do it like this, "If I understand you correctly, you mean ...". This works for me and it helps the person to whom I am listening to relax and feel acknowledged. It's one way to help keep you the one who's driving.



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