

Listen, learn, and lead, or get out of the way

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If you're a so-called leader and you're not listening and learning, you're probably not effective. If you're doing all of the talking most of the time, you'll eventually become out of touch with reality and real problems, leading to solutions that don't work. If this is the case, you better adjust your talking lever soon or your leadership career will be floating down Niagara River in a wooden barrel, moments away from that fateful plunge.

A major discipline by most successful leaders is the ability to balance talking with listening. Listening is an effective tactic in gaining knowledge and wisdom instrumental in formulating the proper guidance for people and organizations. And when you're talking, you're not listening.

Maybe things are going well right now in your leadership performance because you're telling everyone exactly what to do, justifying why you should be the one talking and they be the ones listening. But soon this pattern of communication will begin to hinder your judgment, evaporate your expertise, and weaken your performance. Eventually your constant talking won't contain solutions to problems. In fact, you may no longer know what the real problems are because in the midst of your spoken voice is the silence from the brains of people who have learned much from the proverbial place known as “where the rubber meets the road.” Your lack of learning and listening about that place will cause your knowledge and wisdom

on matters associated with it to become obsolete or invalid.

To prevent this from happening to you, I suggest you follow some advice from Meg Whitman, founder of eBay. She said, “Listen. Listen. Listen. You will learn what people think the problem is, and maybe you'll learn what the solution is.”

Some people have no idea they're bad listeners. I once told a bad leader that he should listen more often to other people. He said he didn't “see it” that way. Apparently his eyes were as bad as his ears.

To determine how well you listen, answer the following questions from global leadership expert Sheila Murray Bethel:

- 1) Do you like to listen to other people talk?
- 2) Do you encourage others to talk?
- 3) Do you listen even if you do not like the person who is talking?
- 4) Do you listen equally well whether the person is a man or woman, young or old?
- 5) Do you listen equally well to a friend, acquaintance, or stranger?
- 6) Do you put what you have been doing out of sight and out of mind?
- 7) Do you look at the person talking to you?
- 8) Do you ignore distractions around you?
- 9) Do you smile, nod your head, and otherwise encourage the person to talk?
- 10) Do you think about what the person is saying?
- 11) Do you try to understand what the person means?

12) Do you try to understand why he is saying it?

13) Do you let the person finish what he is saying?

14) If he hesitates, do you encourage him to go on?

15) Do you restate what he has said and ask him if you got it right?

16) Do you withhold judgment about his ideas until he has finished?

17) Do you listen regardless of the person's manner of speaking and choice of words?

18) Do you listen even though you anticipate what the person is going to say?

19) Would your followers describe you as a good listener?

When you have examined these questions, have someone you trust also answer them about your listening habits. Compare their answers to yours. If their answers are different from yours, lean toward their answers as being the more accurate assessment. If you and they answered “no” to some (or many) of the questions, then it's time to change your attitude and behavior about listening.

You can listen well if you focus every ounce of your attention when listening to someone. Make them feel like they're the most important person in the world. Create a space around them that others back away from and won't breach. Assume they may know something you don't.

Listen, learn, and lead, or do everyone a favor and get out of the way.

~ The End ~