

'An inspirational work. The Listening Leader bristles with insight, common sense and practical tools for everyday use.'

PAUL RAMSHAW, CO-FOUNDER AND CEO, SENSATION.IO



THE LISTENING LEADER

How to drive performance by using
communicative leadership

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WITH CLEMENTINA GALLI ZUGARO

FT PUBLISHING
FINANCIAL TIMES

Praise for *The Listening Leader*

'If everything seems to be going too fast, if it's all too hard, then grab this book, go off to a quiet corner, read some and you'll feel calmer. It reconnects the decent ones among us to things we always knew, but here is the hugely powerful evidence that we've been right, and the clear ways we can do it even better. Let's hope the bad guys don't get anywhere near a copy.'

**Anne Scoular, faculty member,
former diplomat and international banker, psychologist
and writer, co-founder, Meyler Campbell**

'It might be an inconvenient truth for some: successful leaders have to be more than great managers. Communicative leadership, as shown in this excellent book, leads you there.'

**Joachim Faber, Chairman, Deutsche Börse AG
(German Stock Exchange)**

'An excellent book offering a powerful and courageous new leadership approach – highly recommend for any CEO who wants to make a difference.'

**Klaus Rosenfeld, Chief Executive Officer,
Schaeffler Group**

'This book makes you never forget the most important learning about long-term business success: trust building starts with listening.'

**Professor Dr.-Ing. Axel Stepken,
CEO and Chairman of the Board
of Management, TÜV SÜD AG**

'The Listening Leader takes you on a journey into the future world of communication in management. In a style that makes for enjoyable reading, it provides an overview of the preconditions for successful "communicative leadership": information, communication, enabling, empowerment, action. Each aspect is explored using real-life examples from the rich wealth of experience of a true professional in corporate communications.'

**Mario Ghiai, spokesperson, corporate governance,
Allianz Deutschland AG**

management action, makes it more sustainable, grounded on more solid pillars, a stool with an additional foot.

Second, to become aware of the importance of listening for the greater good of the company and of society with *accepted* market mechanisms. This may grant the company the license to operate – and therefore thrive.

The most important thing about listening is another, however: Good listening is a wonderful experience. If you are even only minimally interested in people, good listening will open doors, will establish trust, it will expand your knowledge and your feelings and can lead to pure bliss. But while this truly matters for our lives, it would be an unlikely reason for your boss to be happy hearing that you read this book. Unless your boss already is a Listening Leader.

Richard Sennett explains that good listening skills are about ‘closely attending to and interpreting what others say, before responding, making sense of their gestures and silences as well as declarations.’⁴ I like this definition – it’s as good as it can get in one sentence.

The different dimensions of listening

We have many ways to express our thoughts and emotions, from speaking to grunting to rolling our eyes to angrily waving our arms to shouting to ... being quiet. And if all these efforts aren’t to be in vain, we better swap position and rather than just sending these signals, we should start learning to read them. Learn to listen. The first thing you need to know about good listening is summed up wonderfully by Anne Scoular, the Southern Star of Business Coaching (she’s from New Zealand, after all). Answering the question ‘How do you listen better?’ she answers: ‘Step 1: stop talking!’⁵

Quiet, or the sounds of silence

When I was a young reporter, one of my mentors, a great journalist and an even better novel writer as well as a man of broad knowledge and deep wisdom, Franco Mimmi, taught me a powerful trick.



I had told him how scared I was to interview experienced statesmen, mature central bank governors, long-standing CEOs while I had barely started to shave every second day. He told me the story of the Greek philosopher Zeno, who said: 'The reason we have two ears and only one mouth is that we may hear more and speak less.' As practical advice for interviewing the alpha-wolves in politics and business he said: 'Use silence. Let them talk. Dare to pause. Don't be scared of the void. They will tell you everything.' He was so right.

What was only a *ruse* to get my journalistic story later turned out to be a powerful means to truly learn from the other. To allow for a true sharing of knowledge, of emotions, of experience. The tool remains the same. The purpose is different from the journalistic one, slightly on the verge of being a trap for the speaker. Instead of simply becoming a trap, the higher value of silence is to lead to the contrary, to building trust. So practise it. As short as your tongue may be, you will technically be able to bite bits off the tip enough times to learn the lesson. Quiet will not let you down. Or, as Nancy Kline puts it: 'Consider how long you think you could bear to be quiet and let someone think out loud. With only the occasional benign murmuring and nod and smile of understanding from you and the occasional question requesting even more thoughts, a person in your presence might just turn into a genius – at least, for that moment.'⁶

Do not interrupt

Chatty cultures such as the Italian allow for frequent interruptions in conversations. When Irish men sit in a pub the different layers of a conversation are like a complex cobweb that everybody weaves, still able to follow somewhat of a red thread. As the poet and good friend James McCabe, an Irishman living in Germany, once acutely observed about Germans in a pub: 'They may be drunk like pirates after a bounty but they will wait until Otto has finished to lull his sentence before Franz burps out his wisdom. Everybody will listen to Franz before Fritz will share his fundamental views on that questionable penalty in the last football derby.' This is something peculiar about the German language where the verb comes last in – sometimes enormously long – sentences. So, if you want to

know whether the protagonist of a story told in German has died or survived you literally have to wait until the last word of the story. This is how I, an extroverted Italian boy moved to Germany, learned to listen. It suddenly convinced me that not interrupting wasn't such a bad thing in other languages, too. Interrupting is rude, of course, but it mainly is stupid. Because only a conversation where everybody has the opportunity to fully vent their thoughts with no interruption is a respectful conversation. Respect allows for the unthinkable to be expressed, without fear of derision. It will allow that one single contribution to emerge that will change the whole game in your business.

Proper feedback

If you want to know what feedback is useful for, play a round of Chinese Whispers with your team. The rules of the game are simple. You are only allowed to repeat to the neighbour on your right what you heard from the neighbour on your left. You have only one chance to say what you heard. No discussion is allowed. You start by whispering a couple of words into the ear of the first team member and this goes on until the words have reached the last team member who is then allowed to loudly repeat the words. I play this regularly with my students and the results are appalling. You start with the gentle words 'nice lady' and you end up with the serial killer's confession 'sliced baby'. How come? Because the rules of the game cut out the feedback, that wonderful mechanism by which we check that we have heard what was said.

Feedback is not forced upon anyone if it is to be effective. It may be offered but it has to be wilfully and consciously wanted by the recipient. If someone is not interested in your feedback you may as well keep it to yourself. And if you want to grow, ask for feedback.

Feedback has to be specific and focused on a behaviour, an event, or on something that has been said. It is not a judgement of a person, rather it is a reaction to a singular thing.

If you want this feedback to be heard, it's advisable to keep the ratio of positive and negative feedback to three positives for each negative.⁷

What is a bad listener?

Danuta is an incredibly intelligent equity partner at a management consultancy in Poland. While she successfully managed one key client, she couldn't figure out why she wasn't able to win new business with new clients, despite having a compelling corporate proposal. I was also perplexed. Danuta had been very engaging in our delightful first meeting. She had told me about her interesting life and career and what she wanted to achieve. However, once we started our coaching, it became clear that Danuta didn't listen. She was talking *at* potential new clients, telling them all about herself and her company but it was all one-way traffic. She didn't ask these potential clients about themselves and their business, their challenges, desires and needs. She was too busy talking to listen, find out and then think how she could help. Once she'd finished talking to me, I started to ask her a question and she interrupted halfway through, assuming she knew what I was going to say. She didn't. And she was too busy talking over me – answering a question I hadn't asked – to notice. So once she'd finished speaking, I tried again. And it happened again. I began to understand how her potential clients must have felt. And as her coach, I could give her honest feedback of how I was experiencing her and how others might be too. This wasn't the way to build rapport, trust and great professional relationships. Listening is.

The 'active listening' trap

Beware of cheap shortcuts. There are a lot of good pieces of advice you can find on listening: nod frequently; sum up what the other person said, paraphrasing it, showing that you listened and understood; show interest with your full body – don't lean back, don't put your feet on the table (yes, I read that advice and it was not in a survival guide for jail or a manual for opium caves). They sometimes come under 'active listening'. Nothing wrong with it except for the bitter taste in my mouth that they are 'tricks' to *pretend* to listen. From good coaching practice we know, for example, that paraphrasing is not necessarily the best thing to do: if someone uses one specific word, she means that word and

not a synonym. Paraphrasing then only shows that you can find other words for a term. A good skill, but not evidence for good listening. Just imagine talking to your boss and he practises *all* of those 'active listening' tricks. Wouldn't you probably notice and find this to be highly annoying because it feels instrumental, mechanical, schemed, not sincere?

As always, there are no absolutes.

If there is really no listening culture or if Mr Talkative suddenly applies one of these techniques, it might turn into a useful exercise, as artificially as it may have been performed.

The listening monster

I once almost craved to disappear into the carpet of a boardroom by a sense of shame never experienced before. It was after a tough preparatory session with Tony, an enormously assertive manager with a consultant background. Great in most disciplines, but definitely not in listening. Now he had been promoted to a top position and he needed to lead a very senior team whose support he depended upon. We discussed the importance of listening and he made pages of notes, asked many questions and seemed to have grasped the gist of why listening would help him grow in the organisation. The next day he had his first meeting with the top team. Igor was asked to inform everyone on the latest developments in an important market. The operations were loss making and the grapevine had already given up on Igor, thinking him likely to be fired, in spite of being the big CEO's darling. Igor starts to give his update. And Tony suddenly, and, at least to my observation, abruptly turns his chair towards Igor, throws his right elbow onto his knee and leans his head on his fist intensely looking Igor in the eyes. He seems to inhale every word Igor spells out, he nods vigorously, smiles profusely at Igor and the more he applies the lessons of the previous day the more I sweat blood. I'm really embarrassed. Tony's posture is so ridiculously exaggerated and artificial that not only Igor, the whole team simply must feel that Tony is only pretending to listen, an attitude even worse than distracted dozing. I knew I was responsible. I was Dr Frankenstein



and I had created this Listening Monster, this Fake Listening Robot. It would turn into a disaster. I wanted to melt into oblivion. At some point the good Lord had mercy on all of us and the meeting ended. I tried to sneak out of the room when Igor came to me and asked if he could have a word. I knew my days were numbered. He would figure out that I was the cause of such a fake freak show and would bite my head off. But Igor beamed. 'Have you seen? Can you believe this? For the first time in my life I have seen Tony really listening!' What had happened was clear, at this point: Igor hadn't noticed the exaggeration, he simply experienced for the first time not being interrupted by Tony, not being corrected and flooded with the consultant jargon Tony normally used showing off his superior intelligence. It was such a novelty that Igor didn't perceive the clumsiness of the listening exercise. And no one else had, either. It did the trick.

Reading the speaker

Body language is an art in itself. There are entire books, some of them with very funny illustrations and photos, on body language. The funniest are the Italian ones. Few people know that less than 10 per cent of the people of the freshly united Kingdom of Italy in 1860 spoke Italian. Before 1860 there was no Italy as there were no Italians speaking one language. The people spoke Neapolitan, Venetian, Piedmontese, Sardinian, Sicilian and so on. And they could barely understand each other. To this day I wouldn't be able to understand one single sentence in Sardinian. On top of it, my home country had been a patchwork of city states, regions, dukedoms and kingdoms which had been governed by Arabs, Spaniards, Germans, Austrians and French rulers before becoming a nation-state. This explains why we Italians speak with our hands. It's to bridge the language gap with the authority, represented by foreign rulers. Or with our fellow countrymen speaking remote dialects and languages.

This early training in body language has made me aware of the many shades of non-verbal expression.