

# COACH *Notes*



**W**ith organizations and individuals so fervently focused on the bottom line, it's easy to ignore "softer" goals, such as listening well. All that touchy-feeling stuff is a waste of my time, you might say or think.

On the contrary! A focus on listening can lead to more effective teamwork, higher productivity, fewer conflicts and errors, enhanced innovation and problem-solving, improved recruiting and retention, superior customer relations and more. As authors on leadership development have noted through the years, listening is not just a nice thing to do, it's essential!

"Make the human element as important as the financial or the technical element," wrote Stephen Covey in his seminal book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. "You save tremendous amounts of time, energy and money when you tap into the human resources of a business at every level. When you listen, you learn."

As long ago as 1966, Peter Drucker, author of *The Effective Executive* and numerous other books emphasized the importance of listening to both self and others as an essential step in bringing to light everyone's role as contributors to the organization's overall success.

Likewise, studies in Emotional Intelligence (EI) over the past couple of decades have found that leaders actually "infect" the workplace (for better or for worse) with their attitudes and energy. To understand and influence these flows of emotions and motivational states, leaders need to be able to practice empathic listening skills.

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In their book *Primal Leadership*, authors Daniel Goleman, Richard E. Boyatzis and Annie McKee, describe how varying leadership styles rely on listening skills for their effectiveness.

**Visionary leaders** listen to values held by individuals within the group, enabling them to explain their own goals for the organization in a way that wins support.

**Coaching leaders** listen one-on-one to employees, establish rapport and trust, and help employees help themselves in matters of performance and information gathering.

**Affiliative leaders** listen for employees' emotional needs and strive to honor and accommodate those needs in the workplace.

**Democratic leaders** elicit ideas and participation by listening to everyone's opinions and information.

In *Seven Habits*, Covey cites numerous examples of successful business deals and resolved workplace issues in pointing out the importance—and power—of empathic listening versus mechanical, or perfunctory, listening. He also acknowledges that it takes time and practice to become adept at listening empathically. Here are some tips for sharpening your listening skills.

**Develop your curiosity.** This helps with Covey's suggestion: Seek first to understand. Genuine curiosity is felt by others and helps to open up their speech and your listening.

**Pay attention to your listening.** Replay conversations you've had and assess whether you listened well.

**Seek feedback.** Ask co-workers, employees, bosses, clients/customers and suppliers to assess your listening skills.

**Work with a coach.** Coaches can help you discover ways to listen better not only to those you work with, but also to yourself.

Listening better will reward you with an entirely new level of communication and problem-solving skills, for empathic listening requires the ability to see multiple points of view in any given situation.

## Top 10 Powerful Questions to Ask

The poet e.e. cummings wrote: "Always the beautiful answer, who asks a more beautiful question." Indeed, solid strategic plans, strong work relationships, high morale and improved performance are all byproducts of good questions. This potent communication tool can help you discover important information about your work, yourself, your associates, your customers—and create insights that otherwise might have remained hidden.

Asking questions without leading, prompting or interrupting shows that you're really listening. It encourages us to suspend assumptions, which helps prevent miscommunication, unrealistic expectations, stress, damaged relationships and unfulfilled responsibilities. Below are just a few questions that can have powerful effects on your work and life. Just be sure to LISTEN to the answers.

1. What is it that you'd like to see accomplished and how do you see it happening?
2. What are your thoughts? Concerns?
3. What self-limiting fears, thoughts or actions do I want to leave behind?
4. What's the most important priority to you with this and why?
5. What would you like to see improved?
6. Can you help me understand that a little better?
7. What's in the way of improved performance? How can I change that?
8. If I could change one thing in my life/business that would have the greatest impact, what would it be?
9. What prevents me from being able to place more focus on this?
10. Are my actions today compatible with what I wish to leave behind as a legacy?