

Hear Ye, Hear Ye

Active listening—the ability to listen to understand, rather than simply to hear—is a crucial skill for leadership, management, and sales. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**



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Q With the economy slowly improving, my organization finally has reignited our development initiatives. However, since our current budget pales compared to the pre-recession years, I have been asked to focus our training efforts on leadership, management, and sales. I'd like to consolidate as much as possible to realize economies of scale. I can see some intersection between leadership and management, but I am having trouble identifying common threads with sales. What are some best practices that apply to all three?

A: Given the current business environment, many of our clients are grappling with similar challenges and are turning to their training partners for answers. Certainly, an ability to understand and relate to the other people involved in a particular situation—whether they are fellow leaders, direct reports, or customers—is essential for professional success at all levels and in all functional areas.

Perhaps one of the most fundamental skills one must master in any of the professional capacities you mention is that of active listening. This requires that one listen to understand, rather than simply to hear. It sounds easier than it is, especially when we are faced with an opinion that, at best, is less informed than our own or, at worst, seems on its face to be wrong. Instead, we might default to interrupting, correcting them, or simply neglecting to provide opportunities for others to fully express their opinions.

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In those situations (when we are sure we are “right” or “know more”), the question that begs to be asked is, “Why would it be so important to solicit inferior information?”

And here lies the rub.

First, you might obtain additional information. Even if the other person's analysis is subpar, the data that drives their decision might be informative and useful. Accordingly, the advice would be to ask questions that get at the heart of their analysis and that uncover the information they have used.

Second, you undoubtedly build relationship capital with your counterpart. Everybody—including direct reports, colleagues, and customers—seeks to be heard and understood. By providing

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Last, and most important, you just might find that, even though you are confident in the veracity of your original opinion, you're actually wrong. Or you might find there is at least one other equally plausible analysis of the situation, and you are both right. It's the ability to suspend your confidence in your own conclusions and consider a competing view that distinguishes the great leaders, managers, and salespeople from the average ones.

Now, if you want to take your professionals to an even higher level of performance, a more advanced skill that applies to all three roles would be an ability to consider the other side's goals and opinions...without having to involve the other side (e.g., through active listening).

At my firm, Consensus, we refer to this as telling their story. It involves describing the situation from the other side's perspective, in which they are the central character and protagonist, and are ascribed positive attribution (and, conversely, *you* might be cast in a negative light). It requires the ability to suspend one's own biases and ego—something that is particularly challenging when we have more experience, “superior” information, and good reason to think we are right and/or the other side is wrong.

But, hey, if it were easy, everyone would be doing it, right? Since that isn't the case, skills such as these can be incorporated into New Year's resolutions, as well as within our organizations' core competencies. **T**