

Power Listening: 4 Steps to Conversation Success

I only wish I could find an institute that teaches people how to listen. Business people need to listen at least as much as they need to talk. Too many people fail to realize that real communication goes in both directions. ~ Lee Iacocca

Listening may be the most important, yet least developed, skill for personal and professional success, especially in today's fast-paced business climate.

Good listening skills can help you:

- Secure a promotion or great assignment
- Facilitate the right alliances
- Foster sales and team alignment
- Create healthy personal relationships
- Find out what you don't know
- Make the right decisions
- Develop innovative ideas

Many people take listening skills for granted, focusing instead on how to articulate their own views more effectively. This approach is misguided.

Power listening—the art of probing and challenging the information garnered from others to improve its quality and quantity—is the key to building a knowledge base that generates fresh insights.

Unfortunately, business schools fail to teach power listening. Of the nearly 300 communications courses the American Management Association offers, only two deal directly with listening skills. Professionals must nonetheless write and speak more persuasively, so it's essential to improve one's listening capabilities.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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In *Power Listening: Mastering the Most Critical Business Skill of All* (Portfolio Hardcover, 2012), Bernard T. Ferrari suggests four steps that form a good listening foundation:

1. **Show respect.** Our conversation partners often have the know-how to develop effective solutions. Part of being a good listener is helping them pinpoint critical information and see it in a new light. To harness the power of these ideas, you must fight the urge to “help” by providing immediate solutions. Learn to respect your partner’s ability to identify them.

Being respectful doesn’t mean avoiding tough questions. Good listeners routinely ask key questions to uncover the information needed to make better decisions. The goal of power listening is to ensure the free and open flow of information and ideas.

2. **Keep quiet.** Get out of the way of your conversations so you can hear what’s important. Don’t hog the spotlight, try to prove your own smarts or emphasize how much you care. Speak only to underscore your conversation partner’s points. Your partner should speak 80 percent of the time, with you filling the remaining 20 percent. Make your speaking time count by spending most of it asking questions, rather than having your say.

This may be easier said than done, as most of us are naturally inclined to speak our minds. Still, you can’t really listen if you’re too busy talking. We’ve all spent time with lousy listeners who treat conversations as opportunities to broadcast their status or ideas. They spend more time formulating their next response than listening to the conversation.

3. **Challenge assumptions.** Too many high-caliber professionals inadvertently act like know-it-alls, remaining closed to anything that undermines their beliefs. Good listeners seek to understand—and challenge—the assumptions that lie below the surface of every conversation. Holding onto these assumptions is the biggest roadblock to power listening.

It’s admittedly hard to scrutinize preconceived notions and shake up our thinking. We must be willing to reevaluate what we know and welcome what we don’t (or can’t) know.

Shift your mind-set to embrace ambiguity and uncover what each conversation partner needs from the interaction.

4. **Maintain focus.** Power listening requires you to help your conversation partner isolate the problem, issue or decision at hand. Discard extraneous details or emotions that interfere with homing in on what truly matters.

Create a focused, productive conversation by reducing external and internal background noise. Ask questions that highlight key issues and minimize the urge to stray from them.

Decouple Emotions and Intellect

Recognize that all conversations have intellectual and emotional components. It’s important to “decouple” the two, according to Ferrari, as several emotions are guaranteed to hinder communication:

1. Impatience
2. Resentment and envy
3. Fear and feeling threatened
4. Fatigue and frustration
5. Positive emotions and overexcitement

As with anger and fear, excitement can also distract you from asking the right questions and challenging underlying assumptions.

“The most exciting part is that, once you get good at listening, you will be able to do it easily, almost effortlessly, without even thinking about it,” Ferrari writes.

Practice his four power-listening steps to become the kind of listener others seek as a conversation partner. You’ll build valuable relationships, become more informed, make better decisions and come up with new innovative ideas.

