

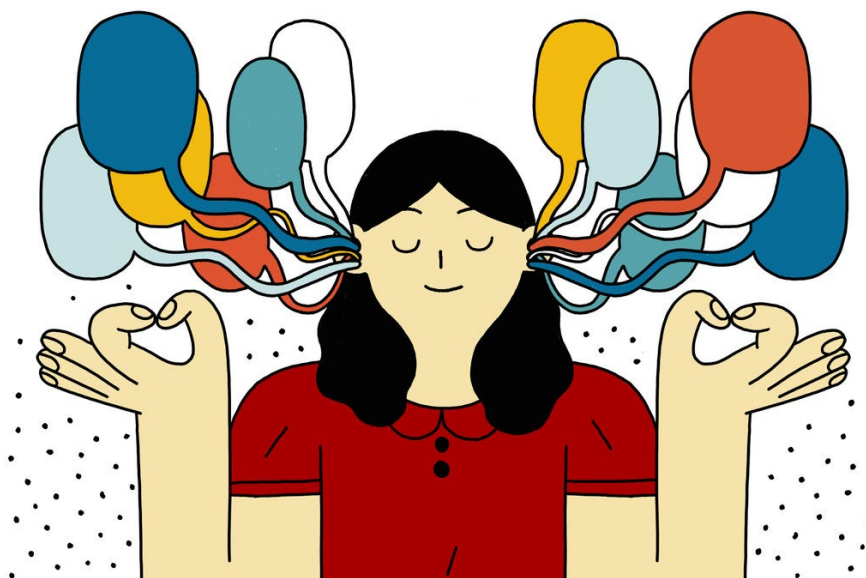


# How to Be a Better Listener

By Adam Bryant

Listening can feel at times like a lost art, maybe because we are communicating so much more electronically. That's too bad, because being a good listener can help you in every aspect of your life – with family and friends, and with your colleagues at work. Want to up your listening game? Here are some tips I've learned from conducting hundreds of interviews over a 30-year career in journalism.

## Be Fully Present



### Dos

- Clear your mind
- Turn off your phone (or put it away)
- Turn away from monitors
- React in the moment

### Don'ts

- Check email
- Plan your answers in advance
- Multitask
- Think about your upcoming schedule

## **DISTRACTED LISTENING**

You know the feeling. You're talking to someone, and you can tell from their body language and distant look in their eye that the person is not really listening to you. You realize they're more interested in an audience than a conversation, so they're simply waiting for you to stop talking so that they can talk.

Distracted listening may not be as dangerous as distracted driving, but it's a big problem. Our cellphones are constantly tugging at our attention, pulling our brains out of the moment — who is reaching out to me and what do they want? — creating a subtle shift in the conversation. (The other person, consciously or subconsciously, knows you've tuned out.) The same thing happens on phone calls, too. You can almost always tell if someone is checking their email or doing something else when you're talking to them (brief lags in their responses are a giveaway).

## **CLEAR YOUR MIND**

Many of the 525 leaders I interviewed for the [Corner Office office column](#) for The New York Times shared memorable stories and smart insights about the importance of listening — a lesson that many of them said they learned the hard way.

Think of listening as a form of meditation. You have to clear your mind of everything else, so you can focus entirely on what the other person is saying. Make sure your phone is off or away from you. If you're at your desk, turn off your monitor or turn your chair around so you're not distracted by the screen. Try to focus fully on the other person, pushing away the thoughts about the next meeting you have to go to or a looming deadline.

“When you have a conversation with somebody, you're not going to get the nuances of the conversation if you're doing too many things,” said [Michael Mathieu](#), now the C.E.O. of BeAlive Media. “If somebody picks up the phone, stop your email, stop what you're doing, listen and have that conversation with the person and then move on. I try to be present so I can enjoy the richness and quality of interactions with people. Most people can't multitask without losing something in each of those tasks.”

## **THE IMPROV APPROACH**

If meditation isn't your thing, use this trick: Pretend you're doing improv, and that you can only react in the moment to what the other person is saying, rather than planning out the next three steps in the conversation. Mark Fuller, the C.E.O. of Wet Design, which makes elaborate fountain installations like the one in front the Bellagio Hotel in Las Vegas, hired an improv instructor at his company to help everyone be better listeners.

Mr. Fuller's logic: “Improv, if properly taught, is really about listening to the other person, because there's no script. It's about responding. If you think about it, if you have an argument with your wife or husband, most of the time people are just waiting for the other person to finish so they can say what they're waiting to say. So usually they're these serial machine-gun monologues, and very little listening. That doesn't work in improv. If we're on the stage, I don't know what goofball thing you're going to say, so I can't be planning anything. I have to really be listening to you so I can make an intelligent — humorous or not — response.”

The best kind of listening is about being comfortable not knowing what you're going to say next, or what question you might ask. Trust that you'll think of something in the moment based on what the other person just said. That will send a powerful signal to the other person that you're truly listening to them.

---

## No Judgments or Agendas



### Dos

- Be empathetic
- Know why you are talking
- Be grounded

### Don'ts

- Judge
- Brag
- Bring an agenda

Listening, done well, is an act of empathy. You are trying to see the world through another person's eyes, and to understand their emotions. That's not going to happen if you are judging the other person as they're talking. It will dampen the conversation, because you will be sending all sorts of subtle nonverbal cues that you have an opinion about what they're saying. If you go into the discussion with the main goal of understanding their perspective, free of any judgment, people will open up to you, because they will feel they can trust you to respect what they are saying.

## QUESTION YOUR MOTIVATION

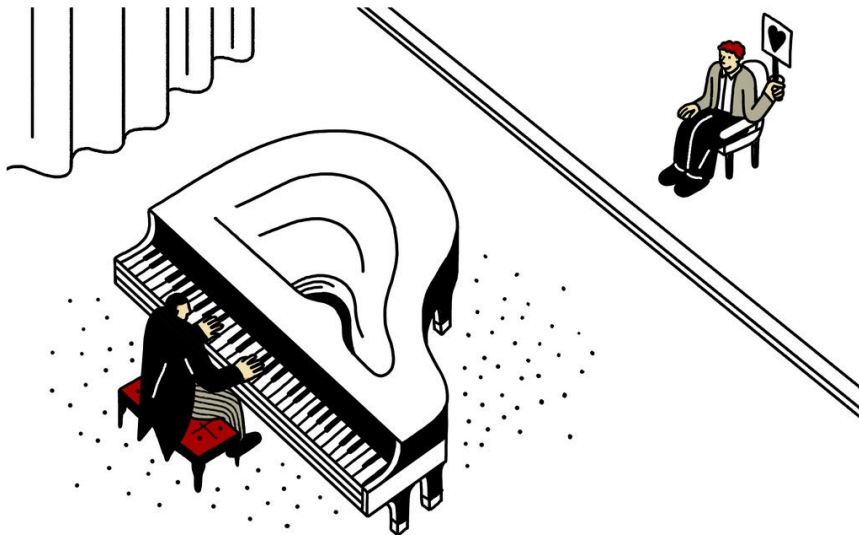
So the first step is to listen with no judgments. And when you do talk, be honest with yourself about what's really motivating you to say what you're about to say. There is a useful acronym to keep in mind when you're talking to someone: **W.A.I.T.**, which stands for "**Why Am I Talking?**"

That's not to say that you shouldn't contribute to the conversation. It's just a good reminder to be self-aware of why you're talking. Is it about the other person — to show them that you understand what they're saying, because maybe you've had a similar experience? Or is there subtext of needing to brag a bit? It's a particularly good rule to keep in mind for anybody in a management or leadership position, because anything you say can quickly overwhelm a discussion and make people shut down. But it's true for everyone, as well.

"You can't have an agenda," [Joel Peterson](#), the chairman of JetBlue Airways and founder of Peterson Partners, an investment firm, told me. "When you have your own agenda when you're listening to someone, what you're doing is you're formulating your response rather than processing what the other person is saying. You have to really be at home with yourself. If you have these driving needs to show off or be heard or whatever, then that kind of overwhelms the process. If you're really grounded and at home with yourself, then you can actually get in the other person's world, and I think that builds trust."

---

## Show You're Listening



### Dos

- Nod encouragingly
- Lean in

### Don'ts

- Cross your arms
- Seem like you don't care

In 1957, two American psychologists, Carl Rogers and Richard Farson, coined the term “active listening” in a paper of the same name. Perhaps it’s debatable whether adding the word “active” is simply redundant. After all, if active listening is a particular kind of listening, then by definition there is another kind called “passive listening.” And is that really listening if you’re talking with someone?

Nevertheless, the phrase has endured for more than 70 years as a popular shorthand for the idea that you can and should make an extra effort to show people that you’re listening to them, rather than just sitting quietly. And that happens with body language, whether you’re leaning closer or tilting your head or arching an eyebrow at the right moment. All these signals help show the other person that you’re listening to them.

## USE BODY LANGUAGE

Showing that you’re listening is not a natural impulse for everybody. Lisa Gersh, the former C.E.O. of Goop.com and Alexander Wang, shared a memorable story of how she learned the power of “the nod.” She had spent her early career as a lawyer, and had to completely change her listening approach when she joined Oxygen Media in its early days as a start-up.

“As a lawyer for many years before that, I was not known as a creative person,” she said in our interview. “When you’re in a legal or business meeting, you don’t egg people on. You pretend like you don’t care. It’s almost like buying a house. You sit with your arms crossed and you pretend like you’re not excited. And it could be the greatest idea in the world, but you don’t want to show your hand.”

“But a creative meeting is different,” she added. “If someone’s coming in with their creative idea, they’re baring their creative soul. And if you sit there with your arms crossed and you don’t say anything, they’re really not going to give it to you.”

“My partner at Oxygen took me to every meeting early on because I didn’t know anything about the business. At one point, I said to her: ‘You never take me to the creative meetings. Why not?’ She said: ‘Because you sit with your arms folded across your chest and it’s not good for creative meetings. **You have to learn ‘the nod.’**’ I said, ‘What’s the nod?’”

“And the nod is when you lean in and you nod your head and you keep nodding your head when someone is pitching an idea. That way, they get more and more excited about the pitch and they give you their best work.”

**The lesson:** Use body language to add energy to the conversation. Even if you are listening intently, you have to show people you are listening to them.

---

## Listen to Learn



### Dos

- Ask open-ended questions
- Be interested
- Learn one thing from everyone

### Don'ts

- Have the same conversation again and again

Perhaps you've heard the saying "it's better to be interested than interesting?" That idea can seem downright contrarian in this era of selfies and social media posts about all the fascinating things we're doing in our lives (and that we assume other people will want to know about). But why not think about listening as a ticket to a free education? All you have to do is assume that everyone you meet has learned a thing or two in their lives, and that you can unearth those insights with a combination of genuine interest and some open-ended questions. Some options:

- What surprised you about that?
- What has been the biggest memo-to-self moment?
- Why did that interest you?
- What did you like most about that?

Here's another way to think about it: What if your everyday life were a podcast and your job was to interview people?

## LEARN FROM EVERYONE

[Narinder Singh](#), who has worked in many technology companies and was a co-founder of the tech firm Appirio, started adopting this idea that he can learn something from everybody early in his career, when he was part of a rapidly growing company and he had to interview up to 10 job candidates a day.

"Almost as a defense mechanism, I started trying to learn something from each person, because otherwise having these same conversations was going to drive me crazy," he said. "Then I started applying that to every person I met, and I try to live by this every day. When you meet somebody, pull every piece of insight you can out of them."

## A NEVER-ENDING LEARNING CURVE

If you're ambitious, this approach of learning from everyone you meet is more of a need-to-have rather than nice-to-have. Reid Hoffman, the billionaire venture capitalist and co-founder of LinkedIn who made prescient early bets on companies like AirBnB and Facebook, said that the most important quality he looks for in aspiring entrepreneurs is an "infinite learning curve."

"Most of the time the businesses that I'm investing in are breaking new ground and creating a new area," Mr. Hoffman told me in [an interview](#). "You have to have a sense of, 'How am I going to learn a new area?' So I'm looking for an ability to be learning constantly, and fast."

If you show interest and energy, people will respond and share what they know and how they learned it. It's a fast and free education, plus you'll build relationships. That may seem like a statement of the obvious, but surprisingly few people act on it.

---

## Hey Bosses, Listen Up!



### Dos

- Respect your workers
- Solicit opinions
- Ask: "What do you think?"

### Don'ts

- Assume you have all the answers
- Shut people out from forming a plan

Over the years of giving talks at business schools to classes of students who have full-time jobs — usually part of an executive M.B.A. program — I've often posed a simple question to the group: "How many of you feel like your boss listens to you — not every second, but just in general?" Most of the time, fewer than half the hands go up.

Let's go back to first principles. What are the qualities that make for a good boss? Yes, there's a long list, but I would submit that they need to be trustworthy and they have to respect the people who work for them. And what is the important day-to-day manifestation of showing somebody that you respect them? Listening to them.

Yet why are so few managers good at listening? Maybe they feel like they're supposed to have answers, rather than questions. Maybe they feel like they're under tremendous pressure to move quickly, and they don't have the time to solicit other opinions when they already have a clear plan in mind. Maybe they are more interested in managing up than managing down.

## A LESSON FROM A PRESIDENT

But if you want to be a better manager, there are four simple words to add to your vocabulary, according to J.W. “Bill” Marriott Jr., the executive chairman of Marriott International. He shared a story from his early years (he’s 86 now) of how he learned them.

“In 1954, I had just finished Supply Corps School and came home for Christmas to our farm in Virginia,” he said in [our interview](#). “Dad’s best friend at the time was Ezra Taft Benson, who was secretary of agriculture and later became president of the L.D.S. church [Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints]. And he invited Ike and Mamie Eisenhower. So here’s the president and the secretary of agriculture, here’s my father, and here I am. They wanted to take Ike to shoot some quail, but it was cold and the wind was blowing like crazy. My dad said, ‘Should we go and shoot quail or should we stand by the fire?’ And Eisenhower turned around and looked at me and he said, ‘What do you think we should do?’”

Mr. Marriott added: “That made me realize how he got along with de Gaulle, Churchill, Roosevelt and others — by including them in the decision and asking them what they thought. So I tried to adopt that style of management as I progressed in life, by asking my people, ‘What do you think?’ Now, I didn’t always go with what they thought. But I felt that if I included them in the decision-making process, and asked them what they thought, and I listened to what they had to say and considered it, they usually got on board because they knew they’d been respected and heard, even if I went in a different direction than what they were recommending.”

Mr. Marriott said that **“What do you think?”** are the four most important words in the English language. “Listen to your people and learn,” he added.

And if you’re curious about how the quail-shoot story ended, the young Bill Marriott shared his opinion with the president: “It’s too cold. Let’s stay in by the fire.”

## TWO FINAL QUESTIONS

Who is the best listener you know? Think for a moment about what they do to earn that status among all your friends, family and colleagues. It’s a good bet that they do many of the things described above — they seem fully present when you talk with them; they don’t judge you or bring their own agendas to the conversation; and they’re genuinely curious about what’s going on in your life.

Now for the last question: If somebody were to ask everyone in your circle of family, friends and colleagues who is the best listener they know, would they say it’s you? Practice some of these approaches and you’ll earn that title. Because listening is becoming an increasingly rare skill, you’ll be a standout if you make the effort.

---

## About the Author

[Adam Bryant](#) is managing director of **The ExCo Group**, a leadership development and executive mentoring firm. An 18-year veteran of The New York Times, he created the [Corner Office](#) interview series and spoke to 525 chief executives about how they lead. He is also the author of two books, including [“Quick and Nimble: Lessons from Leading CEOs on How to Create a Culture of Innovation.”](#)

Twitter: [@AdamBBryant](#)