

# Good leaders are good listeners. Here's how to be one of them

*These three skills are critical to become an effective leader.*

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Early in your career, you know the details of everything you're working on. You have to, because you are generally responsible for those details. That is the core of being a frontline worker. You are carrying out key tasks that are central to the work of your organization. You may not have the full perspective on why the work is being done the way it is, but you do know a lot of details about what is happening.

As you advance in your career, you get an increasingly high-level view of what is happening within the organization. You are given more information about the strategy driving your firm and may even have more authority to make key decisions. You also get to see how the various tasks being done across the firm come together to push that strategy forward.

The cost of this elevated perch is that you are further from the details of how things are being accomplished. You are not having the same kind of day-to-day interactions with the frontline work that you did earlier in your career. As a result, you may not be aware of important elements that might be crucial for strategic decision-making.

In order to have the detail you need to be effective in your leadership role, you need to have regular conversations with those people who are responsible for the details you don't know, and you need to become a really good questioner and listener.

To do that, there are three skills you have to develop:

## **LET OTHER PEOPLE TALK**

Promotions come with additional responsibility, but they also come along with more prestige and status as well. It is tempting to use these roles as an excuse to dominate the meetings you're in by sharing your opinions and beliefs early and often.

There is certainly some need to share your thoughts on strategy with others, but great leaders let other people talk—a lot.

You need to hear the perspectives of other people in order to get a broader view of what is going on in your organization than just what you are able to see directly. Often, the people with the vantage that differs most from your own are people whose jobs are much lower

level than your own. As much as you might be tempted to spend the time sharing your wisdom, you will benefit from ensuring that you hear from a wide range of people.

## **ASK FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONS**

When you talk to people above you in the food chain, you make assumptions about what they want to hear. Partly, you try to paint a rosy picture of how things are going. Partly, you try to adopt the kind of strategic mindset you think they have.

Remember that as you move up in the ranks, people start doing that to you as well. That means that you can't just stop with what people choose to tell you. You need to ask additional questions to get more specific information.

Start by asking people about the most significant challenges they are facing. That will enable them to drop the rose-colored glasses for a moment and give you a sense of some of the problems that make it difficult for them to accomplish their goals.

Next, try to dig into the specifics of what they are telling you. Ask how they accomplish particular goals, who is involved, and what resources they use. Use the experience of the people you're talking with as a way of getting a view of how tasks get implemented.

## **REPEAT BACK WHAT YOU HEAR**

It isn't enough just to hear other people talk about things. When someone gives you a good explanation, you may come to believe you understand it as well. As research on the "illusion of explanatory depth" makes clear, though, you may believe you understand it, but you may not actually be able to explain it yourself.

The best way to ensure that you have retained what you heard from someone else is to repeat it back to them. When you repeat back what you hear, there are two benefits. First, you figure out which aspects of what you heard from someone else you retained, and which aspects were not stored away. Second, you can have any misconceptions about what someone told you cleared up while they are still there to correct you.

In this way, good listening is active listening, because you are doing it in service of developing your ability to explain and use knowledge about what you have heard from someone else.

When you engage in this active listening regularly, you greatly expand your base of knowledge. Because good problem-solving requires drawing on knowledge, the more you know, the better you will be at solving problems that have mystified others.