

How to Improve Listening and Increase Influence

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“The true measure of leadership is influence — nothing more. Nothing less.”

—John Maxwell

Leadership is often defined as the ability to influence others. Beloved leaders set the stage to influence through relationships built on trust, confidence and support. Others influence by providing data and evidence to demonstrate their value. And, still others influence through power and control of rewards. Our research over the last 30 years suggests that employees are influenced differently depending on their listening preferences.

Influential leaders understand how important it is to listen first to gain insight and demonstrate understanding *before* advocating a position or point of view. Listening agility helps leaders better adapt to meet the needs of listeners where they are. Strategic and successful listening leaders leverage and enhance their agility by learning how to:

- Understand and adapt to differing listener preferences.
- Conserve their own listening energy.

When leaders gain wisdom about when and how to approach others as well as their ability to listen, they achieve greater influence and success. Most listening patterns and habits are highly automated and consistent over time. Research conducted with thousands of executives, managers, employees and students both in the United States and abroad over the last three decades, has identified four distinct listener preference orientations: *people, action, content, and time*. These preferences impact how leaders engage, influence, and make judgments and decisions. Leaders of influence learn how to adapt to others to improve communication effectiveness and efficiency. Consider the following:

People-oriented listeners are relational in their approach to listening and often enjoy stories and anecdotes. Usually open-minded about topics of interest and the time they allow to listen, these listeners tend to care about relationships and want to trust the person who is speaking. It is advisable to get to know these individuals prior to decision-making meetings, to use personal examples, and to include the names of people who they know as well as to use “we” language.

Action-oriented listeners prefer to listen to key points up front and appreciate a preview in outline form. They respond best to presentations that are well-organized, succinct and concise. They tend to scrutinize information, identify inconsistencies and become impatient with wordy speakers, extraneous information and too much detail. Usually clear about their expectations, they can jump to conclusions quickly and give direct feedback about what they hear. When information is valuable to them, they will engage and become more flexible with time.

Content-oriented listeners prefer detail and information about both sides of issues. They usually ask a lot of questions and require factual information and evidence before making a decision. Enjoying complex, technical information, they often prefer data/statistics or expert opinion rather than anecdotal perspectives. Not as concerned about time, they want to ensure that others have done their homework and are thoroughly prepared with backup information and detailed support.

Time-oriented listeners are very conscious of schedules and often give specific time limitations for meetings and conversations. The most impatient of all the listener types, these listeners may interrupt wordy speakers and expect agendas to be followed precisely. Sometimes confused as action-oriented rather than time-oriented, these listeners are most focused on their own schedules and may tune-out when speakers go over time limits.

Most audiences are made up of a variety of listeners. It is best to understand the differences and adapt accordingly. Beware that while listeners have a primary preference, many have two or more high preferences. For example, leaders and customers may be more people-oriented with individuals they like, and more time-oriented with those they don't. It is best to prepare messages to include all members of your audience. For example, since action and time-oriented listeners often focus on getting to the heart of the matter quickly, it is effective to give an executive summary that covers the key points to ensure the most important information is covered up front. More detail can be provided during question and answer sessions.

Note: Research results using the *Listener Preference Profile* (Watson & Barker, 2015; Ripley & Watson, 2014; Weaver, Watson & Barker, 1996; Watson, Barker & Weaver 1995) suggest that approximately 40 percent of the general population uses a single-listener preference. Of this percentage, *people- and action-oriented preferences are the most prevalent*. About 25 percent of the general population has two listening preferences, and about 15 percent of the general population has three or four preferences.

Understand and Conserve Listening Energy

The second factor that influences how people listen is their own listening energy. Agile listeners learn to focus more on the needs of others rather than on themselves. It is especially important when considering a person's ability to pay attention. After a good night's sleep, listeners begin the day with a full tank of listening energy. If listeners were short-changed on sleep, they start with limited capacity. Throughout the day, the demands of meetings, phone calls, interruptions and other demands deplete energy and lead to listening fatigue. Without intentional conservation, many leaders use as much as 60% of their listening energy by mid-morning. By noon, their energy may be even lower, and without a way to recharge by the end of the day, most people are running on fumes.

Effective professionals adapt to the listening energy needs of others as well as to their preferences. To make the most of peak listening time, consider ways to help listeners recharge. Encourage others to take a minute or two for deep breathing, take a quick silent walk around the building, keep a photo of a favorite place to submerge into for a minute, listen to classical, word-free music, etc. Schedule important meetings during high listening energy times, and if you feel the energy waning, call a break or pause for a meditative minute of deep breathing.

Reminder: There is No One Best Way to Listen

While listener preferences are neither good nor bad, the best communicators go beyond their own preferences to better match individual and group listener needs. Understanding listener preference patterns in the general population can help us identify people's preference traits. The way we choose to listen to others is influenced by how much time we have to listen as well as the relationship we have with group members. Even when under pressure, we usually listen differently to people we value or who have power. Regardless of others' influence over us, listening agility is one of the most influential skills for communication and leadership success.



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