

Foundational Leadership Communication Skills: Getting Them Right

For the Want of a Nail

*For the want of a nail the shoe was lost
For the want of a shoe the horse was lost
For the want of a horse the rider was lost
For the want of a rider the message was lost
For the want of a message the battle was lost
For the want of a battle the kingdom was lost
And all for the want of a horseshoe nail*

This old proverb speaks to the critical importance of getting small things right. Difficult and dramatic events—such as many we are facing today—are fraught with miscommunications and misunderstandings that may be minimized or avoided if leaders attend to the fundamentals. Foundational interpersonal communication skills like listening and questioning help us to develop empathy and help us to influence others. These communication skills are the *horseshoe nails* of leadership: they may seem minor, but they are the basis upon which everything else depends.

Good Leadership Requires Empathy

At the core of good interpersonal communication is empathy. We build our empathy “muscles” by interacting with others, sensitively learning about their feelings and experiences through awareness of nonverbal cues, vocal tones, and word choices. Empathy improves when we are up close and personal with others. It’s challenging now when many of our interactions take place virtually over platforms such as Zoom, which limit the impact of our nonverbal and vocal communication. To overcome the challenges of these technological limitations, we have to be more intentional with our communication. We need to build rapport and trust by being deliberate with our reflexive communication patterns. In other words, we have to take mindful responsibility for foundational communication skills, in particular, the skills of listening and questioning, and how they lead to influencing.

Listening Is Relationship Magic

Listening is the relationship-building skill. Listening nonjudgmentally allows us to truly understand someone’s interests, goals, and feelings. It allows us to build rapport and trust. Also, listening is the communication tool that diffuses interpersonal tension, which is why it is so powerful when negotiating or managing a conflict. Whether the exchange is high stakes or casual, listening is the communication skill that enables us to connect and build. Many people

assume they listen well just because they have to do it often; they confuse listening with hearing, or with simply being quiet while another person talks. Good listening is more than that: a good listener empathetically enables the expression of another person. Wharton professor Adam Grant encourages adopting an “understanding strategy” when we listen, where we seek to fully understand the perspective of the other person without judgment.¹ We all know the warm satisfaction or relief we feel when talking to someone who actually listens to us; we are naturally drawn to that person and want to tell them more. Good listening has so many benefits, but many people fail at it because they don’t pay attention to the *horseshoe nails*. Here they are:

- **Attending is the “look” of listening.** Others depend on our nonverbal behavior to indicate we are listening. Adopt the “look” of listening by squaring off and facing the other person, avoiding distractions, gently leaning forward, and making eye contact. Tech platforms such as Zoom challenge eye contact, a powerful interpersonal nonverbal, since we have to choose between looking at someone’s face on the screen (which looks to them as if we may be looking away) or looking at our camera lens (which means we can’t see them on the screen). Whichever technique you choose, stick with it, and avoid looking around at other things. Don’t dismiss the importance of attending to the other person while they are speaking. Others can’t read our minds, so our nonverbals are all they have to go on.
- **Encouraging lets others know we are following along.** We encourage others to continue with small nonverbal, vocal, or verbal cues. Bring attentive energy to your listening with head nods or facial expressions that indicate you are connecting to the content. Vocalizations like “mm-hmm” or comments like “Really?” or “I see” let others know we are absorbing what they have shared. Avoid interrupting the speaker or hijacking the exchange by sharing your own story, such as “Here’s what happened to me.” Learn to be comfortable with momentary silences while the speaker searches for the best way to articulate feelings. Resist the temptation to finish their sentences or correct them. Let the other person talk.
- **Paraphrase to demonstrate your attentiveness and check for understanding.** Paraphrase intermittently and at the end of long comments to check in with the speaker. We all naturally focus on things that matter to us, so it’s good to check to see if what seems important to us is what the speaker intends. The subtext with a paraphrase is “This is what I heard you say: did I get it right?” Many good paraphrases begin with comments like “It seems that,” “It sounds like,” or “What I’m hearing is.” Good paraphrases may include a recap of the verbal message, such as “So, you’re

¹ Grant, Adam. “In Negotiations, Givers Are Smarter Than Takers.” *The New York Times*, 27 Mar. 2020.

seeing a lot of inconsistencies?” as well as an interpretation of the emotional content communicated through vocal tone, facial expression, or other nonverbals. Here’s where we, as listeners, really test our empathy skills. Many times, important messages are unstated with words but abundantly clear in *how* they are said. If we paraphrase well, the speaker will truly feel heard and we will build rapport and trust.

Effective Questioning Guides the Speaker to Expand on Their Comments

Another unsung hero of interpersonal communication is the skill of questioning. Many of the questions we reflexively ask are “closed questions,” where we ask for specific details. Closed questions limit the options of the responder to yes or no, or other specific details. For example, “did you learn anything?” is a closed question. For as well-intentioned as this question might be, it doesn’t invite the speaker to share any more than what has been asked. Alternatively, “open questions” are red carpet relationship-building questions that invite the speaker to share information according to their interests and priorities. Consider the difference between “did you learn anything?” versus “what did you learn?” or “how would you describe what you learned?” Open questions send the message that the questioner is truly interested in what the speaker has to say and invites them to say more. When the stakes are high, open questions are a way of telling another person we value their perspective and are ready to hear them out.

Combine These Skills to Be a Powerful Influencer

Influencing others begins with building relationships and establishing trust. Combining listening and questioning is a way to do just that. Begin by demonstrating strong attending and encouraging skills. Paraphrase comments or perspectives and follow with an open question. The respect we demonstrate by listening and questioning allows us to create a platform of trust, and when that trust has been created, we have an opportunity to influence.

Managing Others Is Really About Managing Ourselves

Monitoring our reflexive patterns can yield great results. Avoid common conversational blunders such as interrupting others, looking away, checking our phones, diverting to our own topics or opinions, or digging for information with limiting questions to lead to more meaningful exchanges. These meaningful exchanges lead to better relationships built on trust and respect. When there is trust and respect, policy differences are easier to isolate and manage. In other words, the small things are taken care of, and the big things can be addressed.

And All for the Want of a Horseshoe Nail

To return to the proverb, listening and questioning are the *horseshoe nails* of leadership communication. These are the foundational skills we have to get right.

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