

Leaders Who Listen



Genuine listening is an intense, creative act in which people step out of their comfortable roles to engage their differences.

WHEN VISITING A MAJOR American corporation recently, I was privileged to witness a vivid demonstration of the leadership that is so badly needed today. Seated at a conference table were managers, labor leaders, suppliers, distributors, and officials from the local government. What was most striking is that the president of the company did not seem to be a particularly imposing person. He had no commanding presence, was clearly not a genius, and showed little charisma. How did he manage to pull this diverse group of big egos together into a harmonious team?

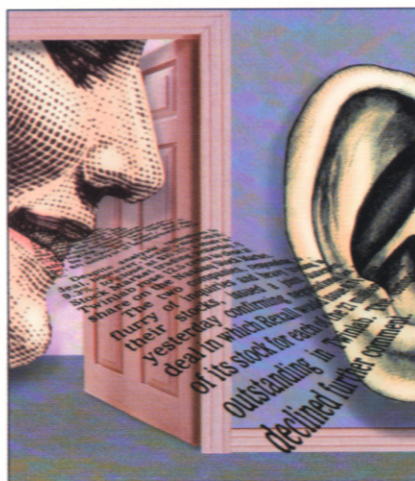
As the meeting progressed, it became clear that he saw his role as encouraging the talents of others, and so he rarely spoke himself but was more intent on asking people for their views. What was most remarkable is that he really listened. Unlike most leaders, this man was genuinely humble. He focused on understanding the reality of the situation. It was like a breath of fresh air! A leader who cares what people really think? Who wants to hear the messy truth? Who does not impose his solutions? Surely this was either a ruse or it didn't work, I thought.

But it did work. It energized the meeting. People brought out their problems, their ideas, their doubts, their misunderstandings, and all the other hidden agendas we normally keep contained within us. The president simply asked an occasional question, made a few suggestions for their consideration, and tried to clarify what they were doing. Otherwise, the group controlled the meeting. Most importantly, the meeting affirmed that this was their organization. They were responsible for its success or failure, so they did whatever was needed to make it work.

Okay, this humble approach really works, but what about the leader, I worried. He was obviously not "in charge," and in fact he seemed a bit uncomfort-

able at times. Little wonder when people would say harsh things to him, such as complain about some aspect of the company and criticize his behavior. Occasionally they even called him by his first name! How could he maintain his dignity and self-respect, much less the power needed to be effective?

Beneath this appearance of casual disregard was a deep sense of respect and affection. Not because this leader held the power of the president, but precisely for the opposite reason. He had voluntarily yielded his authority. The heart of this relationship was that the president



was genuinely concerned about others, and he provided a subtle, supportive guidance that helped them find the way ahead. Ironically, by giving up his formal power, he was given far more real power as a "servant leader" rather than a boss. They would do things for him that no ordinary boss could even ask for.

A Key Principle

This highlights a key principle of leadership today: in a world of escalating complexity and empowered people, *leaders must cultivate the art of helping others to share the responsibilities of management.* But the price of their support is to relinquish that old sense of control while patiently listening to others for understanding.

The knowledge revolution is creating a world in which teams of skilled workers must manage complex business ventures, solve technical problems, and probe the boundaries of a global economy. Not only are economies becoming complex, a more

educated knowledge worker is appearing who is motivated by achievement, creativity, and control over the work.

A historic upheaval in power structures is underway. Jack Welch, CEO of General Electric, summed up the need: "In a world where we must have every good idea from every man and woman, we cannot afford management styles that suppress and intimidate." This power shift comprises a peaceful revolution. Employees are gaining control over their time, have access to the financial records, determine how to perform their jobs, choose co-workers and suppliers, and even evaluate their superiors. Customers make new demands for quality and service. Major investors replace CEOs.

The problem is especially visible on the communication networks that are penetrating business. It is somewhat like the "flaming" that goes on over the Internet. One CEO convened an "electronic meeting" to spur open discussion, only to see top management attacked so viciously that he had to pull the plug.

Obviously, leaders will have to be far more skillful to direct this raw energy into productive directions. The most unsettling change is that they will have to shed their mask of authority to meet people directly, facing all the stinging criticism and outrageous demands that have been suppressed by authority. And employees will be equally unsettled at seeing that leaders are not demi-gods with all the answers but fallible humans; they will then have to assume the responsibilities that managers are being asked to relinquish. With both leaders and followers stripped of their old illusions, both may then settle in for the hard but realistic task of learning to work together.

Today's leaders must facilitate a shared decision-making process by encouraging open discussion, clarifying issues and resolving conflicts, summarizing key themes, and drawing out a satisfactory conclusion. The most crucial requirement is to listen to understand the messy complexity of problems and the different ideas others hold about them.

The art of listening is seldom practiced because it is a demanding discipline. Most people feel chronically deprived of being heard in a way that fully appreciates their unique views and struggles. When some caring soul comes along to listen, the average troubled individual will so eagerly unburden themselves that the listener may have a hard time disengaging. If the leader gives up prior expectations and listens with a careful, receptive mind to capture subtle meanings, the most outlandish points

can prove to be nuggets of good fortune.

For instance, there is no better way to confirm an argument than to be challenged by a strong objection, and then to turn that objection into support. If one can listen carefully and ask probing, honest questions, a resolution usually appears. The role of a wise leader is to nurture this greater truth and present it as a gift to his or her followers. The resulting sense of their gratitude and heightened trust can be palpable.

How little we understand the wisdom of traditional sayings, such as "The meek shall inherit the earth." The very thought seems ludicrous in today's high-stakes power games. But the real message is not that "weakness" will become widespread, but that a gentle, trusting humility is more realistic than self-pride for coping with a world that is too mysterious to comprehend. Rather than a sign of weakness, humility is a virtue of strong people who do not need to prove their might, so they are open to new understanding.

In a knowledge society, leaders will have to reverse what was once considered admirable. Rather than acting with bold determination and extending a brilliant vision to guide others, leaders must direct attention away from themselves to focus on their followers. They should certainly offer their own ideas. But if they can unite their vision with the many other visions also waiting to be realized, the resulting synthesis of views is invariably far richer and more powerful.

We are all creatures of belief, and we are usually trapped inside of our own heads by limited, outmoded beliefs. The first responsibility of leaders today is to understand that it is okay to admit we are ignorant. Let's make the search for understanding not only acceptable but praiseworthy, and show the way by modeling this ability to learn through honest interaction.

If this painful exploration can be sustained through its twists and turns, a new clarity of awareness, or a "vision," may be given us to guide the way ahead. Leadership must be nothing less than a creative process by which isolated souls can touch one another to set off sparks of insight, initiative, and social energy to cope with a far more demanding world. For all its pain and peril, coming to grips with unpleasant realities and with each other is essential to create the needed breakthroughs in awareness for managing a complex world. EE

William E. Halal is professor of management at George Washington University, and author of The New Management (Berrett-Koehler) 800-929-2929.