



Listen like a leader

9 Tips to Drive Powerful
Conversations

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If you're a leader, it helps to be a good talker. But great communication is actually more about hearing and understanding others than it is about being heard yourself. When you listen well in person or over video meetings, you'll be able to connect more deeply with your team members, colleagues, and customers. You'll help advance their thinking — and they'll advance yours with their ideas and insights.

These tips will take your communication skills to the next level, whether you are interacting face to face or virtually. Which one will help you the most?





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Are the 7 Habits® as relevant today as they were when they were first created? Absolutely, they are more relevant than ever before. The greater the change, the more difficult the challenges, the more relevant the 7 Habits become. Why? Because they are based on principles of effectiveness that endure.”

— Stephen R. Covey

1. For planned conversations, be intentional about the time and location.

Environment matters to get good conversations off the ground. To set up the right environment, first consider the subject matter and timing of the discussion.



If the topic is sensitive, book a quiet room, head offsite to a subdued location, or create a private video meeting.

For example:

- **The level of privacy you'll want.** If the topic is sensitive or complex enough to require privacy, then book a quiet room ahead of time, head offsite to a subdued location, or create a private video meeting if you're not collocated. If you anticipate the conversation could become emotional, you should have a box of tissue nearby.
- **Whether you or other participants are busy, stressed, or will be rushing from another meeting.** If your calendar is packed tight, you could end your previous meeting early or delay this one by 15 minutes so you can clear your head and make room for what you're about to hear. If there's an important looming deadline, maybe the conversation could wait.
- **How you'll sit (or stand, or walk) in relation to each other.** For more formal conversations, you might sit across from others at a desk or conference table. In 1-on-1 situations, sitting side by side sets a more collaborative "We're in this together" tone. Or to spur creativity, you could stand and draw at a whiteboard or break out of your normal surroundings and go for a walk. If you're in a remote-working situation, consider holding the conversation by phone instead of video.

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You've spent years learning how to read and write. But what about listening?”

—Stephen R. Covey



2. Use your body language to show you're paying attention.

If you're meeting in person, close your laptop. Turn your phone over. Put down your sandwich. And if needed, remove your watch if it is set to notify you of incoming texts or emails. You get to do only one thing with this time: engage in the conversation. Whether in person or through video, eye contact is a sure way to demonstrate respect and attention, especially in a world where so many people are constantly distracted by technology.



Our body language represents 60 percent of our communication.

How much eye contact is too much?

That depends on your situation and cultural norms. If you feel like you're entering staring territory — which is uncomfortable for all — take breaks by periodically shifting your gaze to the speaker's hands or elsewhere in the room as you process what you're hearing.

As for the rest of your body, avoid fidgeting and other distracting mannerisms. Instead, send signals that you're following along and fully participating by facing the speaker or even leaning toward them, nodding, and showing appropriate facial expressions — like smiling to show encouragement. During a difficult or an emotionally fraught moment, keep a neutral expression to avoid appearing impatient or judgmental.

If you're conversing remotely through video, nod and look directly at the camera so the other person knows you are listening. And if you take notes, explain why your attention is shifting.

For example, at the start, you could say:

I'm planning to take some notes, so if I'm looking at my laptop (or away from the camera), it's only because I want to make sure I'm getting down key points.



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Most people do not listen with the intent to understand. They listen with the intent to reply.”

—Stephen R. Covey

3. Don't interrupt with your own thoughts and solutions.

It's easy for well-intentioned managers to default to problem-solving mode in an attempt to be helpful and effective.



We have two ears and one mouth. Use them accordingly.

When you jump in with answers, you rob others of the chance to fully express themselves and build their own problem-solving skills. Instead of rushing to judgment or thinking of how you're going to respond when someone else speaks, try to zero in on people's actual words and what they really mean.

Continuous listening is an invitation for others to share. Often when people are given the chance to open up, they unravel their own problems and the solutions become clear to them in the process.



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When you really listen to another person and reflect back to them that understanding, it's like giving them emotional oxygen.”

—Stephen R. Covey

4. Encourage the speaker to finish their thought.

Complete thoughts rarely tumble out of someone's mouth perfectly formed, especially when the topic is complex, difficult, or emotional.



If there's a pause in your conversation, stop and count to 10. Resist the urge to talk.

Instead of rushing to fill the void when someone else stops talking, use silence — waiting for as long as 10 seconds — or a gentle prompt like “Mm-hmm” or “Tell me more” to keep the person talking.

For example:

You: How's your progress on the Columbia planning project?

Direct report: Well, we hit a snag yesterday...

You: Tell me more.

Direct report: I'm having trouble reaching the client...

You: How so?

Direct report: He isn't responding to emails.

You: (Nodding silently.)

Direct report: That's not really so uncommon for him, though. And I know he's busy right now with quarterly reviews. Last time, I ended up having to pick up the phone and call.

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Unexpressed
feelings never die.
They are buried
alive and come back
later in uglier ways.”

—Stephen R. Covey



5. Paraphrase back what you've heard to make sure you understand correctly.

If you can accurately summarise what someone has said, you'll give them the priceless gift of feeling heard and understood. And if you don't get it quite right, the other person will have a chance to further clarify. Either way, making an effort to paraphrase shows you're listening.

Start with phrases like:

So what I'm hearing is...

It sounds as if...

If I'm understanding you correctly, you...

And follow up with:

Do I have that right?

So the other person has the opportunity to respond:

Yes, that's it!

Or:

Actually, that's not what I meant.

Your ideas are more credible when you express them clearly, couched in a deep understanding of the other person's concerns or point of view.



6. Respond to unspoken messages conveyed through tone and body language.

Is your usually open and friendly peer crossing their arms? Is your normally quiet team member talking rapidly? When you notice nonverbal cues that break from someone's typical pattern, they're likely meaningful signals about the person's attitude toward the subject you're discussing. Or has a remote employee who is usually engaged turned off their camera for the entire meeting?



In the absence of focus and discipline, urgency dominates human behaviour.

Use this vital information to calibrate your responses in ways that show understanding and encourage even more sharing.

For example, if the person has crossed arms or seems to be avoiding eye contact, you might respond with:

It seems like this is difficult to talk about. I appreciate your bringing it up to me.

Or if someone is talking quickly and sharing new ideas:

It sounds like you're really excited about this project. Tell me more about why.

Or if something you've said causes someone to clam up, you could narrate your observation as a way to elicit a response:

You seem quieter since I mentioned involving Emily in this project. How does what I said sit with you?

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Empathy is the
fastest form of human
communication.”

—Stephen R. Covey

7. Validate people's feelings in ways that show you understand them.

Think about how you feel in those rare moments when someone acknowledges and articulates your true feelings — maybe even better than you could have yourself. Why not aim to be that person in conversations with your team members and colleagues?



Empathic Listening is reflecting in your own words what another person feels and says.

For example, let's say a conscientious team member tells you they worked hard on a successful project. You could show you understand and respect them by saying:

I know how important it is to you to hit deadlines. It sounds like your ability to prioritise really helped lead to success in this instance.

That kind of response has a much bigger impact than a generic compliment like:

Yeah, good job prioritising.

Or for an empathic response when things don't go as planned:

It sounds like you've been doing all you can. Sometimes doing things for the first time just takes longer. I know that can be frustrating, especially for someone like you who is used to hitting every deadline.



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With people, fast is slow
and slow is fast.”

—Stephen R. Covey

8. Listen with an ear for how people's ideas and opinions overlap and diverge.

In most exchanges, people simply react to the latest comment. But next-level listeners also have a knack for relating what was just said to information shared earlier, either in the current conversation or on previous occasions.



Empathic Listening is powerful because it gives you accurate data to work with.

This ability to make connections — and then articulate them — can have a magical effect. It can help people put their thoughts in context and decide what to do next.

For example:

What I'm hearing is that people think we still have work to do on the proposal. Vicky, you seem concerned about cost. Hector still has questions about the target market. Stefan, you said your last team did something similar, but used a more integrated approach. How about we talk through people's ideas for next steps?

Or:

DeShawn, I've heard you say before that this client is impatient with sales tactics, but it seems like now you're suggesting offering him an incentive of free features. How has your thinking changed on this?

One tip to help build this skill:

Take good notes. Don't try to write down everything people say — just capture the main ideas. Then leave some space beneath each main point to add in bulleted subpoints. Seeing all of the main points in one place can help you make connections.

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The deepest need of
the human heart is
to be understood.”

—Stephen R. Covey



9. Use open-ended questions to expand people's thinking on an issue.

Good listening skills can set you up to be a coach — that is, to help others explore what's going on and work toward solutions. Try asking well-timed, open-ended questions that not only reflect what you've just heard, but prompt people to go deeper.

For example:

Your peer: My team has never missed a quarterly goal before. I hope this doesn't kill everyone's morale.

You: That sounds tough. What's been the team's biggest setback up to this point?

Your peer: Hmm... I guess maybe it was when we went through the reorg last year. That threw everyone for a loop, even though our team wasn't impacted directly.

You: What kinds of things did you do to lead them through that?

Your peer: Well, I held some additional 1-on-1s, plus we talked through it a lot in team meetings. We had to totally redo some of our team processes after the marketing group we'd been working with got eliminated.

You: And how did they respond?

Your peer: Some people really stepped up, and most of them actually handled it okay. Now that I think about this missed goal, maybe I can overcommunicate again, and lean on those team members who were a rock during the reorg. They'll set a good example for the others.

You: Sounds like a good plan. What do you think you'll need to do differently?

Your peer: Yeah. Hmm. I'll definitely have to manage my boss's expectations. That'll be tricky. Mind if I block off a lunch so I can try out some practice language on you?



Use these kinds of questions well, and the person will leave your conversation with new ideas and next steps.

Your organisation's success depends on strong individual performance.

No matter how competent your people are, they won't generate sustained and lasting results unless they're able to effectively lead themselves; influence, engage, and collaborate with others; and continually improve and renew their capabilities.

Renowned as the world's premier personal leadership-development solution, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*® aligns enduring principles of effectiveness with today's technology and practices. By making these principles part of your organisation's shared culture, you can propel all of your employees toward their very best performance.

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