

1. **Mark your confusion.**
2. **Show evidence of a close reading.**
3. **Write a 1+ page reflection.**

Listening Is an Overlooked Leadership Tool

Source: Melissa Daimler, *Harvard Business Review*, May 25, 2016

“What do you think?”

I ask this question a lot. My team knows that when they come to me with a question, this is likely the question I’ll come back with first. Sometimes I even preface it with, “I don’t know.” As leaders in our organizations, it’s up to us to coach colleagues and our employees through finding that answer. More often than not, when I ask this question, my team has a better answer than I do — or one that I hadn’t thought about before.

It can be a powerful technique, especially if there is no single right answer – a situation that will be familiar to anyone doing leading-edge work. But it only works in an organization that values listening.

In a growing, constantly changing company like Twitter, there aren’t a lot of things that remain the same for very long. New teams form, new team members join, and projects shift based on new priorities.

With so few anchors in our work environment, and so many variables we can’t control, it’s important to double down on the things we can control.

Listening is an overlooked tool that creates an environment of safety when done well. Several studies over the decades have estimated that we spend anywhere from a third to half our time listening. And yet we don’t retain very much. Back in 1957, researchers found that listeners only remembered about half of what they’d heard immediately after someone finished talking. There’s no reason to think that ratio has improved since then.

Listening can be a challenging skill to master. In our management development sessions, we find it helpful to highlight three levels of listening:

- **Internal listening** is focused on your own thoughts, worries, and priorities, even as you pretend you’re focusing on the other person. In our sessions, we usually illustrate this type of listening with a simple prop — an iPhone. People laugh, not because it’s funny, but because they recognize that this type of listening is what they often do themselves.
- **Focused listening** is being able to focus on the other person, but you’re still not connecting fully to them. The phone may be down and you may be nodding in agreement, but you may not be picking up on the small nuances the person is sharing.
- **360 listening.** This is where the magic happens. You’re not only listening to what the person is saying, but how they’re saying it — and, even better, what they’re *not* saying, like when they get energized about certain topics or when they pause and talk around others.

When I close my laptop and it’s just me and the person across the table, there’s a connection. There’s energy. There’s the reminder of what’s possible if we focus on what the other person has to say. I’m reminded of why what we’re building together matters.

Listening creates spaciousness, which we need to do good work. And the converse is also true: I listen more when I create space in my day. When I have back-to-back meetings, my goal is to get through them with just enough time to run to the other building for my next meeting. When I strategically create space on my calendar to reflect on a conversation and prepare for the next one, I can be more present for others.

During an eventful one-on-one with my manager earlier in my career, I was busy giving my update on all the things I was working on. I said, “The only thing I have left to do is...” She stopped me mid-sentence. “What are all of these things helping to solve in the organization?”

There it was. Boom. A powerful question. That manager illuminated my focus on getting stuff done, and the problem with not tying it back to any kind of strategic priority in the company. She went on to ask, “How does all of this fit together?” Those two questions fundamentally changed how I approached my work. She’s also the same manager who would have her laptop up during most of our one-on-ones, and nod her head and smile as I shared updates, half-listening. It was only when her laptop was closed and her schedule wasn’t jammed with meetings that I got something out of our meetings. We connected, I learned, and we both felt like we accomplished something out of the conversation.

I recently talked about this with Eileen Fisher and Kit Crawford at the Wisdom 2.0 conference in San Francisco. Eileen is the Founder and Chairwoman of Eileen Fisher, Inc. and Kit is owner and co-chief visionary officer of Clif Bar & Company. When I asked how each of them lead, both of them said through listening.

Eileen said she didn’t know anything about business when she first started her company, so she had to really listen to people, to learn and understand. Kit tries to include people who don’t instinctively speak up in meetings. She’ll ask them for their opinion directly. Both have also dealt with intense legal situations in which they had to listen to the points of view of multiple stakeholders. They asked questions, inquired more deeply into why each person felt a particular course of action was the right one, and ultimately made the final decision. As Kit put it, “The more we listen to ourselves, the more we have a different opportunity to choose. Listen to others and then be brave with your decision.”

So how can we listen more? Three suggestions to try this week:

- **Look people in the eye.** Sherry Turkle, a professor at MIT who studies the psychology of online connectivity, wisely wrote in her recent book *Reclaiming Conversation*, “We face a significant choice. It is not about giving up our phones but about using them with greater intention. Conversation is there for us to reclaim.” Put down your phone when you’re in meetings. Close your laptop. See if you’re more energized about work and the people with whom you work.
- **Create space in your day.** Manage your calendar and stop booking yourself out the entire day. Can someone on your team be part of that meeting? Does it need to be an hour, or can 30 minutes suffice? Give yourself time for reflection and space throughout the day, so that when you are talking with someone, you can give them your full attention.
- **Ask more questions.** Next time a colleague or employee asks for advice, make sure you’re listening and understand the situation. Then, before answering, ask a question. Clarify what they really need — usually it’s just validation that their thinking is on the right track.

As with everything, there are always exceptions. We can’t always ask questions; if we’re really listening to the other person, we realize that sometimes he or she needs more direction, guidance and even a point of view. And the reality is that most often we can’t simply turn our devices off and leave them in a drawer.

We at Twitter are evangelists of the power of social media platforms to connect people and share information at lightning speed all over the world. However, we’ve got to insist on time for uninterrupted face-to-face conversation. Even in a world of limitless, instantaneous, global connection, the most powerful mode of communication is that of two people listening.

Possible Response Questions:

- What are your thoughts on the value the different levels of listening?
- Pick a passage from the article and respond to it.
- Discuss a “move” made by the writer in this piece that you think is good/interesting. Explain.