

# Is it possible for a leader to listen too much?



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We all agree that listening is an important leadership skill.

At its core, leadership is a relationship between people. Listening is a way of nurturing that relationship as it sends several clear messages:

- You are worth my time.
- Your ideas are valuable and appreciated.
- I care about what's going on in your life outside of work.

But is it possible for a leader to listen too much? When is it time to stop listening and start leading? This can be a challenging balance for any leader, but especially for new leaders.

I define leadership as the ability to engage others to leave a known current state and move toward a presumably better (but unknown) future state. That involves anything from relatively benign changes to highly emotional transformations, such as how the organization is structured, its products or services, or even its culture.

Leading change within an organization is akin to rolling a large boulder up a hill or changing the direction of rotation on a huge flywheel. First, inertia must be overcome.

In an organization, inertia takes the form of complacency. Members grow comfortable with the status quo. While they might agree the current situation is far from perfect, it's predictable and relatively safe. They likely extrapolate the current situation into the future and see continued safety, perhaps even success for themselves and their co-workers.

Rich dialogue, which involves listening, therefore plays a critical role before a decision is made. Through skillful listening, the leader can ascertain what employees tend to find threatening and why. Some previously unconsidered and valid concerns might be unearthed.

This, likewise, presents a great opportunity for the leader to begin to illuminate their concerns with the current state and to identify the threats associated with continuing business as usual into the future.

Employees' fears regarding future unknowns can be minimized by sharing a vision of what's believed to be possible. Basically, the goal is to decrease the level of discomfort associated with the future and increase the level of uneasiness with the status quo.

During the decision-making process, all input gleaned from dialogues should be considered. What were the valid concerns and how will we address them? What were the common fears and how will we minimize them?

Following the decision, dialogue again plays a key role to explain the rationale behind it. Proactively addressing concerns identified earlier communicates that they were heard and taken into consideration.

Listening is important here as well. Everyone processes change differently. Some will need to verbalize their acceptance, others repeat their lingering fears and others will simply need to vent as a means

of letting go of the past.

Assuming good listening occurred before the decision, there shouldn't be any major surprises.

So is it possible to listen too much? Technically no. But if a leader allows verbalized, normal fear of change to deter them from taking the organization where they know it must go, they are doing everyone a disservice.

At one end of the listening and leading spectrum is the "don't bother me with facts" unilateral boss. At the other end is the "I don't want to lead ... I only want to make everyone happy" pushover.

Both are equally dangerous.

### RICK SAYS

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