

# How Can You Be Sure Someone Has Exceptional Leadership Skills? It Comes Down to 2 Words

Research suggests it's one of the least taught skills in leadership.

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The [digital era](#) is causing a slow degeneration in our ability to communicate and solve problems. Specifically, the part of communication that points to a [good leader](#), and which doesn't even require speaking words: *active listening*.

This affects *all* [working generations](#) and ages of people connected 24/7 to mobile apps, texting, email, and social media. That's virtually all of us. The speed of communicating in 140 characters or less is certainly convenient, but our ability to verbally engage with our ears is diminishing. This is not good for leadership in the business world.

Certain situations demand us to courageously step out from behind our digital comfort zones to deal directly--face-to-face or by phone--with the unpredictability of human emotions. In other words, there are instances that call for us to have human-to-human interactions, to actively listen to a problem that could otherwise get lost or not be conveyed through digital communication. This is what generations past used to do before Steve Jobs stepped on a stage at Macworld to introduce the iPhone in 2007.

## Activating your active listening

Strong active listening skills in conversation are the foundation for superb human communication. Few behaviors enhance a conversation as much as attending to what people have to say. It signals respect and a sense of curiosity for what they have to say.

Unfortunately, active listening is one of the least taught skills in leadership. Studies confirm that most of us are poor and inefficient listeners. When you talk to your boss, co-workers, or customers for 10 minutes, studies indicate we pay attention to less than half of the conversation. I'm certainly guilty of that myself.

As a leader, building up your active listening skills is crucial for solving problems, developing trust, and winning the hearts and minds of people. Here are five things you can do to develop your active listening skills.

### 1. Eliminate distractions

When someone approaches you in person, stop what you're doing and give the speaker your full attention. What you're communicating nonverbally is "I am interested in what you have to say."

### 2. Park your thoughts

Park your thoughts in the moment and your need for a rebuttal. Your time will come to reflect back on what you heard or state your point. While the speaker is stating his or her case, your best active listening shows up nonjudgmentally -- demonstrating patience and focus on the speaker without forming an opinion in your head.

### 3. Step into the other person's shoes

When faced with a conversation with the potential of escalating tension, diffuse it by asking the person for his or her help to clarify what's being spoken. For example: "I'd

like to understand your problem better. Will you help me out?" This is about showing empathy to increase your understanding.

#### 4. Practice "authentic silence"

By practicing authentic silence, you allow yourself to be comfortable with the unknown, stay in the background and in the moment, and let your true feelings emerge. Don't mistake silence for tension. If any tension exists, time perceptions get terribly distorted. Use authentic silence to help the conversation naturally flow and both parties to process things through without pressure.

#### 5. Be aware of your body language

To show the other person that you actually care about what they're saying, actively listening requires good body language and nonverbal cues. For example, nod your head, smile, lean in, make eye contact, and occasionally say "yes" to encourage the speaker to continue. Common downfalls to active listening include: looking at your watch, laptop, or smartphone, fidgeting with things, or tapping your foot on the floor or fingernails on the desk.