

Time to Revamp Leadership Training?! Start With a Quick Self-Assessment Test

Leaders should develop a vision for their enterprise, or the part thereof for which they are responsible.

Fine.

Leaders should get people excited about their work.

Fine.

Leaders should be masterful problem solvers.

Fine.

Leaders should have the highest integrity.

Fine.

Yes, all fine.

But, I contend, that's not close to being enough. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that those items, collectively, miss the boat. In fact, they're not even at the right dock.

What do leaders ... **DO?**

First and foremost they assemble and then develop a topflight team of people.

Here's the way I like to put it, which I label "Seven Steps to Sustaining Success":

You take care of the people.

The people take care of the service.

The service takes care of the customer.

The customer takes care of the profit.

The profit takes care of the re-investment.

The re-investment takes care of the re-invention.

The re-invention takes care of the future.

(And at every step the only measure is EXCELLENCE.)

The obvious point: Developing people comes first. It is the “That without which there is nothing ...”

The leader’s job?

Leaders “do” people.*

(*I have a slide that goes: Leaders do people. PERIOD.)

I’d been doing some serious thinking (re-thinking) about leadership when I came across *Practice Perfect: 42 Rules for Getting Better at Getting Better*, by Doug Lemov, Erica Woolway, and Katie Yezzi. It changed my life. I’m not actually sure about that, but I’m sure that it made me change my perspective. (I’d strongly urge you to read the book.)

In short, in excruciating detail, the authors make the case for directing almost all training toward the bits—not the whole. Integration must take place—but integrative training is actually wasted or even counterproductive if the pieces have not been mastered. I was already starting to head down this path, but *Practice Perfect* iced the argument.

So the story here will be simple in outline—challenging as all get out in implementation. I’m arguing—not exactly original—that leading, like football or music or theater, can be largely broken down into activities. And until those activities are trained in and practiced and more or less mastered, it’s premature to deal with the high falutin’ stuff like vision and values and energy and enthusiasm. (Vitaly important as these characteristics are!)

As you wade into what follows (if you choose to do so), I want to make one point clear. Every item below can be subject to study *and* training *and* practice *and* evaluation—e.g., re item #1, I don’t want you to “get better” at listening. I want you to:

Study listening—book or video learning or some such.

Subject yourself to intense training in listening.

Practice listening ceaselessly—with effective feedback.

Then practice some more. Then take refresher training with some degree of regularity.

(Slippage for bosses, assuming they get there in the first place, is the norm, not the exception.)

The goal: Become a full-fledged “professional listener.”

*Hey, God alone knows how many hours you spent learning accounting and finance, marketing, etc. I want you to direct the same abundant energy on becoming, yes, a notable professional listener.**

*See more at Appendix ONE

To get at this topic in short form, I'd ask you to take a quiz and to score yourself on a scale of 10, where 1 is awful and 10 is masterful. What follows are the essence-of-leadership activities (or a rough stab at them) I'd like you to self-evaluate:

_____ I am what some call an “aggressive listener,” giving, without fail, intense, undivided attention to the speaker and very rarely interrupting; I am a visibly aggressive listener, attempting to be an implacable role model for aggressive listening.

_____ Listening is Item #1 in our set of Core Cultural Values.

_____ ***I believe in “aggressive listening” so much that it is part of everyone’s evaluation and everyone must take annual refresher training in aggressive listening per se.***

_____ I am a full-fledged student of listening, aiming for the same level of “professional excellence” that I’d aim for in a specialty like marketing or finance.

_____ I am exceedingly meticulous about the exact construction of the questions I ask, always mannerly, always probing, always giving the person questioned space/time to formulate a thoughtful answer; my follow-up is not “soft” but is “supportive” to a fault. The questioning process is near the heart of effective leadership practice and I approach it with the gravity it deserves.

_____ I understand the complexity of and the power of excellent questioning skill. I am a formal student of the art and science of asking questions.

_____ I view meetings, which absorb an extraordinary amount of my time (and which always will), to be, by definition, my premier leadership opportunity; I do intense preparation for the most brief of meetings, and make it clear, beginning with body language, that I view the/any meeting as an opportunity, not an annoyance or distraction. I understand if I give off “another-damn-meeting” vibes, I will infect every participant in a flash.

_____ In meetings and every other interaction, I make it clear that we are all part of a civil society; vigorous debate is essential, but good manners, regardless of the passion for a particular position, matter a great deal.

_____ “Helping” sounds innocent/obvious, but it’s anything but; giving help must be meticulously tailored to each individual and her/his momentary circumstance. I have studied in depth the complex process of helping per se and I am able to help in a way that is useful and psychologically sound.

_____ Conversations—obviously—are the meat & potatoes, the hors d’oeuvres, main course & dessert of life. I have studied the science of conversations per se, learning and practicing the tools associated with making every communication/conversation count.

_____ ***I believe in the Iron Law of Communication:
Regardless of circumstances, if there is a
miscommunication ... it’s my fault.***

_____ I believe in effective & extensive training with passion to the point of fanaticism. The quality of each of our training courses is routinely “breathtaking.” (And is evaluated remorselessly.) Our Chief Training Officer receives compensation and acknowledgement on a par with, say, the CFO; line trainers are chosen with the same care and rigor one would apply to hiring a research scientist.

_____ Appreciation and acknowledgement may be the most powerful forces in the universe, and I go out of my way hour by hour to connect with everyone I so much as pass in a corridor, and make them feel, by, at the very least, eye contact, that I

“get” their importance to our enterprise. I have ... ***studied*** ... appreciation/acknowledgement per se and understand analytically its stunning power.

_____ “Thank you”; I thank people for their contributions—small even more than large. Though “thank you” fits under acknowledgement, the TY words per se are “power words,” and I keep at least casual track of my daily “Thank you” score.

_____ “I’m sorry”: Effective apology, as research as well as common sense demonstrates, transforms (“transform,” strong but appropriate word) customer relationships and relationships among peers; I go out of my way to take rapid and visible responsibility for and the initiative in addressing the slightest of real or perceived screw-ups. Moreover, I have instilled recognition of the astounding power of this “tactic” throughout our group/workforce.

_____ I am always on the prowl for people who, unbidden, are routinely helpful to others, who will drop their own precious task in a flash to give a helping hand to someone who needs a hand at a critical moment. I make it clear that mutual helpfulness is a core “cultural” trait, which will be routinely acknowledged and formally taken into account in all evaluations.

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____ Presentation excellence. Those of us who do not do manual work “listen” and “talk” for a living; together, talking and listening constitute our profession as leaders. Intense “professional” training in both is imperative—there is nothing in the least automatic about these skills. I visibly support and require presentation training and development; and practice ceaselessly to improve my own presentation skills.

____ Body language is said to account for as much as 90% of our communication effectiveness. I am a student of body language, a relentless self-observer, and assiduous in turning body language per se into a primary trait of effective leadership.

____ *Many say that hiring is the most important task in the organization. Assuming that’s more or less true, I can call myself and 100% of my leader peers true “hiring professionals,” avid students and practitioners of hiring excellence.*

____ There is perhaps no more complex task than developing and executing an evaluation process that is a major/“Top 5” strength for our entire leadership population. **(GE, incredibly, calls the evaluation process associated with its manager population the corporation’s #1 strength.)** I have schooled myself in the intricacies of the evaluation process, instituted formal training in evaluation, and designed the evaluation process with the same care I would assign to, say, design of the budgetary process. All leaders are strictly evaluated on the quality of their evaluation practice.

____ I acknowledge that time is my only resource—and manage accordingly. I evaluate in exacting detail my time allocation to insure that it visibly matches my espoused priorities. I evaluate daily, weekly, monthly with dispassionate rigor.

____ In managing my time, I keep a substantial amount of my calendar open (25%+) in order to deal with the vagaries of the leadership job. I guard with zeal against the sin of chronic over-scheduling.

____ I am expert at and an avid practitioner of MBWA/Managing By Wandering Around—the key to staying in touch and modeling core values and informally engaging employees. “Obsessive” MBWA effectively surpasses other priorities. I am thoughtful, not haphazard, in my approach to MBWA.

____ Am I an avid student of the process of influencing others per se—or do I trust my instincts since I’ve “been around”? There is a massive amount of research on this topic, and influencing per se should be considered a discreet skill to be studied and practiced and mastered.

- _____ I have painstakingly made myself expert in understanding the complexity of the decision-making process. I am vividly aware of the (enormous!) biases that seep into the decision-making process, and work formally to address or reduce those biases—and instill this understanding and “studenthood” into 100% of the management corps.
- _____ I am a brilliantly schooled and practiced student of negotiation. All jobs include at least informal daily negotiation, and negotiating skills are an implicit part of daily affairs. Training, of various degrees of intensity, is required of every manager.
- _____ Do I talk ceaselessly about the importance of execution, but assume that since it is an obvious priority it does not have to be a subject of directed study? This is especially the case for young/first-time managers. Hence, the conscious management of the execution process per se is a topic of study and practice.
- _____ ***100% of our employees have specific development plans/programs carefully designed and precisely tailored for them and on which they—and especially their managers!—are rigorously evaluated. Any employee one stops in the hall can talk cogently about her/his personal professional development plan and her/his progress thereon (and the degree to which she/he has been aided by her/his manager). Individual and collective and directly managed employee growth is a part of our core value set.***
- _____ I am excruciatingly aware of the “d”iversity of my/our team. (I call it “lower case ‘d’iversity”—not the gender/race variety, but diversity on every-damn-dimension-imaginable.) I actively ensure, for example, that every team features an exciting mix of backgrounds that enhances the likelihood of their following interesting/creative paths to developing and executing projects of every shape and size.
- _____ I am fully aware through study and analysis of the power/staggering value of gender-balance from top to bottom in our organization and relative to everything we do. I have a priority strategic program for addressing this issue/preeminent opportunity.
- _____ Every leader/manager is exceedingly well trained in teambuilding per se. Every manager is assessed on her/his teambuilding skills and results. Attention to teambuilding per se is on the daily agenda of every one of our leaders.

___ **I fully understand that perhaps the most important asset—and determinant of our success on so many dimensions—is the full cadre of first-line leaders. We, for example, have the most extensive and effective first-line manager/leader selection and training and development programs in our industry, so good that they make one “gasp”!**

___ Everyone in the organization (100%!) is trained in “business”—that is, the way a business works, including the financial aspects thereof, so that he or she can have at least a rudimentary grasp of our overall place in the world.

How did you do on this assessment exam?

Perhaps not all that well. While nirvana is not likely, at the very least, heightened awareness may—I dearly hope—lead you to examine your own affairs and the development of leaders throughout your organization.

I will stand by my assertion that these are the things leaders actually do—minute by minute, day after day.

I will also stand ramrod straight by my assertion that each and every one of these attributes can be rigorously studied and practiced and mastered—that not a one is “instinctive.”

The elements again, in summary form ...

“Aggressive ‘professional’ listener.”

Expert at questioning. (Questioning **“professional.”**)
Meetings as leadership opportunity #1.
Creating a “civil society.”

Expert at “helping.” (Helping **“professional.”**)
Expert at holding productive conversations.
Fanatic about clear communications.
Fanatic about training.
Master of appreciation/acknowledgement.

Effective at apology.
Creating a culture of automatic helpfulness by all to all.
Presentation excellence.
Conscious master of body language.

Master of hiring. (Hiring *“professional”*)

Master of evaluating people.
Time manager par excellence.
Avid practitioner of MBWA/Managing By Wandering Around.
Avid student of the process of influencing others per se.
Student of decision-making and devastating impact of irrational aspects thereof.
Brilliantly schooled student of negotiation.
Creating a no-nonsense execution culture.
Meticulous about employee development/100% of staff.
Student of the power of “d”iversity (all flavors of difference).
Aggressive in pursuing gender balance.
Making team-building excellence everyone’s daily priority.
Understanding value of matchless 1st-line management.
Instilling “business sense” in one and all.

Have at it!

Appendix ONE

“Strategic” “Professional” LISTENING

“If you don’t listen, you don’t sell anything.”
—Carolyn Marland, former CEO, Guardian Group

“I wasn’t bowled over by David Boies’ intelligence. What impressed me was that when he asked a question he waited for an answer. He not only listened, he made me feel like I was the only person in the room.”
—from Marshall Goldsmith, “The One Skill that Separates,” *Fast Company*

“The best leaders talk with people, not at them”
—Susan Scott, “Let Silence Do the Heavy Listening,” chapter title, *Fierce Conversations: Achieving Success at Work and in Life, One Conversation at a Time*

Harvard M.D. Jerome Groopman wrote a fascinating book titled *How Doctors Think*. Dr. Groopman claims, which is not terribly surprising, that the best source for a doctor concerning the patient’s complaint is—the patient. Yet he goes on to cite research showing that on average the doctor interrupts the patient after ... *18 seconds*. I’ll bet you a pretty penny that the average manager rarely surpasses the 18-second mark!

The doc interrupts after ... *18 seconds*.

Most bosses would agree that listening is “important.” But, again, is effective listening *per se* a strategic obsession? First up: *Is the boss sure that he/she is a listening pro?* Has the entire leader corps been intensively trained in listening—“fierce” listening? Why the insistence on the formality of the training—and retraining—in listening? Simple. (Yes, truly simple.) Because, beyond a shadow of doubt, listening is a peerless differentiator when it is applied to anything from sales to effective joint ventures. And it is surely tool #1 in every leader’s armament. Listening “Pros” = Business & Leadership Winners.

I jotted down a list of the things that flow from effective listening (“strategic listening” or “aggressive listening” or “fierce listening”). Listening is ...*

the heart and soul of engagement,
the heart and soul of recognition,
the heart and soul of strategic partnering,
the heart and soul of learning,
the heart and soul of customer connection.
And so on ...and on.

*See the extended list at the end of this Appendix.

*Listening
“Pros” =
Business &
Leadership
Winners.*

Listening per se is a ... *PROFESSION.*

As with all things important, the key is becoming a serious student and practitioner. In fact, I'll go so far to say that listening per se is/can be a "profession" ... as much as playing the cello or flying a commercial aircraft. While some are doubtless better than others (e.g., women >> men), this discipline can be studied and practiced and improved upon—individually and as a group.

"My education in leadership began in Washington when I was an assistant to Defense Secretary William Perry. He was universally loved and admired by heads of state ... and our own and allied troops. ***A lot of that was because of the way he listened. Each person who talked to him had his complete, undivided attention. Everyone blossomed in his presence, because he was so respectful, and I realized I wanted to affect people the same way.***

"Perry became my role model but that was not enough. Something bigger had to happen, and it did. It was painful to realize how often I just pretended to hear people. ***How many times had I barely glanced up from my work when a subordinate came into my office? I wasn't paying attention; I was marking time until it was my turn to give orders.*** That revelation led me to a new personal goal. I vowed to treat every encounter with every person on Benfold (Abrashoff was the Captain) as the most important thing at that moment. It wasn't easy, but my crew's enthusiasm and ideas kept me going.

"It didn't take me long to realize that my young crew was smart, talented and full of good ideas that usually came to nothing because no one in charge had ever listened to them. ... I decided that my job was to listen aggressively ..."—Mike Abrashoff, *It's Your Ship: Management Techniques from the Best Damn Ship in the Navy*

Appreciating Listening ...

Listening is ...

(And when you read “listening,” please substitute “*OBSESSION*” with listening.)

Listening is ... the ultimate mark of *Respect*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Engagement*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Kindness*.

Listening is ... the heart and soul of *Thoughtfulness*.

Listening is ... the basis for true *Collaboration*.

Listening is ... the basis for true *Partnership*.

Listening is ... a *Team Sport*.

Listening is ... a *Developable Individual Skill*.*

(*Though women are *far* better at it than men.)

Listening is ... the basis for *Community*.

Listening is ... the bedrock of *Joint Ventures that work*.

Listening is ... the bedrock of *Joint Ventures that last*.

Listening is ... the core of *effective Cross-functional Communication**

(*Which is in turn Attribute #1 of organizational effectiveness.**)

(**I know, I keep repeating this—only because “Attribute #1” is no exaggeration.)

Listening is ... the engine of *superior EXECUTION*.

Listening is ... the key to *making the Sale*.

Listening is ... the key to *Keeping the Customer’s Business*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network development*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network maintenance*.

Listening is ... the engine of *Network expansion*.

Listening is ... *Learning*.

Listening is ...the *sine qua non* of *Renewal*.

Listening is ...the *sine qua non* of *Creativity*.

Listening is ...the *sine qua non* of *Innovation*.

Listening is ... the core of *taking Diverse opinions aboard*.

Listening is ... *Strategy*.

Listening is ... *Source #1* of “*Value-added*.”

Listening is ... *Differentiator #1*.

Listening is ... *Profitable*.*

(*The “R.O.I.” from listening is higher than from any other single activity.)

Listening underpins ... *Commitment to EXCELLENCE*.

Do you agree with the above?
(Frankly, that's a set-up question. How could you *not* agree?)
(I hope.)

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *a Core Value*?
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *perhaps Core Value #1*?*
(* "We are Effective Listeners—we treat Listening EXCELLENCE as the Centerpiece of our Commitment to Respect and Engagement and Community and Growth"—or some such.)
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *a Core Competence*?
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *Core Competence #1*?

Shouldn't listening be ... *Core Competence #1*?

If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *an explicit "agenda item" at every Meeting*?
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *our Strategy—per se? (Listening = Strategy.)*
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 skill we look for in Hiring (for every job)?*
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 attribute we examine in our Evaluations?*
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 skill we look for in Promotion decisions?*
If you agree, shouldn't listening be ... *the #1 Training priority at every stage of everyone's career—from Day #1 to Day LAST?*

If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *in the next 30 MINUTES?*
If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *at your NEXT meeting?*
If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *by the end of the DAY?*
If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *in the next 30 DAYS?*
If you agree, what are you going to do about it ... *in the next 12 MONTHS?*

*If you agree, what
are you going to do
about “strategic”/
“fierce” listening in
the next ... 30
MINUTES?*