

# Leadership development: Why you need to stop talking to start leading

Recently, a colleague and I were at a dinner function with a group of leaders from a client company. We found ourselves seated at a table with a new member of the executive team who we were meeting for the first time. Waiting for the plated meals to arrive, we eased into the conversation with small talk about sports and weather, and then we went deeper inquiring about his family, his career, his thoughts on the industry.

When the dinner wrapped up 45 minutes later, my colleague and I had learned a lot about him. We had learned about his years working abroad, his days as a partner at an IT consulting firm and his time on Wall Street. Yet he had learned nothing about me or my colleague. In 45 minutes of conversation, he hadn't asked either of us a single question.

Sadly, this common, self-absorbed style of relating has reached new, alarming levels. Social interactions no longer seem to be two-way. Whether with friends, colleagues, new acquaintances or even family members, the common courtesies of asking questions and listening have given way to an urgent need to speak and be heard.

In my work as an executive coach, I try to talk no more than 30% of the time, giving my clients the majority of the airtime. When I am talking, I'm mostly asking questions. By giving my clients that airtime, I'm able to understand their challenges, relate to their needs and extend the empathy they badly want and need. For me, listening is how I learn. For my clients, it's a way to show I value them.

A recent Harvard study zeros in on the scale of this problem: People spend most of their time during conversations talking about their own viewpoints and tend to self-promote when meeting people for the first time. In contrast, high question-askers—those who probe for information from others—are perceived as more responsive and are better liked.

Of course, being liked is not the main goal of conversation, but it can be the starting point for healthy relationships. The people in our lives want to feel valued and validated. And asking people questions does this and more. In my work with leaders and teams, I've learned that asking genuine questions and listening to what people have to say can have these benefits:

- Improve engagement by showing we value the views of others
- Improve the quality of decisions by understanding multiple perspectives on an issue
- Improve collaboration and buy-in by inviting dissenting views that may otherwise go unheard
- Increase influence by involving others in decisions and direction setting
- Develop stronger workplace relationships, leading us to want to invest in the success of others.

The job of the leader is to ensure that bad news surfaces fast. The sooner the toughest issues get raised, the sooner they get fixed. Yet many leaders I observe put more energy into telling and convincing than into listening and learning. Leaders are often mistakenly viewed as the experts who have all the answers.

At higher levels, the worse it seems to get. Many of the CEOs and SVPs I work with are shielded from the real

issues. They have failed to create a culture of openness and candor, which must start with their own curiosity and interest in others—with their willingness to ask and listen.

These same leaders often seek counsel from their coaches, asking, “How do I develop better relationships with my people? How can we increase employee engagement? How can I show people they are really valued? How can we create a culture of learning and innovation?”

Fortunately, there’s a simple approach that doesn’t require a big budget. Here are four ways to get started:

1. **In your meetings, observe what’s going on.** How much are people talking and positioning versus asking, listening and learning? What is your own tendency?
2. **Try not to talk first.** Force yourself to let others go first. Don’t jump in too quickly to fill the silence.
3. **Make a habit of asking questions that increase learning** like, “Tell me more about your recommendation. What am I missing? What are we not thinking of? What are some other ways we can approach this challenge? What’s our real purpose in this?”
4. **Go deep by asking follow-up questions.** Model showing curiosity about others’ views.

As a leader, you are well served to ask the right questions versus always having the right answers. Try it for a couple of weeks and see what happens.

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