

# Tuned In

By learning to be a better listener, you will become a great Sales Leader. By Rick Davis



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You are in the midst of an important and productive meeting with a client. But as you listen to him your mind begins racing with ideas. You begin thinking about what you might say next and, as you contemplate your comments, a brainstorm of a fantastic new idea pops into your head. Another inspiration enters your mind, and you are already thinking about the next thing you will say to the client. You suddenly realize that you have not heard a word he has said for at least 30 seconds. What do you do?

*A. Pretend that you have heard everything he has said and nod knowingly.*

*B. Ask him to repeat what he just said, admitting that your mind drifted.*

*C. Conclude that you need to become a better listener because your attention should have never drifted in the first place.*

The answer obviously is C. When a person is speak-

ing to you during an important meeting, the correct behavior is to listen. Yet, if you are like most people, you have zoned-out at one time or another during a sales call and you recognize that listening is not always a simple task. With all the challenges and distractions in life, taking time to focus carefully on what others are saying often becomes either an inconvenience or a challenging task.

As you probably know, your power as a business leader is founded on your ability to listen. The question is whether you are actually doing what you know you should do. Listening is not a natural act; rather, it is a skill that takes practice and concentration. So if you really want to improve your listening skills, you need to proactively seek ways to become more perceptive and to concentrate more effectively.

Great Sales Leaders are powerful listeners. In Jim Collins' book *Good to Great*, his research shows that a prevailing trait of great leaders is their open-minded approach to problems and their ability to listen. He discovered that the best CEOs of organizations are usually more like Socrates and Abraham Lincoln—men of few words but with many questions—than dynamic executives that attract and thrive on media attention. More important, he discovered that soft-spoken visionary leaders usually create powerful and lasting results within their companies and among the people around them.

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To become a powerful listener, you first need to recognize the obstacles that impede your ability to focus and hear effectively. Although the list is extensive, there are some common challenges. The most obvious hurdles are external distractions, which often can be avoided by scheduling important meetings, such as interviews or employee reviews, in discrete locations; however, more often than not, noise interruptions such as passersby, phones, and the like are unavoidable. Distractions are usually inevitable, so you must strive to keep your focus on the immediate conversation to avoid being mentally sidetracked.

Our natural tendency to prejudice others different than us also can create a serious distraction. Most people communicate better with those similar to themselves, people who look, speak, and think just like them. When people

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are different, it is easy to assume that they will have viewpoints that disagree with your own and, as a result, you mistakenly put up barriers of resistance

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that hinder your ability to listen and learn. It is during these encounters that you should be most vigilant about keeping an open mind. People from different backgrounds with different experiences, varying viewpoints, and

unique opinions offer the most profound learning opportunities. In order to create real personal and professional power, the secret is to not merely remain open-minded in the face of diversity, but to actually seek it out.

However, the most profound obstacle to listening stems simply from our lack of concentration. As children we played the telephone game in school, where a circle of children whisper a secret from one person to the next. When the message has gone

around the entire circle, the final recipient blurts out the original comments. The amusement of the game is that over the course of translation from one child to the next the statement almost always morphs into something totally differ-

ent. Poor listening skills were the culprit that distorted the original message.

When information is inaccurately communicated, business suffers as individuals, teams, and organizations lose opportunities for growth and financial gain. Conversely, listening skills can create power in a multitude of ways, such as the facilitation of ideas, improved accuracy of information, increased esteem for people, open-mindedness, and more.

## Lend an Ear

Increase your leadership qualities and selling skills by trying the following:

- **Maintain eye contact and avoid distractions.** It is difficult to let your mind drift when you are looking directly into the eyes of another human being. Moreover, this gesture of respect creates a powerful connection that dramatically enhances com-

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munication and opens up opportunities for ideas and mutual growth between two people.

that may be a sign that you are not sincerely interested and, more significantly, that you have stopped listening.

■ Ask questions with sincere interest. In a sales and management role, it is easy to ask questions that are manipulative and motivated by selfishness. If you are already thinking about what you want to say before another person has finished speaking,

Listen and keep an open mind in order to truly understand the viewpoints and gifts of other people.

■ Embrace diversity. In a world in which the media tend to homogenize our daily existence, take time to enjoy the differences in humanity, one individual at a time. Powerful leaders do not strive to mold individuals into a homogeneous performance unit, but instead allow each person to blossom freely and contribute by using their unique strengths. When you listen carefully, you recognize that everyone will contribute differently and should be managed to bring out their best traits.

■ Read someone else's story. It is easy to believe that the "other guy" has had an easier path in life. We often get so caught up in our own struggles that we fail to realize that every human being has a story to tell and believes that his or her struggle would make a good novel. Walk a mile in their shoes, then a few more. Almost everyone's life story probably would make a good novel—if you are willing to stop and listen to it.

■ Don't interrupt. If there is one characteristic that differentiates a powerful business leader from an imposter, it is the ability to listen without interrupting someone. Powerful executives can do this because they possess security and self-esteem and know they have nothing to prove. Don't interrupt and you'll discover that other people are more anxious to listen to you when it is your turn to speak. Patience is power.

Remember that great managers and Sales Leaders recognize their own limitations and know they do not have all the answers. Listen carefully to others and you will attract attention and develop powerful alliances. You will develop better employees, customers, and teammates, and you will feel better about the way you can make people feel about themselves. And you most definitely will learn something in the process. ■