

LISTEN. LEARN. LEAD.

As young professionals, we constantly hear, from several fronts and in various ways, that we need to be leaders. Want to land a great job? Be a leader. Want a promotion? Be a leader. Want more fulfilling professional and personal experiences? Be. A. Leader.

But what does this mean and how can we “be a leader”? And not just be one, but be the best leader that each of us can personally be? Sometimes many of us equate being a leader to being the loudest or seemingly strongest person in any situation, whether it is vocally or personality wise. From this perspective, it can be misleading. It can also seem daunting, especially if you’re naturally introverted, shy, quiet, or maybe just unsure of yourself. You might even tell yourself that you’re “just not that way” or “well, some people have to be followers”.

While the above are all valid thoughts, the good news is that the foundation of being a solid leader is simpler (not always easier, just simpler) than we sometimes make it out to be. So, what are the pillars that make up strong leaders? The abilities to listen, learn, and build trust.

Effective leaders have robust listening skills, allowing them to learn from and build trust with those that they meet. Listening is a skill that everyone needs, yet so many misunderstand and struggle with. We often think of leaders as those with the loudest voices, quantity of rhetoric or that have control over the conversations at hand. With this mentality, people are frequently concentrating solely on taking their turn to speak instead of truly listening. However, in doing this, you lose all value in what the other parties are sharing, which in turn, makes it harder for you to engage in meaningful conversation for learning and trust building opportunities.

So how can we be more effective listeners? Here are some tips:

Be present and without distractions.

In many ways, we’re in a constant state of distraction. Between our phones, screens, and thoughts, it can be difficult to stay present in a conversation. By turning off and separating yourself from all potential disruptions, you can better focus on the person communicating.

Controlling your thoughts is another part of this that might be tough for some. You might be thinking about your upcoming meeting, your next meal, or what you have planned for the weekend. To keep yourself grounded and in the moment, consider daily or frequent meditation.

Hold your judgments and agendas.

You may have heard that listening is an act of empathy. This is true as real listening happens when you're trying to understand a person's perspective through their lenses. To successfully do this, we need to take ourselves completely out of the equation. Meaning, listening with an open mind and no agenda, as people can often sense judgment through verbal or nonverbal cues. This immediately puts guards up, affecting the quality of the discussion. Additionally, listening without our own agendas can help us carefully consider the other person's thoughts. When we listen with an agenda, we tend to only hear the parts of the conversation we want to for the purpose of guiding the discussion in alignment with our own goals. However, it is often the unexpected pieces that are the golden nuggets, which we miss when we're focusing on ourselves.

A shift in perspective: listening to learn.

By listening to learn, you're setting your only goal as discovering more about the person or topic at hand. With this approach, you're more likely to reflect before responding, ask in-depth and valuable questions, and reiterate the conversation in ways that lead to a better understanding and appreciation. Free growth opportunities and education, am I right?!

By being a more effective listener, you will naturally build trust with those around you. Since trust is an activity that is centered around other people (not yourself), it's important to understand the other party. You can only do this by genuinely listening. From there, it's all one big learning opportunity filled with chances to create true connections.