

Can You Hear Me Now

By John C. Maxwell, March 2007

It's happened to all of us. We're blazing through conversation when we realize we're not getting cues, (uh-huh, yeah, yep, ok), from our friend on the other end of the call. Uncertain, we ask whether or not our buddy remains on the call: "Hello? Are you there? Can you hear me?" The ensuing silence prompts us to look at our phone. Sure enough, the call has been dropped.

As frustrating as a dropped call can be, given the complexity mobile phone communications, we are not overly surprised when we occasionally are cut off from a conversation. At some level, we understand the limitations of network bandwidth, battery life, and signal strength.

While dropped calls are explainable, few experiences are as demeaning or insulting as being dropped in face-to-face conversation. When we're talking to a person who tunes us out, we feel worthless. When a listener's posture or facial expressions show boredom or disinterest, we feel insignificant. Similarly, we are annoyed by ceaseless interruptions or being cut short when speaking.

Something inside of us demands to be heard, to be acknowledged, and to know that our ideas and opinions matter. Great leaders have mastered the art of listening, and by doing so, they gain wisdom, earn respect, and win friends. In its February 2007 edition of *Leading Effectively*, The Center for Creative Leadership summarizes six listening tips from author Michael Hoppe.

Paying Attention

One of the greatest gifts a leader can give is his or her undivided attention. As simple as it sounds, in practice, paying attention can take a heavy dose of discipline. Whether we're thinking about an upcoming meeting or an urgent phone call, our minds are cluttered with dozens of thoughts at any point during the day. To offer full attention in conversation, Hoppe suggests:

- Allowing time and opportunity for the other person to think and speak.
- Being present, focused on the moment, and operating from a place of respect.

Holding Judgment

By nature, leaders initiate action. However, when listening, leaders must be wary of jumping in too soon with their assessment of a situation. Being overeager to voice an opinion communicates self-importance. Instead, Hoppe proposes the following:

- Be open to new ideas, new perspectives and new possibilities.
- Suspend judgment, withhold criticism, and avoid arguing or selling your point right away.

Reflecting

In reflecting, the listener affirms the person speaking by matching their emotional tone and restating important themes from the conversation. Reflecting reinforces a listener's involvement and interest in a conversation. Hoppe weighs in with the following tips on reflecting:

- Mirror the other person's information and emotions by paraphrasing key points.
- Don't make assumptions.

Clarifying

In communication, when intent differs from interpretation, the misunderstanding can have troubling consequences. Hoppe recommends clarifying by:

- Clearing up confusion.
- Inviting reflection and a thoughtful response instead of telling others what to do.

Summarizing

Without outlining action steps or assigning responsibility, many meetings conclude in confusion. As a conversation draws to a close, be sure to review promises made and to write down commitments given. Hoppe's tips on summarizing include:

- Restating key themes.
- Being clear on mutual responsibilities and follow-up.

Sharing

Leaders are confident, decisive, and quick to volunteer advice. However, when listening, a leader's first job is to gain full understanding of the person speaking. Then, and only then, should the leader begin to coach or instruct. Hoppe proposes two tips to remember when sharing:

- Seek understanding before seeking to be understood.
- Use similar experiences to introduce ideas, feelings, or suggestions.

"The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer."

~ Henry David Thoreau