

**From:**

***The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader***  
**By John C. Maxwell**

L I S T E N I N G :

T O C O N N E C T W I T H T H E I R H E A R T S ,

U S E Y O U R E A R S

The ear of the leader  
must ring with the voices of the people.

—*Woodrow Wilson, American President*

A good leader encourages followers to tell him  
what he needs to know, not what he wants to hear.

—*John C. Maxwell*

A S M U C H A S S H E T A L K S ,  
S H E L I S T E N S M O R E

Who would you include in a list of the most influential people in the United States? Certainly the president would make that list. So would Alan Greenspan. Michael Jordan might make it—his is the most recognized face on the planet. You could argue for Bill Gates to be on it. Stop for a moment and think about the people you would include. Now I want you to add a name that you might not have considered: Oprah Winfrey.

In 1985, Winfrey was practically unknown. She appeared in Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple*, and she was the host of a local morning talk show, which she had been doing in Chicago for a year. What success she had achieved could be attributed to her ability to talk. "Communicating with people is how I always developed any kind of value about myself," explains Winfrey. And she received praise for it early in life. "I remember being two years old and speaking in church and hearing people say, 'That child sure can talk. That is one talking child.'"

But Winfrey also did more than her share of listening. In fact, the ability to listen has been a chief characteristic of her life. She is an inveterate learner, and her listening ability got its start as she absorbed the wisdom of writers. She devoured fiction and biographies, learning about how other people feel and think—and in the process she also learned about herself.

That bent toward listening has served her well in every

aspect of her career. Its application is obvious for her television show. She is constantly observing and listening to find issues to address on the air. And when she brings celebrities, authors, or experts on her show, she genuinely listens to what they have to say. Music star Madonna said about her, "She has been in the public eye for so long, yet she has this amazing rapport with people. I don't know how she does it." She does it through listening.

Oprah Winfrey's ability to listen has been rewarded with remarkable success and incredible influence. She is the highest paid entertainer in the world and is worth nearly half a billion dollars. Each week, thirty-three million people in the United States alone watch her show.

Despite her show's success, she recently gave thought to discontinuing it. But instead she decided to revamp it. How did she decide what changes to make? She asked her staff.

"It doesn't have to be work," she told them. "Making changes in this show is like making changes in our lives. It can be fun to do. So let's stretch. What can we do to make it more fun?"

She had a lot of doubts about one of the ideas her people came up with. But she also had enough wisdom to listen to it—and give it a try. The idea was for a book club. As you probably know, its success has been phenomenal. Hundreds of thousands of people are learning and growing by reading, some for the first time. And Winfrey is delighted. Her goal in life is to add value to people. And she succeeds because she listens.

## F L E S H I N G I T O U T

In *The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership*, I point out that leaders touch a heart before they ask for a hand. That's the Law of Connection. But before a leader can touch a person's heart, he has to know what's in it. He learns that by listening.

An unwillingness to listen is too common among poor leaders. Peter Drucker, the father of American management, believes that 60 percent of all management problems are the result of faulty communications. I would say that the overwhelming majority of communication problems come from poor listening.

A lot of voices are clamoring out there for your attention. As you think about how to spend your listening time, keep in mind that you have two purposes for listening: to connect with people and to learn. For that reason, you should keep your ear open to these people:

*1. Your Followers*

Good leaders, the kind that people want to follow, do more than conduct business when they interact with followers. They take the time to get a feel for who each one is as a person. Philip Stanhope, the earl of Chesterfield, believed, "many a man would rather you heard his story than granted his request." If you're in the habit of listening only to the facts and not the person who expresses them, change your focus—and really listen.

## 2. *Your Customers*

A Cherokee saying states, “Listen to the whispers and you won’t have to hear the screams.” I am amazed by the leaders who are so caught up in their own ideas that they never hear their customers’ concerns, complaints, and suggestions. In his book *Business @ the Speed of Thought*, Microsoft CEO Bill Gates said, “Unhappy customers are always a concern. They’re also your greatest opportunity.” Good leaders always make it a priority to keep in contact with the people they’re serving.

## 3. *Your Competitors*

Sam Markewich announced, “If you don’t agree with me, it means you haven’t been listening.” Though he was no doubt making a joke, the sad truth is that when a leader sees another organization as competition, he focuses his attention on building his own case or championing his cause and forgets to learn from what the other group is doing.

Larry King says, “I remind myself every morning: nothing I say this day will teach me anything. So if I’m going to learn, I must do it by listening.” As a leader, you don’t want to base your actions on what the other guy is doing, but you should still listen and learn what you can to improve yourself.

## 4. *Your Mentors*

No leader is so advanced or experienced that he can afford to be without a mentor. I’ve learned so much from leaders who have more experience than I have, people such as Melvin Maxwell (my

father), Elmer Towns, Jack Hayford, Fred Smith, and J. Oswald Sanders. If you don't already have a mentor, go out and find one. If you can't get someone to help you in person, begin the process by reading books. That's where I got started. The main thing is to get the process under way.

#### REFLECTING ON IT

Are you a good listener? I know when I started in leadership, I wasn't. I was too busy doing my own thing and trying to make things happen. But once I slowed down and paid greater attention to what was going on around me, I found that my activity had sharper focus and accomplished more.

When was the last time you really paid close attention to people and what they have to say? Do more than just grab onto facts. Start listening not only for words, but also for feelings, meanings, and undercurrents.

#### BRINGING IT HOME

To improve your listening, do the following:

- *Change your schedule.* Do you spend time listening to your followers, customers, competitors, and mentors? If you don't have all four groups on your calendar regularly, you're probably not giving them enough attention. Pencil in time for each of them on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.

- *Meet people on their turf.* A key to being a good listener is to find common ground with people. The next time you meet with an employee or a customer, discipline yourself to ask four or five questions about him as a person. Get to know who he is, and seek common ground to build your connection with him.
- *Listen between the lines.* As you interact with people, you certainly want to pay attention to the factual content of the conversation. But don't ignore the emotional content. Sometimes you can learn more about what's really going on by reading between the lines. Spend time in the coming days and weeks listening with your heart.

D A I L Y T A K E - A W A Y

President Theodore Roosevelt was a man of action, but he was also a good listener, and he appreciated that quality in other people. Once at a gala ball, he grew tired of meeting people who returned his remarks with stiff, mindless pleasantries. So he began to greet people with a smile, saying, "I murdered my grandmother this morning." Most people, so nervous about meeting him, didn't even hear what he said. But one diplomat did. Upon hearing the president's remark, he leaned over and whispered to him, "I'm sure she had it coming to her!" The only way to find out what you're missing is to start listening.