

# LEADERSHIP Excellence



Warren Bennis

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## Hold to the Iron Rod

*This leader has become so burdened with his positions and possessions, that, while he eyes the rod (high bar) longingly, he can't reach up for fear of having to let go of some things, discard his baggage, and grab hold of what is most important.*

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# Powerful Pause

*Listening is leadership.*



by Kevin Cashman

**E**FFECTIVE LEADERS speak to influence and motivate; exceptional leaders listen to learn, collaborate and innovate. Of all the core competencies critical to sustained leadership, listening is at, or near, the top of the list. As Calvin Coolidge put it, "no man has ever listened himself out of a job." Yet, listening is rare for many leaders, and this lack of listening is one of the key reasons leaders derail.

A startling 67 percent of new leaders fail within 18 months. Why? *Lack of listening.* Why do teams often break down? *Poor listening.* Why do relationships, in general, fail? *Inadequate listening. Leaders, in general, are poor listeners.* In fact, the greater the position of power, the more elevated the propensity to discount advice, mainly due to inflated self-confidence. Often, *we as leaders are more confident in ourselves* and our perceived past expertise than trusting of others, their experience and insights.

After 30 years of advising CEOs and senior leaders, we have observed *three pitfalls* to inadequate listening:

- **Listening pitfall 1: Hyper self-confidence.** When we see ourselves as the quintessential expert, the most experienced or accurate person in the room, we position ourselves to fall into a listening black hole. Others with valuable insights defer rather than speak up, diminishing rather than strengthening leadership teams. The kiss of death for collaboration, connection, and innovation is moving too quickly to our own perceived "right" answer. Slow down. Challenge yourself. Pause to listen a few minutes longer. Learn to lean in and learn from others.

- **Listening pitfall 2: Impatience and boredom.** When conversations or meetings don't reflect our point-of-view, we may get impatient or bored. Our inner voice, drowning out other voices, says, "They are not getting it!" They may not be getting your idea or solution, but they are getting something, possibly something valuable and hidden to you. If we are too caught up in our judgmental self-conversation, we can never genuinely listen and hear what

is going on around us. We lose on multiple levels: we don't learn; we don't know what is happening; we don't connect, and we don't innovate. Fight your impatience and boredom by looking deeper. Pause to question: *What are they seeing and understanding that I don't see? What are the beliefs underneath what is being said? What are the hopes and fears underneath the surface?* If you look at things in this new or different way, what would be the implications?

Challenge yourself to stay engaged by looking deeper. Remember, you can always disagree later, but as St. Francis advised, "seek first to understand."

- **Listening pitfall 3: Bias for action.** Listening is challenging because *we want to do something*, not just hear about it. We are certain we know the solution and urgently want to fix it. However, as a leader, it's not wise to rush in with the answers, unintentionally creating dependency and stunting the growth of others. Let groups struggle and strain longer, to grow, and to explore their own ideas and solutions. Listen to how they are collaborating, resolving conflict, and problem solving. Pause more and step in only when necessary. Sometimes leading is the discipline of getting out of the way for others.

*Avoiding pitfalls* is only part of mastering the art of listening. You enhance effective listening with three **Powerful Pauses**:

- **Powerful Pause 1: Balance self-confidence and humility.** Recently, I advised a CEO and his team in a talent review process. The CEO was very supportive of one up-and-coming talent. I asked, "Why do you love this candidate?"

He said: "He knows when to be self-confident and when to be humble, to learn and to collaborate." Knowing when to assert your point-of-view and knowing when to listen is the mark of great leadership. Exceptional leaders know when to be *receptive*—to be humble, listen, and learn, and when to be *assertive*. Humility keeps leaders open to learning; confidence compels leaders to serve, share, and create value through innovation. Leaders need to do both.

When we *overdo self-confidence* and then *underdo humility*, our listening suffers. Without humility, we will never listen. Why? We are always right!

Humility begins with *self-awareness*—deeply knowing your strengths and vulnerabilities, and *what you know* and *do not know*. Humility requires an attitude of wisdom that keeps you open to more learning. When you *know yourself* well, your authentic self-confidence and authentic humility are available.

- **Powerful pause 2: Grow others.** Pausing to listen to the needs, concerns and aspirations of our key people is crucial to growing talent. If you rush from meeting to meeting, project to project and rarely pause to check in with your key people, your risk mounts.

Growing others requires mastery of

the art of coaching, and great coaching involves two core skills: deep listening and deep questioning. At the end of every discussion . . . pause . . . and ask a meaningful core question: "How are you doing? What is energizing you? What is draining you? What are your biggest challenges? What are your aspirations?"



Having these deep developmental discussions—really engaging people—communicates care and connection. Pausing to grow people by taking them deeper will help to elevate the business conversation from management tactics to leadership excellence.

- **Powerful pause 3: Innovate.** Cultivating innovation may be the critical, strategic role for leaders today. Volatility and dynamic change compel us to come up with the new and the different. Challenging our teams to *go beyond* and then listening to their approaches is critical to getting more *innovation ready*. However, all innovation begins with self-innovation: *you must become the change you wish to see*. Leaders must become skilled innovators. After you embody vision, you must articulate it to stretch towards innovation. Then your job becomes: observe, question, listen and challenge. Over time, with the proper balance of this interaction, the *new* and the *different* emerge frequently.

**Practice the powerful pause of listening, the counter-intuitive step backwards, to have greater impact as you step forward. LE**

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**ACTION:** Listen to improve your leadership.