

# Lessons in Authentic Leadership

By

**Daniel D. Elash, Ph.D.**

People, intellectual capital and organizational effectiveness are the critical elements needed to sustain a competitive advantage in today's marketplace. Yesterday's competitive advantage quickly becomes today's minimal criteria for success. Never before have the lived experiences of the three generations that inhabit the world of work been so profoundly different. Assumptions, operating principles and worldviews are strikingly dissimilar across these generations. For example, within these generational cohorts, an appreciation of the importance of diversity issues tends to be inversely proportionate to age.

"Business as usual" becomes more of an oxymoron. Recent leadership transitions at companies such as ATT, General Motors and IBM have vividly demonstrated that knowing what used to work is insufficient today. If you want the job, you'd better know how to lead, and lead effectively. Discussion today about leadership and what it takes to be a leader abounds. Just stand in front of the bewildering array of prescriptions and suppositions in the business book section of any modern bookstore. In his opening remarks in The Dance of Change, Peter Senge wrote, "If you are an organizational leader, someone at any level concerned deeply about these challenges, then you face a daunting task. In effect, you are engaged in a great venture of exploration, risk, discovery, and change, without any comprehensive maps for guidance" (p. 3).

If you want the job, you'd better know how to lead, and lead effectively. However, as Senge points out, leadership isn't about having the answers. The mountain men of the Rocky Mountain fur trade in the 1820's and '30's were intrepid explorers and inveterate adventurers. They became the guides for the wagon train migrations of the 1850's and '60's. They were qualified to lead because they had been there. They knew the secrets. They'd mastered the crafts. Many a person in a leadership role still fancies him/herself out in the lead, driving the organization to success, and having the brains and intuitions required to get the enterprise where it is going. As romantic as that image may be to some people, that paradigm will never supply the solution again. Leadership, going forward, is not as much about telling as it is about hearing; not as much about knowing as it is about facilitating dialogue and inquiry; not as much about being in charge as it is about enabling the necessary capabilities and outcomes.

If you want to lead, you'd better know how to listen to what is going on in your organization. Larry Bossidy at Allied Signal, Jack Welch at GE, and Roger Enrico at PepsiCo (to mention only a few) have clearly demonstrated that if you

are going to inspire, mentor, stretch and retain today's workers, you have to hear what they are saying (Tichy and DeRose). Even so, hearing alone is not enough. A leader has to create the listening posts in order to ensure that forums for peer-to-peer conversations and the "third places" for dialogues about the work exist across both internal and external boundaries (see: The "Third Place" Way, by Chris Mooney at <http://www.epn.org/commonwealth/mooney-c0008.html>). This paper explores how authentic listening serves as an indispensable tool for leaders at all levels.

### **Listening from an Organizational Context:**

Organizations have structured themselves like pyramids for hundreds of years. The shape of a pyramid made for an appealing metaphor: one leader at the top giving everyone direction. This has been the traditional way of thinking about organizations.

The network has emerged as a new organizational metaphor. In networks, every component has the potential to communicate with every other component. This vibrant model was derived from the scientific study of the operations of living systems. Whereas the icon of the hierarchical organization was the machine, the icon of the networked system is the living organism. The emphasis in the networked system is highly social. Whereas the focus of the hierarchical model was on predictability and continuity, the networked organization seeks agility and adaptability. In the industrial age the physical strength of the workers powered the organization, but in the post-modern economy, it is the workers' knowledge that creates the value. These changes have necessitated an evolution in our thinking about workers and leadership.

The IRI Model (Identity, Relationships, Information) is our idea of how organizations function as systems. While the Model arises from ideas derived from science (post-Newtonian physics and modern biology), its principles are highly relevant to today's networked organizations.

The IRI Model begins by thinking about the system as a whole. Every system has an *identity*, which provides answers to key questions about that system. Who are we? What is our purpose? What are our boundaries? The answers to these questions define the system's identity. The leader's role, at whatever level of the organization, involves articulating and disseminating a common identity throughout the organization. Leaders must attend to the conversations of the workforce and act to create and sustain a focused sense of shared identity.

Next, all organizational outcomes require *relationships* with other members of the system: an individual within a system can never function in isolation.

Organizations have tried to re-invent themselves to accommodate changing market requirements. This is why organizational silos have proven to be so troublesome as collaboration and cross-functional partnering has grown in importance. Key questions emerge about organizational relationships: with *whom* must I interact to accomplish the organization's mission? *How* I must interact in order for the system to function optimally? Leaders must be astute at tending to and enabling these relationships. These relationships, to work optimally, cannot be dictated but must work successfully, adding value to everyone involved.

In organizations, relationships become formalized as processes. A robust system views its processes as opportunities for conversation about operational and strategic concerns. It then facilitates the kinds of relationships that will enable those conversations to take place: What are we doing well? What could we do better? What does the environment have to say about us? What do we have to learn to do that we don't do now? Leaders need to model the concern about the answers to these questions and cannot do so without listening well.

In this networked organization, everyone is expected to look beyond their job to think about ways to improve the system as a whole. Relationships, then, are the key to the IRI model. Ultimately, because relationships center on trust, it is crucial for organizations to seek ways to establish and enhance trusting relationships. It is only through the evolution of a trusting work culture that highly developed relationship skills in networked organizations can develop.

Finally, identity-focused action-relationships in networked organizations require quick, targeted sharing of *information*: what information has to flow within the relationship in order to fulfill the purpose of the system. Systems find ways to transmit vital information, often in spite of formal processes. Fundamental to this transmission are opportunities for people to talk together about the work and to listen accurately to what others have to say.

The IRI Model shows that systems achieve results through interdependent processes. Heightened effectiveness and efficiency arises when all relationships within the system are maximized. In such maximized systems, required information flows with little resistance. No matter where I sit in such a system, I have to be able to determine what now needs to happen from a relationship standpoint that will allow the right kind of information to flow so that we can accomplish what is needed. As such, real value creation takes place within the relationships; the level of intimacy that the relationships attain ultimately determines the company's potential for success.

## **Listening from a Leadership Context:**

Leading well requires work. Done well, it may appear effortless, but it isn't. Effective listening is a fundamental part of the work of a leader. Listening requires that you stop and accurately absorb new data, mentally sort and categorize it into useful information, and perhaps, act on it within the business context. It is important to hear the content, understand the context and evaluate the implications of this information on a number of agendas (Ciancutti and Steding).

There are innumerable reasons and excuses that are used to explain the appearance of derailers in organizations. There are always barriers to doing anything well. Some of those barriers are legitimately difficult to navigate. So what? If excellence were easy to attain it would be commonplace. Countless books have been written telling you to clear your desk, make eye contact, say "um-hum", etc. Good advice, but trivial. Most of us really do know how to listen. What is missing in dysfunctional communication is the honest engagement of one's self in the interaction, the authenticity. When you don't listen well, for example, you have already decided, "I have reasons not to be engaged." Or, you've decided that, "I do not feel the need to be authentically present in this conversation, at this time." Below we will consider some of these derailers, consider the messages that they convey to the organization and suggest appropriate antidotes. An overview of some common derailers is presented in figure 1.

**Fig. 1 Common Communication Derailers:**

Category	Type	Description
<b>Listening With Bias</b>	Defensive	Developing your response to what you're hearing while the other person is still talking to you.
	Adversarial	Listening with an ear on picking out points of difference so that you can negate the perceptions of another.
<b>Listening Without Focus</b>	Multi-tasking	"Listening" while doing or thinking about other things at the same time
	Lack of Time	Simply engaging in a conversation when you do not have the physical, mental or emotional time to engage
<b>Listening Without Respect</b>	Impatience	Communicating that you understand another's message, whether you do or not, because you don't have the time, or because you do not value what you think is being said.
	Wrong or Uninformed	Deciding that what the other person is going to say is WRONG so you interrupt and tell them what they should think.
	Too Much Ego	Failing to listen to the message of another from within their context rather than only from yours.

### **Listening without focus:**

One class of de-railer is listening without focus. When a leader listens without focus, he or she is blurring and diluting the shared identity of the organization. This type of poor listening can appear in a number of guises. Listening while doing (or thinking about doing) other things at the same time is an example. Some people smugly refer to this as multi-tasking, as if only half paying attention was a skill. A variant of this theme comes from rushing through a conversation because of the real or perceived lack of time to devote to the conversation while it is going on around you. There is too much to do. Individuals are overly committed; organizations are often stretched too thin. Leadership does not mean explaining away the shortfalls in the face of these realities. It means finding ways to do what is required in spite of the obstacles.

There is an unintended message that is sent to the listener(s) when someone in a leadership role listens without focus. The leader's message is as follows: "what the other person has to say is of little or no consequence to the leader of this enterprise." This message will give some people the idea that they are irrelevant. Whether intentional or not, the effect of such a message is to generate cynicism and distrust. At its core, this message tells the speaker that he/she is not a part of the team. It follows that subsequent on-going corporate messages of reassurance serve only to amplify the skepticism.

The antidote to listening without focus is to pay attention within the context of the business idea. This is easily said and yet, quite hard to do. A leader must always listen to serious conversation within the context of the purpose and identity that motivates the enterprise. It is this purpose that gives appropriate meaning to the information shared within the organization and across organizational units. To do this, you must be present in the conversation at hand. You must be focused upon what is being said. Being too busy to pay attention is unacceptable and counterproductive.

### **Listening without respect:**

Another genre of de-railer arises from listening with disrespect. Although often unintended, this disrespect is usually implicit and quite caustic. At times, this appears as impatience with the conversation or an unexplained urgency to "get to the point." Some leaders assume that they know the direction the conversation is taking, so they lose interest until the speaker stops and they react to what they thought was said. Others interrupt and finish the speaker's statement for him or her. In another way, some decide that what the other person has to say is wrong or uninformed so, they interrupt and tell them what they should think. The variations on this theme are endless, but the roots are imbedded in the soil of self-centeredness. In an organization, relationships are crucial to success. Disrespect is palpable in these behaviors and the speaker responds on a visceral level whether the reaction is expressed or not. The organization becomes hamstrung with distress. People come to work wanting to make a contribution. They want to be important. They want to make a difference. A leader who optimizes his or her organization is one who works to underscore those contributions, and to motivate people

to do more by celebrating that which they have already done. To do less is not to lead, but to deter.

Another aspect of this problem is listening with too much ego. Regardless of their level in the organization, it is easy for those in leadership positions to excessively personalize their responsibilities. A person can embody a role, but it seldom works for a role to embody a person. A leader plays a symbolic role in the eyes of others. If a leader believes that he or she just has to show up and indulge himself or herself, others are marginalized. A leader can fail to hear and interpret the messages from others' frames of reference. In that case, opportunities to teach are lost; opportunities to benefit from a contrary perspective are lost; and opportunities to see the world through different lenses are lost as well. A leader needs to hear from the scouts who are out ahead of the organization. These "scouts" need to know that their unique perspectives are valued.

Another particularly virulent strain of this genre is sustained by listening through a filter of un-validated assumptions. We all make assumptions. We must find ways to absorb and sort all of the information that bombards us daily. The danger lies in automatically sorting new ideas into old boxes while changing their contexts and their implications without realizing it. The result is a continuation of the status quo, a lack of new options and a block to innovation. Right now, those results are at cross-purposes with what needs to be done.

The fault here can be readily seen in the message conveyed by this behavior. The communication makes it clear that "This conversation is about me and not you. It is about what I think, not your ideas or observations. You have nothing valuable to add." It is not that these messages are conveyed verbally. Indeed, no leader worth his salt would make such declarations. Indeed, the fact that these messages are implicit makes them deniable in spite of their very real impact. The implicitness makes the message easy for the sender to overlook. As a result the recipient has more difficulty identifying what has been said. This ambiguity works against the building of a culture of trust and it dampens the natural enthusiasm of a self-confident, innovative workforce.

To avoid such difficulties a leader must listen as if he or she were a member of a high performance team. He or she must communicate a genuine understanding of what he or she is hearing. Lip service alone is inadequate if not downright destructive. The leader's posture must be one of openness to the perspectives of others. The leader's actions must communicate the recognition that, "No one is as bright as everyone." If your team does not deserve that respect, develop them or change those players who are not up to the task. On the other hand, treating talented people badly will ensure truncating their contributions.

### **Listening with Bias:**

The third genre of communication de-railers is listening with bias. Authentic listening implies openness to new data, new implications and new interpretations emerging from

this conversation. When the openness is not evident, those speaking in good faith walk away with the sense that the implicit expectation was not honored. Barriers raised between leaders and those that they aspire to lead can hinder or even stop the flow of information.

Listening with bias occurs when openness is implied but the reaction to the presentation of new data is skepticism. This can come from someone listening defensively. Here, the leader listens only long enough to “get the gist” of the message and then uses the rest of the speaker's conversation to take time to concoct a response that supports the traditional point of view. An authentic connection is required between the speaker and listener if there is to be an opportunity for the leader to genuinely educate the speaker. That cannot develop in these conversations. It does lead to a hardening of positions as each person defends his or her previous position without the permeability required for dialogue or the growth of new ideas. Listening with bias also occurs when the leader has an attitude of listening to gather evidence or to find fault with the information contained in the speaker's position. It is a posture that communicates that the listener is an adversary who is listening to gather evidence that will be used to “get you”, “nail you”, or in some other way exploit any vulnerability that you display.

This is not to say that at times the speaker isn't wrong, misinformed or inappropriate. However, embarrassment and humiliation do not teach skills. Rather, the leader is actually conditioning the speaker to avoid authentic efforts to converse with the leader in the future. Communication has to provide the milieu for changing those erroneous perspectives and listening is required for communication to occur.

There are unintended messages that are clearly communicated about what information will or will not be received when a listener goes into an already biased conversation. This is not a dispute, but instead, is a negative consequence that can arise from the lack of integrity between what we purport to do versus what we actually do. The messages deny the validity of the speaker's reality. “You do not know what you are talking about,” is one. Another is to tell another that they do not have the “power” (whatever their data) to change your mind or to alter your thinking. These damaging messages negatively skew the speaker's perception of his/her work context, allowing the accumulation of incorrect inferences about the job and creating the message that they are needlessly exposing themselves to harm by sharing what they know. These are devastating messages to someone who has to go back to his or her workstation and continue produce for you and for the enterprise.

The antidote to listening with bias comes from a concentrated effort to listen for understanding. A leader's role requires that he or she inspire people to follow. Knowing and respecting the lessons and knowledge that the workers can accrue through the experience of doing the work accomplishes this. A leader can identify where a person's experience needs to be broadened if it proves to be inadequate, or how it can be increased in sophistication if it proves to be too provincial. These outcomes can only be possible if the leader maintains a dialogue with those sharing his or her purpose. Hosting conversations, engaging in dialogues and nurturing and sustaining intellectual capital are

the key elements needed if an organization is to acquire the information needed to fulfill its mission.

## **Leadership, Good relationships and Business Success:**

If an organization has superior technical abilities and fully developed marketing strategies, it is still missing one important ingredient: good relationships with and among the participants. By actively listening from a leader's perspective throughout conversations with your fellow workers, you will gain valuable information in three areas:

1. Feedback from the trenches - Listening to feedback provides a chance for you to move beyond your own expectations of what should be occurring and into what is really happening based upon the perceptions of your team. You can also listen to intelligence gathered from your teammates, their customers and the market place.
2. Feedback relevant to your own personal style - you can hear where you need to better manage your own impact or where the assumptions of others are erroneous and need to be addressed.
3. Listening to yourself - these dialogues provide you with an opportunity to figuratively step outside of yourself, and listen to yourself in action.

Developing trusting relationships, where feedback is genuine, information passed on is clear and accurate, and the message is consistently reliable, is the kind of cutting edge advantage that is difficult to duplicate by a competitor. There is significant intellectual, emotional and financial investment in these activities. The return on the investment is exponential. Significant returns are seen in the retention of good people, an increase in the intellectual capital available to the organization, and a broadening in its range of capabilities. There are many leaders with good ideas and products; there are an equally substantial number with good strategies and marketing plans. But, they will not be successful if they do not have the commitment and loyalty of their employees to help them make it happen. Leaders who genuinely and consistently listen to what their employees are saying best represent the qualities of leadership needed to successfully direct the enterprise. How much longer can you afford to listen, but not hear?

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