



COMMUNISPOND™

LISTENING: ONE OF THE BEST KEPT SECRETS TO LEADERSHIP SUCCESS

A Communispond Business Issue Profile

When one hears the description “visionary business leader,” Apple Inc.’s Steve Jobs often comes to mind. As an associate said of him, “Steve has a power of vision that is almost frightening. When Steve believes in something, the power of that vision can literally sweep aside any objections, problems, or whatever. They just cease to exist.”¹

Steve Jobs’s greatest success as a leader occurred after he returned to Apple in 1997, bringing the power of his commanding vision and a new sense of the needs of those he asked to follow him. His greatest success—the iPod—was not even his original idea. The device itself, including the concept of its tight integration to desktop software (*iTunes*), was the concept of Tony Fadell. Fadell had shopped the idea to several other companies before he tried Apple. But it was Steve Jobs who had the vision to see its potential for remaking our very culture. In the hands of Jobs, the device became a cultural icon and a marketing juggernaut.

¹ Trip Hawkins, quoted in *iCon Steve Jobs: The Greatest Second Act in the History of Business* by Jeffrey S. Young and William L. Simon



Jobs’s powerful vision, together with a willingness to accept input, forged him into one of the greatest business leaders of the modern era. What he had learned during his time away from Apple was how to *listen*.

The skill of listening offers leaders two advantages:

- It helps them gather the information they need to create the shared vision the organization is to follow.
- It is a process that strengthens the leader’s relationship to the employees.

Gathering Information

Good leaders don’t just magically produce a vision. First, they gather intelligence. Determining the path ahead requires leaders to use the organization’s eyes, ears, and brains as much as their own. Many leaders find themselves insulated from the rest of the world. They know the best way to learn what’s really going on is to ask and listen to the people who interact with the world in various situations at all different levels.

But listening is not easy. Most people experience two states in a conversation: speaking and waiting to speak. Both states leave little room for listening. If you’re speaking, you’re not listening, and if you’re waiting to speak, you’re thinking about what you want to say. That’s not listening either.

In all fairness, the cards are stacked against you. Conversational speech runs at a rate of about 125 words per minute while normal comprehension occurs at 400 to 500 words per minute. This means that you are capable of listening at a rate three to four times faster than another person is capable of speaking. The disparity of the two functions leaves part of your mind free to fill its leftover capacity with other things—things that can crowd out the conversation. This results in a loss of what’s being said.

The cure for the inevitable tendency of the mind to wander during conversation is a discipline called active listening.

The techniques for achieving active listening, which are surprisingly easy to learn, provide focus, concentration, and discipline. Active listening gives your mind tasks to perform within the conversation to keep it focused. These three tasks include:

- **playing back**—showing you are listening and understanding what is being said
- **summarizing**—pulling important ideas, facts, and feelings together
- **taking notes**—ensuring that all information has been captured before moving forward in the discussion.

Active listening also requires some input from the listener to the conversation. To generate thoughtful and meaningful responses from speakers, active listeners often use open questions to gain more information from a conversation. Open questions offer no choices. Rather they draw out additional information from the speaker. For example, “How are people in the department feeling about the change?” will prompt the employee to begin discussing the morale in the department.

Listening Your Way to a Relationship

Solid, visionary leadership depends on good relationships. Building those relationships means doing more than just listening for content. It means employing another active listening skill—reflecting feeling.

This is where some managers become uncomfortable. Their notion of professionalism precludes emotional involvement. They believe that the way to prevent emotional involvement is to prevent the expression of feelings.

But it's possible to attend to an employee's feelings without getting emotionally involved. Reflective feeling, another aspect of active listening, is one way to accomplish this. When you hear a sign of feeling in the employee's conversation, simply acknowledge it. This shows the employee that you are attending to him or her as a person as well as a source of information, and it builds your relationship.

One of the best lead-in phrases for reflecting feeling is “It sounds like ...”

- “It sounds like you're angry about the way that turned out.”
- “It sounds like you're concerned about the way this makes your department look.”
- “It sounds like you enjoyed your role in that project.”

Similar to reflective feeling and just as effective is the echo. This technique uses the main word or phrase of the employee's thought as the basis for a question:

Employee: “I'm being nibbled to death by ducks.”

Leaders: “Ducks?”

Employee: “Administration, Marketing, Finance. Everyone wants a piece of me.”

It's possible to acknowledge a person's feelings without engaging them. Doing so shows the employee that you are aware of him or her as a person, and that builds relationships.

The Bottom Line on Listening

Trying to lead an organization without actively listening to employees is a recipe for disaster. If you're not listening, you're not gathering the intelligence and building the relationships you need as a leader.

Take another look at Steve Jobs. Visionary leaders succeed not just through what they say, but also how they listen to others.

About Communispond

Since opening its doors in 1969, Communispond has become the communication resource of choice for clients worldwide—CEOs, board chairs, sales leaders, sport and media figures, candidates for high office, and other high-achievers numbering over 600,000.

Through communication excellence, Communispond unleashes the talent of your employees. With knowledge and practice, employees become confident. With confidence, they become passionate performers.