

Admin 101: How to Become a Better Listener

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Image by Kevin Van Aelst

We professors like to, well, profess. We aren't always great at listening. Yet when we move into administration, practically every hiring profile calls for a "great listener." And, accordingly, almost anyone who seeks a leadership post in higher education lists "strong listening skills" as one of their signature attributes.

Do we actually have such skills upon joining the leadership track? Often no. But they can be learned.

Being able to hear and understand what people are saying — through not only their words but also their tone, manner, and body language — is a vital tool for succeeding in management jobs from department chair to president. This month the Admin 101 series takes on the subject of how to sharpen your listening skills.

Why are professors generally less-than-stellar listeners?

- First, few of us are actually trained in the hearing arts. In most academic fields, listening is not considered to be a basic skill that requires formal training — the exceptions would include law, nursing, anthropology, and journalism.
- Worse, many academics — and I say this as a communications professor — continue to think that listening, speech making, and other communication skills are naturally ingrained. You either have them or you don't. Some academics wrongly assume that working to acquire better listening skills won't make much of a difference.
- Another factor is what might be called the "domain transfer fallacy." That is the mistaken

assumption that being good in one form of listening — such as paying attention during a research talk and parsing out key points relevant to your scholarship — means you are adept at others — like, say, appreciating faculty concerns at a town-hall meeting.

Admitting you need to get better at listening is fundamental. So once you have accepted that, what can you do to improve?

Don't just listen — show you're listening. Many people have habits that betray us when we are not paying attention: wandering eyes, fidgeting, tapping fingers, and, everyone's favorite, cutting off the speaker in midsentence. In administration, almost as important as listening is that people *perceive* you to be.

Here lies the rub for academic administrators: Most of the concerns brought to us are remarkably limited in variety. Often the answer or solution is evident long before someone has finished explaining the problem. Nevertheless, good listening involves steeling yourself to silence.

Sometimes what we learn from a conversation or a public forum is less a set of facts and figures than a confirmation of emotions and feelings. If you jump in too quickly, you risk coming off as brusque, inattentive, and, yes, a poor listener — even if you deliver the wisdom of Solomon.

Because people want to be heard. In some cases, they want that more than they want their quandary resolved.

For instance, on my first day on the job at a previous employer, a faculty member came to my office and spent 90 minutes reciting 20 years of grievances he'd suffered. Most of the time, I was silent or took notes, because it was fairly obvious that he really didn't expect me to undo all the decisions of the past. He just wanted someone to hear him out. In fact, afterward, he said as much. He wanted acknowledgement that someone cared enough to listen.

So wait for a natural break or an organic opening that allows you to offer your answers without making people feel unheard, and thus unvalued. Suppress the sometimes unconscious ways in which you may communicate impatience or boredom. Demonstrate that you are listening *before* you open your own mouth.

Identify key words and phrases. Almost every academic, from the earliest days of graduate school, learns how to read copious amounts of material or listen to long lectures and draw from them a precis of what they really need to know. Conversation is no different.

As an administrator, you want to exude empathy. But you also have a schedule to keep and other people demanding your attention. So your back-of-the-mind thought during and after a discussion or conversation should be: What are the takeaways?

If someone walks into your office with a checklist of questions or concerns neatly enumerated and annotated, with precise details of what they want you to understand and do, the listening part seems pretty easy. But most of the time that's not how it goes. They veer off course into points that are tangential, unrelated, confused.

In the face of such a meandering conversation, you need to develop gentle interrogation skills. Here's a simple technique to figure out what really matters to the speaker: Use phrases such as, "Let's circle back to one thing you said," or "I see your point about X" to help the person focus on vital — to them — issues. When the speaker winds down, review the salient points and try to get an affirmation of what he or she considers to be most important.

Detect codes and symbols. Academe is a particularly opaque realm of interpersonal communication. For example, a provost may be reluctant, because of internal politics, to inform the faculty of a given college that "your unit is low on my priority list for funding." Instead, the provost might declare, "Well, we need to keep an eye on the budget; I look forward to working with you on finding solutions in the future." Translation: Prepare to be cut.

Alternatively, a professor may be concerned because new developments in his field are beginning to make obsolete a lot of his research and teaching templates. He is unlikely to admit to himself — let alone state in public — that he needs to update and upgrade. Instead, you may find him firmly declaiming the necessity of "protecting the sacred traditions" of the curriculum.

In those sorts of foggy conversations, you have to develop second-order listening skills. Try to understand what is implicit or just under the surface of what the speaker is saying.

Sometimes, too, a little cultural translation is necessary. For part of my career, I worked in a region of the country where people were pretty direct with administrators. If they had a problem with what you were doing, they would stride into your office and state, "I have a problem with what you are doing." And I would respond directly in kind.

When I moved to a region of the country where people tend to eschew direct confrontation, I had to adjust my approach. Eventually I learned not to interpret their silence as approval and I began to develop indirect means of finding out people's opinions. I also tried to foster a style that was milder yet still clearly conveyed what I thought needed to happen.

Follow up. A colleague once summed up a dean he knew as "all glad hands and attentiveness but no follow up." He meant that, in the moment, the administrator was terrific at interpersonal communication. But afterward, it became clear that he only *appeared* to be an excellent listener.

After a meeting or a conversation, show that you have listened and valued the exchange enough to follow up on it.

Note: Following up does not necessarily mean giving people what they want. Being a college or university leader today requires regularly telling people they can't have exactly what they desire in the exact way they want it at the exact time they need it. But "No" can be proffered

empathically, with people feeling that their point of view has been appreciated.

So get back to petitioners, whether your response is a token “thanks for the discussion,” a promise to investigate, or a more decisive action. I like to establish a paper trail, so that an email sent right after a meeting to “clarify and confirm” is the first step. Later on — via email, by phone, or in person — you can offer a, “Well, I looked into the matter, and this is what we can do.”

The point is to let people know that you can listen beyond the immediate and that you don’t forget about them when they walk out the door.

Listening skills are elusive in our business; otherwise, more of us would be masters of them. The greatest impediment to improving our listening abilities is the assumption — often driven by ego — that we are naturally talented in this arena. Like all attributes of a good administrator, however, “strong listening skills” are worthy of perpetual self-assessment and refinement.

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