

a much-needed leadership skill

Seth S Horowitz, author of *The Universal Sense: How Hearing Shapes the Mind*, in an article in the *New York Times*, writes, “Hearing, in short, is easy... It’s your life line, your alarm system, your way to escape danger and pass on your genes. But listening, really listening, is hard when potential distractions are leaping into your ears every fifty-thousandth of a second.” When it comes to leaders, listening becomes a more difficult task for they need to be both effective and passionate listeners.

It is fair to say that leaders across the globe are facing massive disruptions from digital to dealing with a changing workforce. Leaders have increased pressure on them, across India, to continue to grow as well as deal with constant structural change across their business landscape.

Technology has shrunk physical distances, dissolved borders, and helped employees stay connected, but technology can lead to employees feeling distanced from their organizations, which produces a communication challenge.

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Illustration by nilesh juvalekar

In business, today, employees are so busy and pushed to deliver results that, with important customers, they talk more than listen. Employees will rarely listen to you if they do not feel that you have listened and understood them. Listening is an essential leadership skill.

One of the biggest issues needing passionate listening is how to leverage your employee's human intelligence (HI) and combine this with the enormous potential provided by artificial intelligence (AI). Listen passionately to your employees: they will have some creative ideas.

In the age of AI, if you are looking to implement sustainable growth, you must understand what human skills you need for your employees: what is human intelligence?

In the age of AI you need human intelligence: HI = (Social Intelligence) + (Creative Intelligence)[®]

Social intelligence includes skills in social perceptiveness, negotiation, persuasion, and caring for others. Creative intelligence includes skills in originality (problem-solving, critical thinking, and innovation). Do not forget human intuition and insight, with the assistance of AI this innate ability could become your superpower. Remember employees must be valued and appreciated for their effort.

According to the Association for Talent Development, 40 percent of employees do not feel appreciated and valued. Another study, *Motivating by Appreciation Inventory*, states that more than one-third of employees prefer to be rewarded with written or oral words of affirmation. So, a smooth flow of communication is important.

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According to P21 – Partnership for 21st Century Leadership, the skills we need to focus on in the next decade are the 4Cs: collaboration, critical thinking, communication, and creativity. Improving these skills will give you a competitive edge—individually and as an organization.

Communication includes listening, sharing, and understanding the real meaning of the conversation.

reflective listening

When communicating with others, the best leaders ask the best questions. But, questions are only effective if you listen to the answers. Many leaders are too busy thinking about their positions and their next statements to really listen. To really listen, leaders, need to use reflective listening.

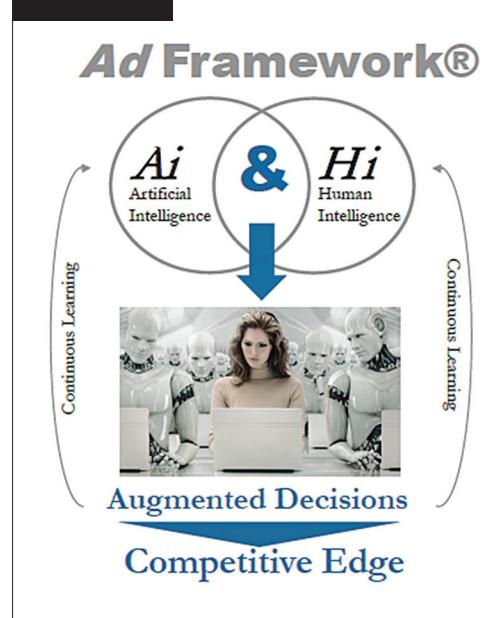
Reflective listening skills are powerful and are part of manager effectiveness courses and team development courses. Remember questions create power and control; statements create walls that close in any discussion on good ideas; your success depends on the power of your questions.

Mongolian quote: Four things come not back—the spoken word, the spent arrow, the past life, and the neglected opportunity!

Learn reflective listening skills, and you will be a better leader in any situation. As we all grapple with AI and how to use big data to make better decisions, your team or key employees will have great ideas that need exploring. Exploration is where human intelligence comes into its own.

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exhibit 01:



Leaders, like businesses, need new ideas to flourish; AI allows the issue of big data to be tamed. HI allows us to interpret and innovate with concepts to make augmented decisions that allow us to leverage a competitive edge. Exhibit 01 shows how this model is all about continuous learning and as leaders we learn from continuous feedback from our team. Machine learning through AI allows us to challenge our thinking about possibilities of the future. A very exciting time to be a leader.

try passionate listening—you will never go back

Recently, when discussing some implementation challenges with a leader in IT, she said, “Thanks, I enjoyed our meeting, it was just like talking to a rubber plant.”

On seeing my puzzled look, she explained a favorite trick of programmers is explaining a problem to an inanimate object like a rubber plant or a rubber duck. As they explain the problem, programmers often discover solutions.

Claude Sammut of Deloitte Digital explains more in a blog, *Rubber Duck Debugging*: “Your rubber duck (cat or plant) does not know how to solve your problem. But explaining your code to your duck will help you slow down and be more precise and thoughtful while going through the code.”

After I understood her, I realized the IT leader was paying me a compliment: I had listened passionately, she could think through an important problem.

Apart from the IT leader, two recent books reminded me about the importance of listening.

extreme listening is a passionate process

I recommend former McKinsey consultant Caroline Webb's excellent and practical book, *How to Have A Good Day*, and have given several leaders copies. Caroline has a chapter called, *Bringing The Best Out in Others* that includes the idea of 'extreme listening'. For most leaders used to offering immediate solutions and solving problems instantly, this is a tough technique to try. Caroline explains extreme listening: “Instead of racking your brain to come up with solutions and ideas, you create the best possible space for ‘the other person’ to think about the problem.”

How? Aim for them talking for at least five minutes

- do not make comments or suggest solutions; encourage and give your time.
- ask, “What would you find helpful to talk through?”
- do not interrupt. Nod, listen, and make encouraging noises.
- keep your eyes on them, even when they turn away.
- when they go quiet, ask, “What else?” Then wait.
- when they say “that is all.” Ask, “So what do you think you will do now?”

And why might the talker enjoy extreme listening? Because ‘the rapt attention of the other person makes them feel interesting and smart’.

If you want to try something other than extreme listening, try using summaries.

Explore summaries in the ebook, *Persuading Customers You Can't Afford To Lose - Focus on Them*.

strategic listening

Another recent book by Justin Lee, *Talking Across the Divide*, in our polarized culture aims to give people tools to talk across the many divides in politics. Justin talks about strategic listening to ‘help you reach someone with a different perspective of the world’. In brief, listen for answers to these questions:

- what do they want?
- what do they believe?
- what do they think you want?
- what are their sources of information?
- what language do they use?

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- what are they worried about?
- what do you have in common?

Some of the most effective leaders I know are excellent listeners; some of the most ineffective leaders I know are appalling listeners. Are you listening?

Listen now. When people talk, listen completely. Don't be thinking what you're going to say. Most people never listen. - Ernest Hemingway

The ability to listen actively has a major impact on workplace productivity and the quality of relationships with customers, peers, and managers. Listening allows leaders to identify, comprehend, and evaluate employees' views, thoughts, and ideas. Employees also better understand what is expected of them—they will do their best for a leader who actively listens to them, creating a productive and motivated team.

If you are not listening deeply, then your response ends up being emotive rather than an effective response to the issue, the very thing you are trying to avoid. If you are not certain just how effective your listening skills are, test them at your next internal meeting. See how much you really listen. It can be a sobering experience.

Listening skills are the hallmark of an effective communicator. Listening skills are essential for sustainable growth and leadership. ■

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