

The Crucial Body Part All Great Leaders Must Enhance

By Deborah Grayson Riegel

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When the newscasters announced this past spring that there would be an [influx of billions of chirping, buzzing cicadas](#) across the Eastern United States, people started wondering "why now?" My family and I were among a small population of non-entomologists who knew the answer, having recently seen an incredible exhibit at Japan's Risupia hands-on science museum on the science behind "Prime Brood Cicadas." There are 12 broods of 17-year cicadas and 3 broods of 13-year cicadas—and all of these broods only emerge on years when the population of their natural predators has diminished.

Genius!

Once again, it seems like Darwin's natural selection has emerged victorious. But as I think about how these insects have managed to survive (with my thinking occasionally interrupted by the hissing of cicadas outside my suburban New York window), I wonder about one feature of humans that has also managed to survive despite an influx of predators: the ear. How is it that most of us still have two of them considering how rarely we use them for really listening?

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I know that the reason I still have my ears is that I am a leadership and communication skills coach, so I use them as they were intended to be used on a regular basis. However, even a professional listener like me struggles with our ears' natural predators: outside noise and inside noise. Outside noises consist of the external distractions that we are surrounded with every day at work and at home that drive inattention: external conversations, email chimes, [cell phones](#) ringing, interruptions, cicadas, etc. Internal noises are the voices in our heads (even among sane people) that distract us from truly paying attention to the person we're supposed to be listening to: worries we have, advice we want to give, explanations we want to offer, reasons why they're wrong, etc. Both internal and external noises keep us from committing to really hearing what's being said—and often, what's being left unsaid—by the people we are purportedly leading, managing, selling to, buying from, befriending, parenting, loving, or otherwise partnering with.

In his *HBR* article, "[The Discipline of Listening](#)," author and advisor Ram Charan reports that 25% of corporate leaders' 360-degree feedback indicates a listening deficit, "the effects of which can paralyze cross-unit collaboration, sink careers, and if it's the CEO with the deficit, derail the company." And good listening isn't just a leadership competency—it's a critical skill for anyone who needs to build rapport and trust, show support, better understand and communicate expectations, reduce conflict, resolve problems with customers, colleagues and superiors, work well in a team, and, basically, demonstrate that they care about anyone other than themselves.

So... that's pretty much anyone who wants to get and keep a job or a relationship.

Considering how critical listening is for our work and life, and how easily distracted we are from doing it well, here are three ways to become a better listener.

Diagnose Your Level of Listening

In coaching, we talk about Three Levels of Listening. In Level 1 Listening, you are focused on yourself, not the person you are supposed to be listening to. You are paying attention to predators like your own thoughts and feelings, thinking about how what the other person is saying impacts you, or waiting for your chance to respond. Level 2 Listening is when you hear what the other person is saying—the words themselves—but neglect to hear what is underneath the words. You miss the underlying meaning, which can often be the opposite of what is being said. And you also miss what isn't being said—which, of course, often tells us the most. Level 3 Listening requires your total focus on the other person. You are listening to fully understand, which means you must attend to their verbal, vocal, and non-verbal cues. You are with them and their thoughts, not with your own. You're curious and open rather than planning your response (or attack). Listening at this level is so rare but it builds trust better and faster than any other level.

Decrease Your Distractions

In other words, hide from your natural predators! When I began working from home when my twins were 3 years old, I put a traffic signal on my office door. Green meant "come on in," yellow meant, "knock," and red meant, "unless the house is burning down, do not approach this door." You know what? It worked—and it allowed me to be fully present as a listener for my clients AND for my kids. If you know that your email is going to chime every time a new message comes in, close your laptop or turn off the sound (yes, even the vibrate) on your iPhone. Put a sign on your door that says, "In a meeting" and adopt a new closed-door policy. To manage your internal distractions, notice when your mind is wandering and bring it gently (or firmly) back to wondering, "what's really going on here?" or "what is this person really saying?"

Drop Your Agenda

If you already believe you know better than the person you're listening to, you're not listening. If you already have advice to give, you're not listening. If you already know how this story turns out, you're not listening. If you're already listening only to the parts of the story that confirm your beliefs, you're not listening. And if you already have your counterattack planned, you're not listening. If you want to be a more effective listener, drop your agenda. And what I mean by that is make sure that really listening is your only agenda item at that moment if you want to build trust, develop relationships, solve problems, create collaboration, and demonstrate your leadership.

After all, it's survival of the fittest.