

The One Question To Ask To Become A World-Class Listener

By David Zax

November 12, 2014 | 6:06 AM

David Steinberg, CEO of [Zeta Interactive](#), still remembers the day he learned he talked too much. It was 1997, and he was on a trip to the Bay Area with John Sculley, the former Apple CEO and a mentor to Steinberg, in an effort to ink deals to sell [wireless phones](#) over the Internet. They met one morning with the CEO of a company called More.com.

"I dominated the meeting," recalls Steinberg. But not in a bad way, he felt: "I had great points." Steinberg walked out feeling good.

But Sculley took him aside on the way out. "Listen, Dave," Steinberg recalls him saying, "There's an East Coast style of doing things, and a West Coast style. You want to evolve into a West Coast guy." What he was saying, basically, Steinberg felt: "You really gotta shut up during meetings. You've got to let them tell you what they need versus you telling them what they want."

In other words, Steinberg had to learn to become more of a listener, less of a talker.

It was hardly a skill that came overnight. Steinberg is a native New Yorker, a born talker. Over the following years, he still did more talking than he needed to, he reckons now. At his last company, he ran the weekly operations meeting, down to every detail—a job probably best left to the COO. A major turning point, though, came from an encounter with Steinberg's child.

His daughter was five at the time. "She was telling me a story, and I was on my BlackBerry. She looked at me and said, 'Daddy, are you listening to me?' I was mortified. I was so embarrassed. I was like, 'I'm not listening to my child!'" he recalls. "I immediately put the BlackBerry down and focused on her completely. And she blossomed like a flower when she was talking."

Steinberg realized that if he was inadvertently ignoring his kids—with all the missed opportunities that implied—then he was probably doing the same with his colleagues. Gradually, he began to shift into more of a listener. Now, in his operations meetings for [Zeta Interactive](#), he hardly says a word. He finds that keeping quiet allows him to draw connections that might otherwise remain obscure to him. "Someone will say something in the office in India that directly correlates to something in the office in London, and I'll be on the only one who puts it together," he says."

His insistence on listening is actually sometimes met with confusion. About six months ago, Steinberg passed an employee in the hallway, an employee who had "started off on a very professional foot"—their interactions had been strictly business. Steinberg asked, "How are you today?" His employee nodded and kept walking, understanding the question to be merely pro forma.

But Steinberg lingered. "I said, 'No. Tom. How are you *doing* today?'"

The employee's guard went down. "He said, 'You know, actually. I'm having a problem. My dad has a health issue.' And we sat there for five minutes in the hallway, with me asking questions: Could I be helpful? Our relationship changed from a professional one to where Tom is now a close friend. That evolved out of me just asking a very open-ended question."

That simple deepening of the most ubiquitous and shallow of questions—"How are you?"—is central to all of Steinberg's relationships, be they business or personal. When he meets a friend of one of his children, for instance, he'll ask it: "So, *how are you doing today?* Not just as a salutation! You ask it, and then you wait for the answer," he

says. "If you give room to somebody to answer, you'd be amazed by how they respond."

The challenge of listening is compounded for Steinberg by the fact that his company has offices around the world, including in London and Hyderabad. Each location has different cultures of listening, talking, and information flow.

He finds that his Indian employees are "such amazing listeners that nobody's talking!" Each time he visits, he takes the team out to dinner, and plays a game: each person has to share something the group doesn't know about them. It emerged that one of his employees is the daughter of a top Bollywood film producer. "When the other people at the table heard his name, they couldn't believe that was her father!" recalls Steinberg. Another employee shared a story about the onerous task of convincing his family that he would marry the woman he loved, rather than an arranged marriage.

Steinberg's still learning how to listen himself, he acknowledges. "I'm not the Dalai Lama. I'm not pretending to be the greatest listener in the world. I'm just substantially better than I used to be." And it's a skill that's paying off, on multiple levels: "To get to know the people you work with, in a deep and meaningful way, is among the most important things you can do in business," he says.