

Recently I had the pleasure of reading *What Got You Here Won't Get You There: How Successful People Become Even More Successful* (Hyperion, 2007), a best-selling book on leadership by executive coach Marshall Goldsmith and collaborator Mark Reiter. Many passages stood out, including this one:

“Jack Nicklaus said 80 percent of a successful golf shot begins with a proper grip and how you stand over the ball. . . . It’s the same with listening: 80 percent of our success in learning from other people is based upon how well we listen. In other words, success or failure is determined before we do anything.”

I have hooked enough shots to know that Nicklaus was absolutely right—and so is

From the President



Goldsmith. Listening can be a struggle for even the best intentioned among us. When you see someone who is really good at listening, you stop and take notice. We can learn a great deal, for example, from A. G. Lafley of Procter & Gamble. When Lafley became CEO in 2000, the company was in a tailspin. It’s been on the way up since then—and Lafley landed a spot on *U.S. News & World Report’s* list of “America’s Best Leaders” in 2006. How did this happen? Lafley hasn’t discovered a magic ingredient of success. He has something that’s actually better: great listening skills.

As *U.S. News* noted, “For Lafley, that doesn’t mean poring over market research reports and lining up focus groups. . . . Instead he visits dozens of customers each year, sitting down in their homes or walking with them through the local grocery store.” Lafley deserves every ounce of credit he gets for listening exceptionally well to his customers and his colleagues. Still, it would be a mistake to assume that he has an ability the rest of us lack. The truth is we can all become better listeners if we’re willing to work at it. And frankly, we don’t have much choice.

Michael Hoppe, a talented CCL colleague, likes to say that good listening is not an optional component of leadership—it’s a necessity. Hoppe wrote an excellent CCL guidebook for executives and managers called *Active Listening: Improve Your Ability to Listen and Lead*. He boils his advice for better listening down to six steps:

1. Pay attention. Turn off your Blackberry. Maintain eye contact. Nod to show you understand; otherwise the conversation is dead before it starts.
2. Suspend judgment. Hold your criticism, and let others explain how they view a situation. You don’t need to agree; just show some empathy.
3. Reflect. Periodically recap others’ points to confirm your understanding.
4. Clarify. Ask open-ended questions that encourage people to expand their ideas. For example: “What are your thoughts on how we might increase sales?”
5. Summarize. Briefly restate core themes raised by the other person. You’re not agreeing or disagreeing; you’re simply closing the loop.
6. Share. Once you know where your colleague stands, introduce your own ideas and suggestions. That’s how good conversations get even better.

This six-step approach really does work—but only if you practice it repeatedly. Leadership is like a muscle; the more you practice the right competencies, the stronger it gets. The same can be said for listening skills. We can all get better. In fact we must. As Marshall Goldsmith reminds us, our success often hangs in the balance.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John R. Ryan". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

John R. Ryan, president and CEO, CCL

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