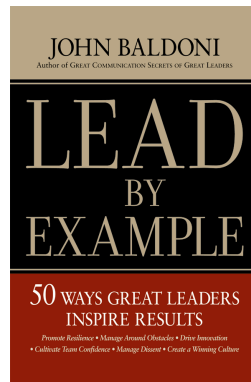


# *Facilitating Listening*

by

John Baldoni

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BALDONI CONSULTING L.L.C.

LEADERSHIP/CONSULTING • COACHING • COMMUNICATIONS

[www.johnbaldoni.com](http://www.johnbaldoni.com) • [john@johnbaldoni.com](mailto:john@johnbaldoni.com)

# Facilitating Listening

*Listening is a discipline. Experienced leaders know that listening is not a passive process; it requires energy, time, and most of all commitment to do it. It can even happen in meetings.*

Three of the greatest banes of management life are meetings, meetings, and more meetings. While scientists have yet to devise a perpetual motion machine, one that runs on its own energy without ever stopping, managers in large organizations come pretty close to perfecting a model. Managers are forever and continuously running from one meeting to the next. Hour after hour, day after day, week after week. That's perpetual in my book. Attendance at such meetings means that managers never get to do their own work until everyone has gone home. It is one reason why so managers clock long hours as well as feel so unproductive. True enough meetings are often a waste of time, but that's a pity because a good meeting is a valuable locus of time that when well spent is worth not as much as a perpetual motion machine, but pretty darn close. The key is to run the meeting well. That requires a meeting leader who listens as well as organizes.

## **Types of meeting leaders**

What good meeting leaders do first is define the purpose for the meeting; they convene them only when there is a reason for people to come together either to gather ideas or make decisions. For all other reasons, meetings can be minimized, that is, done either via the phone, email, or even off-line in one-on-one situations. That accomplished good meeting leaders fall into one of four categories: facilitators, punctuators, affirmers, or what if-ers. Regardless of time, good listening skills are critical.

*Facilitators.* Successful meetings must have a cadence, a rhythm that keeps them humming and moving along smoothly. Such a tempo does not occur by happenstance; it comes from design. Team leaders who facilitate do it by setting firm agendas and holding to them. They also encourage discussion of relevant topics as well as keep people on the mark. And when discussions veer off temporarily, facilitators deftly step in and call for the discussion to be

carried on off-line. In that way, the meeting moves forward. They also call out the time and keep everyone focused on the prize, getting out of the meeting with key decisions made.

*Punctuators.* Meetings become memorable for the ideas discussed. Punctuators are those folks who can summarize what's been said by others as well as add their own cogent points. As with facilitators, they do it gently, but firmly. Their statements propel the meeting forward, rather than calling attention to themselves. However, after a time, people in the meeting look to punctuator types for their ideas as well as direction. It is a form of leadership that influences rather than dictates.

*Affirmers.* Meetings can be long and boring, yes. So they need livening up. Affirmers are those who lead by thanking people for their contributions as well as cheering on those who need a little kick in the pants. Affirmers are not rah-rah types per se; they are folks who believe in their people and want to see them do well. They are also strong organization types; they like their work and the company for which they work. Affirmers are ones who harkens frequently to the values of the company and in doing so keep people focused on their roles and responsibilities.

*What if-ers.* Too often meetings proceed along tried and true paths like trains going to the station. And that's precisely the reason we can cut the number of meetings; if we all know the outcome, why call a meeting. What if-er's by contrast are those types who sense meetings as opportunities to question assumptions, probe practices, and proffer suggestions designed with one purpose in mind – challenge the status quo. What if-ers are change agents; they want to rock the boat, and if some people fall in the water, along with their hidebound ideas, so much the better. What if-ers are like pixie dust; sprinkled in the right proportion they can stimulate productive thinking that leads to breakthroughs.

### **Bringing people and ideas together**

Some meeting leaders combine all four qualities: they facilitate by words and actions; they punctuate with their statements; they affirm the qualities of people and ideas; and they probe for new horizons with their questions. Folks who can do all four are special; everyone wants them on their teams. There are those who combine the negative attributes of these characteristics. For example, there are facilitators who seek to make things easy for themselves by shifting work to everyone else, particularly those not in attendance at the meeting. There are punctuators who sound off with their opinions stifling the comments off everyone else. There are those to affirm their own brilliance to the diminution of anyone else. And finally there are the if-errs who wield questions like prosecuting attorneys. Their goal is not to elicit information; it is to terrorize and humiliate anyone who disagrees. And yes there are managers who embody all four negative attributes and then some. Such managers are bullies, often insecure themselves, but ones who like to beat up others to prove their own misguided sense of self-worth.

Running a good meeting is essential to the health of the enterprise. Such meetings can be opportunities to surface new ideas that can lead to new products and services. They can also be used to address issues or problems that if attended to promptly will prevent loss and disaffection of customers and employees. And finally such gatherings are opportunities for people to gather in a spirit of frank exchange; everyone doesn't need to like everyone else, but they need to treat everyone with respect. Maintaining that sentiment as well as total meeting effectiveness falls to the meeting leader. Such a person senses opportunity in meetings where others see nuisance or drudgery. As a result such people rise to the top of their teams and organizations. And it's why we call them leaders.

### **Thinking in the Halls**

Of course, not all ideas – in fact most great ideas – are not shared in meetings. They happen wherever a receptive listener happens to be. Here are some things to consider if you opt for this approach.

*Be gutsy.* The idea of sharing an idea as you think it through is a little act of courage. Too often we think, “Gosh, if I say this, people will think I am stupid.” Actually being stupid is not opening your mouth. It is good to voice an idea and it challenges other people to think it through with you.

*Be alert.* As you share, keep your antennae tuned to other similar ideas or suggestions that can make your idea even better. Creative types not only come up with their own good ideas they tune their antennae to what other people are saying. For example, in advertising a graphics person and a copywriter may collaborate, one with images the other with words both united to tell the product story. Same applies in song writer. The lyricist works on the words or story; the composer conceives the melody. What emerges is a good song where lyrics and melody complement each other. Neither could have happened without two creative people synchronizing their talents.

*Be self-critical.* Not everything you talk about must be implemented. In fact, talking through a bad idea might kill it, and rightly so. Many unsuccessful products might have gone into the dust bin instead of the marketplace thereby saving companies billions of dollars in lost revenue and damaged reputation. Again talking out the idea is not stupid; it the smart thing to do.

Not every idea needs to be worked out loud. Often quiet contemplation is a better way. Such discipline focuses thought on a single channel and that is what may be needed. Voicing an idea too soon may, as with a soufflé, let all the air out of the concoction before it has risen. Once the idea has baked, however, it must be shared. Leaders know that their ideas must become our ideas if they have any chance of survival, let alone implementation. Collaborative thinking opens the door to collaborative development and execution. It also makes reviewing the entire process accessible and normal. That contributes to a sharing of the enterprise on personal level. And that may require another meeting.

*[Adapted from Chapter 10]*