



## Power Listening

### Mastering the Most Critical Business Skill of All

#### THE SUMMARY IN BRIEF

Nothing causes bad decisions in organizations as often as poor listening. It often makes the difference between profit or loss; between a cohesive team or a fractured one; between a long career or a short one. Countless managers are told on their performance reviews to “become a better listener.” But that’s more easily said than done.

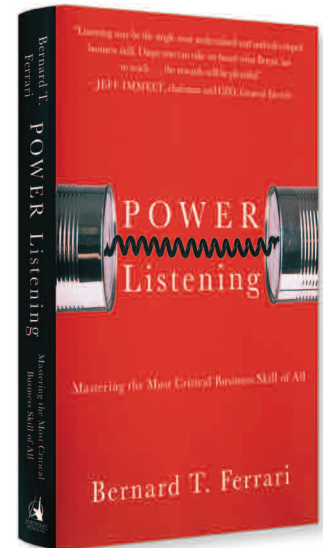
Bernard T. Ferrari, adviser to some of the nation’s most influential executives, has seen firsthand why listening isn’t a soft skill — it’s the most powerful tool at any businessperson’s disposal. He makes a compelling case that anyone can improve from a mediocre listener to a power listener. It just takes a commitment to practice some new skills and habits.

Anyone can learn how to shape and focus a conversation, make others feel respected, stay focused on what’s really important and uncover the hidden pieces of information that can change everything.

Don’t assume that power listening will take more time than your old listening style. On the contrary, you’ll waste far less time in unproductive exchanges. You’ll more easily sort through the informational chaos coming at you. You’ll stop rehashing the same conversations over and over. Your decisions will be wiser and more effective. Perhaps best of all, you’ll develop the reputation as someone “easy to talk to” — one of the greatest compliments for any leader.

#### IN THIS SUMMARY, YOU WILL LEARN:

- The six common archetypes of bad listeners and their communication habits.
- How to keep quiet and allow others to lead a conversation.
- The five questions that form the framework of effective, powerful listening.
- The best methods for turning listening into four problem-solving techniques.



by Bernard T. Ferrari

#### CONTENTS

##### Part I: Listen Up!

Page 2

##### What Kind of Listener Are You?

Page 2

##### Part II: Sorting the Chaos

Page 4

##### What Is the Plan?

Page 5

##### How Will We Get It Done?

Page 6

##### Part III: Reaping the Benefits

Page 7

##### Changing Your Organization Through Listening

Page 8

# THE COMPLETE SUMMARY: POWER LISTENING

by Bernard T. Ferrari

**The author:** Bernard T. Ferrari is the chairman and founder of Ferrari Consultancy and a 20-year veteran of McKinsey & Co. as a leader of the North American Corporate Finance and Strategy Practice and the firm's Health Care Practice.

*Power Listening: Mastering the Most Critical Business Skill of All* by Bernard T. Ferrari. Copyright © 2012 by Bernard T. Ferrari. Summarized by permission of the publisher, Portfolio/Penguin, a member of the Penguin Group (USA) Inc. 189 pages, \$25.95.

ISBN: 978-1-59184-462-4. To purchase this book, go to [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com) or [www.bn.com](http://www.bn.com).

Summary copyright © 2012 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com), 1-800-SUMMARY.

For additional information on the author, go to [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com).

## PART I: LISTEN UP!

### Listening Is Worth the Effort

When someone talks about a meeting they've attended, or recounts a conversation they've had, they'll often say something like, "At that point, I stopped talking for a moment. It was good to catch my breath and rest for a bit." It's an interesting comment, because it creates the impression that *talking* involves more effort than *listening*. In fact, just the opposite should be true. This misinterpretation — that listening is somehow equivalent to resting — leads people to believe that listening is a passive, rather than an active endeavor. From that false premise naturally flows the assumption that listening can be a time waster, rather than an effective means of advancing the ball.

There are four major reasons to view good listening in the business setting as a critical activity, and a strenuous one at that:

**1. Listening is purposeful.** A disciplined businessperson enters a conversation with a clear understanding of what the conversation needs to accomplish.

**2. Listening requires control.** Even when you're on the receiving end of a communication, you need to steer and filter the incoming information in order to accomplish your purpose.

**3. Listening requires total focus and engagement.** When you listen with intent, you must bring a heightened awareness to the conversation so that you can formulate the right questions, and generate the necessary interjections and interruptions to advance the conversation productively.

#### 4. Listening is the front end of decision making.

It's the surest, most efficient route to informing the judgments you will need to make.

Highly developed listening skills increase your focus and sense of control. You will see the change in your own performance and productivity. More important, good listening skills will enable you to bring forth more fully developed ideas from the people around you. In the best of all worlds, it can facilitate streamlined analysis, more focused planning and more sure-handed decision making. ●

### What Kind of Listener Are You?

To improve your listening skills, you must first figure out exactly what is keeping you from seeking and hearing the information you need. Here are six of the more common archetypes of bad listeners:

**The Opinionator.** At the heart of an Opinionator's problem is the tendency to listen to others really only to determine whether or not their ideas conform to what the Opinionator already knows to be true.

**The Grouch.** Whereas the Opinionator's listening is limited by his belief that his ideas are right, the Grouch is blocked by the certainty that your ideas are wrong.

**The Preambler.** Television pundits have become the very embodiment of the poor-listening archetype, the Preambler. The Preambler's windy lead-ins and questions are really stealth speeches, often designed to box his conversation partner in. The Preambler uses this questioning technique to steer the conversation, send out a warning, or to produce a desired answer, as if the dialogue had been scripted.

**The Perseverator.** The Perseverator talks too much, in the way the Preambler does, but presets difficulties



1-800-SUMMARY  
service@summary.com

Published by Soundview Executive Book Summaries® (ISSN 0747-2196), 500 Old Forge Lane, Suite 501, Kennett Square, PA 19348 USA, a division of Concentrated Knowledge Corp. Published monthly. Subscriptions starting at \$99 per year. Copyright © 2012 by Soundview Executive Book Summaries®.

**Available formats:** Summaries are available in several digital formats. To subscribe, call us at 1-800-SUMMARY (240-912-7513 outside the United States), or order online at [www.summary.com](http://www.summary.com). Multiple-subscription discounts and corporate site licenses are also available.

Rebecca S. Clement, Publisher; Sarah T. Dayton, Editor in Chief; Andrew Clancy, Senior Editor; Amanda Langen, Graphic Designer; Contributing Editor; Andrew Clancy

## Summary: POWER LISTENING

---

that are more subtle but no less confounding. The Perseverator may appear to be engaged in productive dialogue, but if you pay attention, you might notice that he's not really advancing the conversation. As often as not, he's actually editing on the fly, fine-tuning what he is saying through constant reiteration.

**The Answer Man.** Everyone likes to be the problem solver. An extreme version of this is the Answer Man. This is the person who starts spouting solutions before there is even a consensus about what the challenge might be, signaling that he is finished listening to your input in the conversation.

**The Pretender.** The Pretender isn't really interested in what you have to say. Maybe he's already made up his mind on the subject; maybe he's distracted by other matters; maybe he has to put on a show of listening for political reasons. Whatever the reason, we'd all be better off if he would drop the pretense.

You are likely a good listener at times. However, if you are honest with yourself, you will recognize that many of these archetypes of bad listening apply to you at different times and in different situations. You might be a Grouch on certain subjects or at different moments in the business cycle, but act more like a benign Pretender in other circumstances. You need to be able to recognize the behavior of each of these types, in yourself as well as in others, as the first step toward improving your listening skills and raising the overall level of communication and decision making in your organization. ●

---

### Respect Your Conversation Partner

Indra Nooyi, the CEO of PepsiCo, recalls in an interview with *Fortune* that the best advice her father gave her about working with others was, "Assume positive intent." If you do, she said, "You will be amazed at how your whole approach to a person or problem becomes very different. You are trying to understand and listen because at your basic core you are saying, 'Maybe they are saying something to me that I'm not hearing.'" Indeed, most people you work with want to do their job well — and to help you do yours better, too. Generally speaking, it's safe to assume that you chose your conversation partner (CP), or they have chosen you, because of that implicit covenant.

Of course, sometimes it is *you*, not your CP, who needs to provide the solution to a problem, and you engage your CP because you think he or she might be able to help. Here, again, the conversation depends on respect. Revelations and insights can come from unex-

pected places, so the best listeners solicit information from sources far and wide, knowing that any of their colleagues might have a surprising nugget of wisdom to offer. Managers often bucket their colleagues into certain roles and assume they can provide useful insight only into areas that are close to their expertise. Respect means taking seriously everything people say to you and giving them the benefit of the doubt. Even that quiet intern in the sales department might be able to offer a morsel of information that could help you arrive at a better solution.

The manager I encountered who demonstrated the most wonderful way of getting information and showing respect for those who gave it to him was the COO of a hospital. He remarked once that he simply couldn't run a place as complex as a hospital without soliciting information and ideas from everyone. He respected each and every employee and patient, and they all returned that respect.

This COO succeeded because he opened his mind to the possibility that everyone around him was smart in his or her own way and had a good idea or two. A great motivator, to be sure, but what made this COO a great manager was his ability to create concrete actions based on input he received during his walkabouts. Whether it concerned signage in the hallways or how staff greeted incoming patients, he made sure to mine every conversation for those pearls of insight. ●

---

### How to Keep Quiet — Most of the Time

Chances are that you've heard someone invoking the 80/20 rule somewhere recently. It applies to listening as well. My guideline is that my CP should be speaking 80 percent of the time, while I speak only 20 percent of the time. Further, I seek to maximize my 20 percent. I can make my speaking time count by spending as much of it as possible posing questions, rather than holding forth with my opinions and observations.

People in leadership positions often feel a certain pressure to steer, direct or control conversations within their organizations. But don't be misled. Your choosing to listen more than speak does not mean you've ceded control of a conversation. Well-directed questioning and minimal but well-timed commentary can help people bring forward new facts, open their minds, think in new ways, and come up with better ideas. Ultimately, a good listener gains more control over the problem at hand and comes to better decisions.

## Summary: POWER LISTENING

Often, in business or organizational settings, our tendency to interrupt people in conversation arises from our impatience to seek closure, or our need to stroke our egos in conversation.

The first thing to do when you feel the urge to interrupt is to — keep quiet! You need to control your instincts and reflexes when you're listening. Don't say anything — no responses, no comments — before taking a moment to think about how it will affect the speaker and the course of the conversation. As a practical matter, when I consciously pause in a conversation, I like to count five beats in my head. Now, if you succeed in keeping still and quiet, you might create a moment or two of uncomfortable silence. Don't be afraid of that. Most people abhor silence and they have a natural tendency to fill empty silences with commentary. However, you could be very surprised by what insightful comments your CPs blurt out during these lulls. Sometimes I find it helps to simply nod a little, just so they know I'm not zoning out. ●

### Challenge All Assumptions

Much of the time, we remain blissfully ignorant of the assumptions that govern our decision making. In many cases, we don't become fully conscious of them until they are challenged. And then, our natural stubbornness kicks in, and we often dig our heels in, certain of the correctness of those operating assumptions. The problem is that, unfortunately, this feeling of certainty does not guarantee that something is actually true. It's not necessarily the end product of infallible reasoning. Rather, certainty is a feeling, a good feeling — like calm or even joy. The neurologist Robert Burton tackles this phenomenon of feeling like you know something in his eye-opening book *On Being Certain: Believing You Are Right Even When You're Not*.

Burton assembles a wealth of experimental evidence to argue that the feeling of certainty is just that — a feeling, or mental state resulting from chemical reactions in the brain — and doesn't necessarily connect to actual facts. If these “certainties” prove to be false assumptions, they can be truly toxic to your business. Conversations provide occasions to examine and challenge our assumptions. Certainty and the assumptions it guards wreak havoc because they shut down our hearing. The refrain, “I know the answer already” is a sure symptom of all the pathologies exhibited by the Opinionator, the Preambler, the Answer Man, and the other archetypal bad listeners. ●

## PART II: SORTING THE CHAOS

Any great listener must become the master of the question. Building an information framework will assist you in developing the right questions. It will allow you to sift, sort and classify the chaotic rush of incoming information, so that you can apply it to your decision making and get to actions that make a difference.

When I think about this framework I picture a set of file drawers representing the broad categories of business problem solving and action. The categories that work for me are mandate, plan, team, execution and personal. These are broad and general categories that, together, are comprehensive enough to cover most of the issues that managers face. ●

### What Is the Mandate?

Most of the conversations you have in the work environment won't overtly confront such cosmic questions as whether a company should exist or how to improve education in the United States, but you would probably be surprised how often problem solving in business can be derailed by a simple misperception or misalignment about the mandate of an organization. What is the company's basic purpose? It's essential mission? Why are we all here?

You might think that this kind of question only concerns CEOs and others at the highest levels of management. Not so. In fact, I would go so far as to say that the most common factor I've witnessed in business failures is a lack of agreement about the company's mandate throughout the workforce.

Mandate discussions can be brief and much more specific than the grand, open-ended conversations triggered by a question like, “Why does the company exist?” Without doubt, however, agreement about the answers to those big questions should inform each nitty-gritty discussion. Whatever level you are working at in the organization, it's important to make sure you and the CP see success exactly alike.

Here are the questions that appear on the file folders in my “Mandate” drawer:

**Question 1: Why are we here?** This is a fundamental question, but a practical, not metaphysical, one. What are the enduring, overarching aspirations? What is the fundamental reason for being? On what does the organization base its identity? This is where you have to start. Use this question or your version of it to ensure that

## Summary: POWER LISTENING

you and any CP have a shared understanding of the group's mandate. Get clarity here, at this level of abstraction, and then proceed to the other questions.

**Question 2: Are there any misalignments?** Any lack of alignment or acceptance of a mandate can have disastrous consequences for a company or organization.

The best leaders listen to, monitor and then manage the complicated interplay of conflicting mandates, a fluid phenomenon that requires ongoing attention and regular reassessment. The dynamic tension generated by the multiple mandates of different stakeholders provides grist for the mandate discussion again and again, and can produce richer, more beneficial shared mandates when managed thoughtfully.

**Question 3: Can we work with this mandate?**

It's one thing for a mandate to be inspiring on an emotional or intellectual level, but it also has to be practical. It must fertilize planning and execution. There are three component questions you need to answer to fill up this particular file folder:

- Does the mandate capture the imagination and energy of the leadership team?
- Can the mandate be communicated more broadly to all the stakeholders?
- Can the mandate be translated into a plan? ●

### What Is the Plan?

Every business that seeks to improve its performance needs a plan to realize its mandate. Mandate is the destination, but without a well-drawn plan for getting there, even the most finely chiseled mandate becomes just an amalgam of moonbeams and vapors. A thoughtful and workable plan is formed and amended through many conversations about how to move forward. The headline question for a plan is simple: "What are you going to do now?"

The first folder in the "Plan" drawer that I generally seek to fill, and then to update as appropriate, concerns the concrete objectives that form the backbone of any plan.

**Question 1: What are the specific objectives that begin to move a company toward its mandate?**

There are two components to the objectives question: First, we listen for how the objectives contemplated by the CP are aligned with the mandate. Then we listen for the clarity of the objectives, and carefully consider the process that generated them. I try to ascertain whether, when the decision was made, those responsible had covered all their bases, asked all the right questions, and

been able to glean the most thoughtful, complete, honest, and accurate information from everyone involved.

**Question 2: What are the specific initiatives that will help achieve the objectives?** Steps must be described and understood in more practical detail the nearer you approach the time of actual execution.

I am ruthlessly exacting when it comes to listening and questioning about initiatives. What I'm really sensitive to is wasted motion. You would be wise to enter into conversations about planned initiatives with the presumption that they are likely to be too complicated or too numerous to be manageable. While listening for individual initiatives that are clear, simple and easy to communicate, a good litmus test is that the aggregate of initiatives undertaken by an organization add up to a plan that is both credible and achievable.

**Question 3: What is the timeline?** The thing that managers have the most trouble anticipating and predicting is pace. Planners and strategists in business need to challenge the timeline rigorously. Challenge the underpinnings by pointed questioning until you understand the complete sequence of events related to an objective or initiative, including relevant contingencies.

Fill this file folder until it's bursting, if necessary; it's the only way to schedule and sequence any plan with confidence. It will help you pay particular attention to milestones along the way. Are you and your CP in agreement about how often, and by what standards, you will mark your progress, in order to maintain confidence in your schedule?

**Question 4: What assets are required, and are they available?** Different types of initiatives require different types of assets to ensure that you keep momentum and get to the finish line successfully.

You and your CP should imagine there are subfolders to fill for all the items in the required inventory for carrying out the plan. Bear in mind that even after you've identified all the necessary assets, you still have only half the information you need. You must also determine whether those assets will be available when you need them. You don't want to be waiting for the cavalry when the time for battle is now.

**Question 5: What are the risks we will be facing?** When it comes to discussions about risk, I can turn to the writings of McKinsey colleague Lowell Bryan. Bryan suggested laying out multiple initiatives that would allow an organization to proceed with its strategy while regularly re-evaluating its commitment to any one initiative as it came closer to maturity. He illustrated this idea using a grid, with one axis representing risk, and

## Summary: POWER LISTENING

---

the other representing the proposed time frame, on which he laid out the initiatives under way. This allowed for spot assessments of which initiatives were in the pipeline and the level of uncertainty or risk associated with each. Later, Bryan added the dimension of the return anticipated from each initiative. ●

---

### What Is the Team?

A “team” is any group of people working together with a common purpose, whether it is assembled by design or comes together organically. The team doesn’t have to denote a formal work team designed and assembled by management. Even the hiring of a single individual for a job is an exercise in team building.

It’s frighteningly easy to make a bad call about people, and the results of a misstep here can be disastrous. I was consulting to the CEO of a large health-insurance company who needed to replace the COO he himself had brought in only a year and a half before.

He chose a candidate from outside the company, a man I’ll call Chandler, who was very much in the CEO’s image. His hiring of Chandler — an executive so much like him — might have reflected the CEO’s conviction that he could have done the COO’s job himself, had he enough hands. As it turned out, Chandler was simply the wrong man for the job. The company’s performance continued to deteriorate, and the new COO was removed after only 18 months.

The CEO needed to bring in a new COO quickly. One candidate, Larry, had virtually grown up there, starting out in the mailroom and working his way up through all levels of the operation over a 30-year career. The other man, Russell, had been with the company only a few years less than Larry, most of which he spent in the executive ranks. On the outside, Russell cut a somewhat more polished figure, as if he were more naturally suited to stand at the right hand of the CEO, but Larry was as competent and determined as Russell. Neither candidate was the obvious first choice.

Instinct and intuition, while undeniably relevant when it comes to assembling good teams or fixing dysfunctional ones, can only take you so far.

I encouraged the CEO to use the following questions to focus his listening as he interviewed the two candidates and sought feedback about them from other members of his management team:

**Question 1: What capabilities do we need?**

**Question 2: What are the mind-sets of the team members?**

**Question 3: What are the roles of the team members?**

**Question 4: Will this assignment be good for the individuals on the team?**

**Question 5: What are the inescapable realities?**

**Question 6: How is the chemistry?**

**Question 7: What are the consequences of performance?**

The CEO embraced this approach as he made the personnel decision. He sourced information and ideas about the two candidates from across his management team and his board of directors, ensuring that he had a deep reserve of data that could inform his decision. At the end of this process, I think he was surprised by the decision he came to: the position of COO went to Larry. Larry’s commitment and his singular style proved to be the winning edge; 18 months into his tenure, the company had re-established its forward momentum and was looking toward the future with optimism. ●

---

### How Will We Get It Done?

There are a few critical elements that are essential to successful execution. The labels on the file folders in my Execution drawer — decision-making, information, complexity, and rhythm — may be rather broad, but this is by design. Problems related to unanticipated complexity or a poorly defined chain of responsibility, for example, will arise at any level of an organization.

**Question 1: How are we making decisions?**

Listening for how decisions are made and ensuring that everyone involved understands the chain of command and who has what kind of authority will, of course, increase any organization’s odds of smooth and successful execution of its plan. This leads us to the second challenging decision-making question: What happens when unexpected stuff threatens to take us off course? Perhaps it sounds a little counterintuitive, but there must be clearly articulated procedures at the outset, so that people on the team can know what to do when seismic events shake the best-laid plans.

**Question 2: Are we getting the right information at the right time?** In an environment where a couple of keystrokes can produce a flood of data at any time, managers can be stymied by too much information as easily as by too little. If good execution depends on good information, it is incumbent on managers to ensure the integrity of the information on which they base their decisions. They need to qualify the sources. Just as important, they need to determine what data are

## Summary: POWER LISTENING

relevant and important to their ongoing assessments, and what merely constitutes noise.

**Question 3: How do we manage complexity?** A good leader assumes the job of defining the complexity of an operation. He makes sure the team understands what it is they need to be concerned about and what they can ignore. By carefully listening to his or her team, a manager can identify the developments and conditions that are outside the field of play, and then define the boundaries, thus reducing complexity.

**Question 4: Do we have a rhythm?** Managerial rhythm, to me, means a time-regular set of interactions; be they one-on-one discussions or larger meetings, managers must commit to maintaining a communications calendar. With regular and ongoing interactions you establish a discipline in a company that ensures the gathering of focused and timely information, and allows for precise measurements and calm decision making. ●

### Is It Getting Personal?

The reality of business life is that in all our communications, we share some aspects of ourselves. Everything we communicate reveals something about who we are, how we think, what we feel, and what we think is important.

Much more intriguing to me, and relevant to good listening, is an individual's intrinsic personality, analogous to the more subtle secondary colors that decorate his or her life. These characteristics do not wax and wane with passing moods; they define a person's very nature.

It's not possible to open a file folder for every character trait that a person might display. Instead, I've developed a series of questions that enable me to tease out practical and useful information about the ways in which a person's character might govern his or her behavior and color his or her communication.

**Question 1: What does this person value?** The core values and beliefs of a person can come into play in the context of business discussions. For instance, some people commit themselves to peak personal performance, while others make the group ethos their primary concern. The point is that understanding the values at the core of your CP's nature will help you listen more accurately to the essence of his or her conversation.

**Question 2: What are the individual's personal aspirations?** The more you are attuned to an individual's personal aspirations — and the more sensitive you can be to the many ways in which those aspirations

might run counter to the organization's plans for that person, or to the short-term needs of the organization, or possibly even to the overall mandate — the more effectively you'll be able to filter your listening.

**Question 3: How does this person interact with colleagues and others?** As tough as it is to work side by side with an abrasive personality, it's an even greater challenge to manage one. Conversations with problematic personalities demand that you filter your listening in an unusual manner. You have to be on guard. Every conversation has value, and you need to make the decision to listen past the unpleasantness so you can stay tuned in for the nuggets of gold that earned your CP a place at the table to begin with.

**Question 4: What is the person's level of self-awareness?** By determining your CP's level of self-awareness, you can understand how he may or may not be consciously filtering what he says to you. It can be a listening challenge — a little like having to listen through multiple layers of studio enhancement so that you can hear someone's true voice on a recording. ●

## PART III: REAPING THE BENEFITS

I've observed that the best listeners in the business environment are able to access and utilize a handful of powerful problem-solving techniques more readily and more often than their peers. First, they are acutely aware of everything that their idiosyncratic filing system already contains or needs to contain. They move quickly to fill in the missing pieces of information, either from other areas of their stored memory or from an external source.

Second, they rapidly shuffle and recombine any or all of the stored information, constantly adding to the options and alternatives available for consideration. This compare-and-contrast technique, allowing them to dismiss a progression of inferior options, makes good decisions more likely. The process of comparing and contrasting allows leaders to distill the choices down until only the best options remain.

Leaders can then assess these options using a third technique. During the Renaissance, in Italy in particular, when patrons, magistrates or church officials had to select an architect or artist for an important project, they occasionally employed the principle of *paragone*, which translates literally as "comparison." Works of art would be placed next to each other so that their relative

## Summary: POWER LISTENING

merits could be weighed. What makes *paragone* particularly effective in the business world is that even though it involves comparing two efforts or two proposals side by side, it is not necessarily intended to force a simple either-or decision between the two. The assumption is that each of the options has value, so the observer — that is, the decision-maker — can take the best elements of each, and combine them into an entirely new option. In the best circumstances, the amalgam that results could have advantages over either of the two original options on its own.

You can think of the fourth approach to problem solving as the natural product of combining the first three techniques. The best business listeners I've observed — not coincidentally, some of the most effective business leaders as well — have honed their ability to call up an array of option sets at any decision point in their operation. Furthermore, they embrace the opportunity to test however many option sets are necessary before making any decisions. And they do some of this testing out loud through discussion with their colleagues. These executives understand the dangers of jumping too quickly to a point solution before test driving all the viable alternatives.

On occasion, this process of developing and comparing options falls short of surfacing a clear favorite. In such instances, the absence of an obvious choice may indicate that, for some reason, the timing isn't right for making a decision. Even in the fast-moving and fluid business environment, your first decision may be about whether or not a decision needs to be made and acted on at all or, alternatively, whether it needs to be made now or later. Delaying a decision can test the mettle of even the best of executives. ●

### Changing Your Organization Through Listening

Not only can the quality of your listening determine your own individual performance, but it can also shape that of your organization.

Because it influences the performance of each individual, a business's culture is critical in determining how well a business performs in the collective. Yet what is culture actually built on? How does it evolve within an organization? At its essence, a corporation's culture is really the sum of all the many hundreds and thousands of personal interactions between its members. Face-to-face conversations, discussions, presentations, debates and

meetings — these are the building blocks of culture.

Though cultures evolve organically more often than by design, there is no doubt that they are shaped, in large part, by company leaders. Managers set the standards within their organizations through their interactions with others. They use their conversations and discussions as tools, not only to better their own performance, but also to lead by example, to demonstrate what they believe to be or what they would wish to be, the acceptable norms and boundaries for behavior and performance.

Good listening means having productive and respectful interactions. You will find that as you listen better and your interactions with colleagues improve, you will actually begin to affect the behaviors of those around you and the culture of the organization or unit that you manage. Here's how, through good listening, you will make positive cultural change happen in your business:

- Foster a more discipline and productive organization.
- Ensure the free and open flow of information and ideas.
- Establish a reverence for fact-based discussions.
- Generate new insights and more creative solutions.
- Build an organization that excites and energizes its people. ●

### Conclusion

My final message is this: There's no time like the present. Start your new listening journey right now, by trying to substitute one good listening practice that seems most natural to you for one bad one that you have identified.

As with so many efforts at self-improvement, half the battle is already won the moment you make the decision to try and the commitment to apply yourself. I hope you're excited by the prospect of the fuller and richer world that good listening can open up for you. I know I am. ●

#### RECOMMENDED READING LIST

If you liked *Power Listening*, you'll also like:

1. **Just Listen** by Mark Goulston. Veteran psychiatrist and business coach Mark Goulston reveals the secret to how to get through to anyone, even when productive communication seems impossible.
2. **Everyone Communicates, Few Connect** by John C. Maxwell. How can you really connect with others? It's a skill anyone can learn. Here, Maxwell offers his proven method — Five Principles and Five Practices — so you can connect one-on-one, in a group, or with an audience.
3. **Win** by Dr. Frank I. Luntz. Learn how top performers win in all areas of human endeavor by utilizing superb communication skills.