

by Alberto J. Delgado

"It doesn't make sense to hire smart people and tell them what to do; we hire smart people so they can tell us what to do."

You've probably heard [that quote thrown around at](#) meetings and posted all over social-media as axiomatic of good leadership. And yes, Steve Jobs insightful leadership philosophy about organizational development may create an environment that unleashes a team's talents.

But if you think about it, you'll come to realize that it is incomplete. Leaders must first create and develop effective communication, which hinges upon active listening being an implicit requirement for leaders and their teams. Essentially, we should "hire smart people, **and lead them by actively listening to them**, so they can tell us what to do."

That new statement, of course, begs the questions, what is active listening and why is it a "requirement"?

Active listening is [listening with a purpose](#), "to feed [a] hunger for knowledge, to learn what other people know . . ." It is also "asking and probing." It's listening ferociously and not just some of the time, but most of the time. The failure to actively listen to subordinates causes mistrust, misunderstanding, and fractured relationships.

Let's start with mistrust, does the leader trust the subordinate and vice versa? If there is no trust in the relationship, the leader must not only understand what is causing the lack of trust, but also focus on what can be done to develop trust? When there's mistrust, a leader should consider the "listen more and talk less" (a lot less) approach. By listening more attentively, the leader can get to know the subordinate and may discover there's a dissonance in the way he trusts. The leader may be heavy on emotion-based trust that is strongly rooted in empathy and kindness. Whereas the subordinate may possess a very strong cognitive-based trust, which places an emphasis on competence and achieving the organization's goals. As a result, there's a potential schism that may be impossible to bridge, if not for the leader's desire to gain knowledge from the subordinate by ferociously listening to him. The leader must also understand that actively listening means paying attention not only to what is being said, but also to how it is said - the art of the use of language and tone. In other words, a leader [must be aware of verbal and non-verbal messages](#). "Active listening is listening with all of one's senses."

Once the leader understands the source of his mistrust, the leader can work towards

dissolving mistrust, misunderstandings, and start building a closer relationship with the subordinate. The leader should continue to actively listen. He or she should work towards transitioning from creating an environment in which difficult emotional issues were shared, to one in which [the leader provides space](#) and becomes “someone [the subordinate] can bounce ideas off of...rather than absorbing...ideas and energy, [he would] amplify, energize, and clarify [the subordinate’s] thinking.” Finally, through providing coaching, counseling, and mentorship to the subordinate, he or she can establish, and even improve, meaningful relationships built on trust and respect. Also, by training the subordinate in the organization’s systems, the leader through his actions communicates directly to the subordinate: I trust you and got your back. The subordinate, who will now feel valued, respected, and listened to, will then be in a much better position to unleash his or her talents and help build a better team.

The leader’s effort, including his or her follow up, sense of urgency, and strategic planning, will all help determine how successful this leadership approach is in achieving the organization’s vision.

Leaders who enable their teams “to be run by ideas, not hierarchy,” even in the case of martial organizations, will without a doubt achieve extraordinary results. Leaders who actively listen will often create teams that will surely and steadily consist of nothing less than unleashed genius.

At the end of the day, perhaps we’d be better off if we listen more, a lot more, thus creating more meaningful relationships by talking less, a lot less.

MAJ Alberto Jose Delgado is an active duty Army Judge Advocate who just graduated with a LL.M. in Military Law from the The Judge Advocate General’s Legal Center and School. The author would like to thank Ms. Myrna Mesa and COL Robert Abbott for their recommendations and support.

Share this:

- [Email](#)
- [Tweet](#)
- 
- [Print](#)
- [WhatsApp](#)