

## Leading by Listening

After drafting three different versions of “working with leaders” and “leaders as change agents,” I must confess a struggle. For inspiration, I walked down the Business aisles at my local bookstore (with any luck you still have one) and found shelves of leadership books—Ulysses S. Grant, Attila the Hun, Steve Jobs, Machiavelli, interspersed with *Surrounded by Idiots*, *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, and *Leaders Eat Last*. Which one offers ways to create a strong bond with chapter members? Which one helps develop insightful programs, build a strong financial base, and attract new members? On which one should I rely? The answer—I don’t know, so I didn’t buy any of them.

I decided instead to rely on lessons learned from outstanding leaders in my life. Not all of them had official leadership roles, nor did they all profess that they had the leadership “answers.” However, they all taught me how to manage myself and support others with grace. Perhaps you can learn from them, too:

- The connections you make before and after meetings are as important as what happens in the meetings themselves. Retired members want to learn what is happening in the classrooms they left. Current teachers want to learn that their experiences are part of the long heritage of educators. Meetings fill a gap that we don’t always realize is there.
- Listen with your heart. The emotions in the story you are being told may be more important than the words themselves. Think about the “why,” the root cause, of the feelings being expressed.
- Try to wait until the speaker is finished before saying anything. The author Margaret Atwood, in her short story “Happy Endings,” says that our stories all begin and end the same. What is in the middle makes us different yet allows us to connect. We need to hear the whole story to understand and be able to respond.
- Once the story is told, recap what you have heard, considering again the underlying “why.” Your ability to summarize shows that you were listening and that you understand. This recap is important for the positive stories as well as the ones that are not so positive.
- Determine what steps if any can arise from what has been shared. Does a meeting program idea emerge? Can you integrate ideas from the story into the work that the chapter is doing? Can you offer professional or personal guidance? Can you direct someone to others for assistance? Don’t let the chance to help escape.
- As you end the meeting, look around the room. Did you speak with everyone, even for a moment? Do you have an action list, even if it only includes a note of thanks for contributions to the conversations? Remember that the introverts may not approach you, but you need to identify a way to reach out to them.

The bottom line for me, what makes my chapter important, is the connections we make. Leading by listening may not be a part of all the books listed above, but we all know that true leaders, those we remember, those we want to emulate, are a part of the work that we do and the connections we make. They listened.