
WHAT BOSSES WANT

THIRD EDITION

**A GUIDE TO BUILDING
LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES**

Gary V. Nelson & Bonnie L. Nelson

////INBOGroup

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

What you are about to read is the result of work from many fine professionals. Along the way each has contributed in a creative and thoughtful style.

We have been privileged to work with many of the finest customers, educators, writers, professional speakers and trainers in the world. It's ironic that many have learned from us but all have taught us much as well. The probing, questions, problem solving and discussions have led to "What Bosses Want".

We would like to personally thank Lauren Swieter who contributed to the third edition of this effort. Her professionalism and attention to detail are much appreciated. Joanne Taylor and Julie Kenny have also provided valuable input to revising competencies. The staff at the NBOGroup, particularly Yvonne Ho who has helped with publishing and editing support and many others were all contributors to this book.

Our families provided both support and continuous thought provoking dialogue on leadership issues. Our son Brian Nelson and his family, our brother Buzz Buchanan, our sisters Patti Camarillo and Linda Daily and their families all contributed to rich debates that helped crystallize these concepts.

"What Bosses Want" is truly a global and a team effort. We hope you will become part of our team at the NBOGroup. Read, develop plans, comment and share your successes and struggles. We look forward to hearing from you at nelson_thomas@nbogroup.com or visit www.nbogroup.com.

Gary and Bonnie Nelson

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HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

“YOU CAN EITHER READ SOMETHING MANY TIMES IN ORDER TO BE ASSURED THAT YOU GOT IT ALL, OR ELSE YOU CAN DEFINE YOUR PURPOSE AND USE TECHNIQUES WHICH WILL ASSURE THAT YOU HAVE MET IT AND GOTTEN WHAT YOU NEED.”

PETER KUMP

“READING IS NOT A DUTY, AND HAS CONSEQUENTLY NO BUSINESS TO BE MADE DISAGREEABLE.”

AUGUSTINE BIRRELL



INTRODUCTION

This book is intended for anyone who wants to understand and improve their leadership performance in the workplace. The need for genuine leadership—initiative, entrepreneurship and innovation, has become increasingly critical as global competitiveness gets stronger.

You will find a wide range of information and guidance in this book. We have drawn on leadership and management practices that are universally acknowledged as being sound and workable. We have then taken these practices and turned them into development and action plans that yield solid, practical progress.

The competencies have been defined as the qualities that organizations are keen to develop in existing and upcoming leaders and managers.

In compiling leadership competencies, we have defined leadership as a proactive role that anyone in an organization can develop. This guidance is therefore applicable to anyone who needs to lead, i.e. get others to understand and buy into their ideas and direction.

NBOGroup has been delivering leadership development, consulting and training services in the Asia-Pacific region since 1988. Our client base includes many well-known multinational companies as well as leading Asian organizations. We have worked closely with them to develop the list of competencies that are most critical to organizations in today's fast-paced, rapidly changing environment, and have put the accompanying action plans to the test in real-life situations.

We have used feedback from our clients to refine and adapt the plans. Clients use the core competencies and adapt them as necessary to their particular industry or circumstances, but the fundamental principles always remain the same.

This book will be of value at any level. The competencies are designed so that they can be used:

- as part of a 360 degree feedback exercise;
- as reference manuals supporting individual classroom training;
- on their own, for personal development.

If you are reading these competencies independently of a feedback or development program, avoid the temptation to work on too much at once—you will find the task overwhelming. No-one demonstrates all competencies to the same degree of excellence. The aim is for you to identify a maximum of three development



priorities and use the **Individual Development Plans** at the back of the book to build a *structured*, achievable program.

In working on development needs, too many people focus on their weaknesses. They approach the task feeling inadequate and demoralized. Every individual has different strengths. We believe that the best way to meet a development need is to approach it from a perspective of strength. In other words, understand your strengths and use them to build or develop competencies in a way that works best for you. We have included instruments for organizing and measuring your progress throughout the book, but they should be used to support your own individual style of learning. There is no “cookie cutter” approach to developing competencies.

More than anything, this book is designed to give practical guidance and support in developing leadership competencies. There is an overwhelming choice of detailed information on each competency available on the market. Our aim has been to distil the essence of that information into manageable, easy-to-follow segments that you can explore in more detail at your leisure.

We want you to enjoy reading and using this book. No project of this type can aim to be totally comprehensive or fulfill every leadership need. However, we are continuously reviewing best practices in all areas of leadership and in this respect, your feedback would be invaluable. If you have any comments or suggestions on improving this book, please let us know. Contact us on our website at: www.nbogroup.com.

LISTENING

“THE MOST BASIC OF ALL HUMAN NEEDS IS THE NEED TO UNDERSTAND AND BE UNDERSTOOD. THE BEST WAY TO UNDERSTAND PEOPLE IS TO LISTEN TO THEM.”

RALPH NICHOLS

“WE LISTEN IN ORDER TO LEARN AND RETAIN INFORMATION. IF WE ARE SPEAKING, WE ARE NOT LISTENING OR LEARNING ANYTHING TO ADD TO OUR SUM OF KNOWLEDGE. THIS IS WHY THE FIRST STEP TO EFFECTIVE LISTENING IS TO STOP TALKING!”

KEN FRACARO



Listening is the art of hearing what someone is saying. It is the skill of interpreting the meaning in what you hear. Effective listening is fundamental to good management. We take for granted that we listen to others simply because we hear what they say. However, we tend to be selective in our listening. Body language gives away our unwillingness to listen. How many times have you non-verbally signaled to someone that you are too busy to listen? Reasons might be:

- They speak hesitantly.
- They find it difficult to articulate what they want to say.
- You don't agree with their point of view.
- You don't like the person.
- They are persistent complainers.
- They simply like talking a lot and tend to ramble.

The danger of not listening is that you miss important information. Or you may demotivate an otherwise effective member of the team through your unwillingness to listen to their point of view.

Active listening enables you to address all these scenarios and deal with them effectively. Even though listening takes time, your overall effectiveness is increased because misunderstanding, miscommunication and unnecessary conflict are diminished.



□ **Socrates, Greek Philosopher**

Socrates understood that the art of listening means asking the right questions. He pioneered a technique of asking probing, open questions that lead the learner to explore the answers for themselves, gaining insight, fueling curiosity and ultimately leading to increased wisdom. This questioning technique is known as Socratic questioning and is an integral part of the active listening process.

Socratic questioning is so powerful because the questioner engages the other person in the quest for the answer. It is immensely effective in any dialogue where both parties will benefit from cooperating together to find the best solution—the classic win-win situation. Skilled Socratic questioning is useful in situations where traditional dialogue puts the two parties on opposing sides. It can be used to enormous benefit in dealing with customers, in coaching, counseling and in mentoring. Whatever the situation, both parties can work to understand the root of the problem, areas for mutual cooperation, and arrive together at a solution that benefits both.

□ **Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa, U. S. Senator 1906-1992**

Samuel Ichiye Hayakawa was born in Vancouver, Canada in 1906 to Japanese immigrant parents. He became a professor of English at an American university after receiving graduate degrees from both Canadian and American universities. Throughout his career he was best known as a semanticist, studying the history of language and thought patterns.

In 1976 Dr Hayakawa was elected to the US Senate as a Republican. He founded the lobbying organization U.S. ENGLISH to promote English as the common official language of the United States.

Dr Hayakawa readily understood the power of effective listening in promoting a common language. He said, “Few people have had much training in listening. Living in a competitive culture, most of us are most of the time chiefly concerned with getting our own view across, and we tend to find other people’s speeches a tedious interruption of our own ideas.”

He also noted that “the funny thing about human beings is that we tend to respect the intelligence of, and eventually to like, those who listen attentively to our ideas, even if they continue to disagree with us.” What better reason have we to become attentive listeners?

PREVIEW

STRENGTHS

- Practices active listening
 - Gives focused attention to the speaker
 - Can accurately restate/rephrase others' comments
- Patiently hears people out, proposes solutions only after clarifying
- Clearly understands the emotion and issues in others' conversation

DEVELOPMENT NEEDS

- Does not listen, frequently interrupts others
 - Proposes answers before others are finished
 - Does not listen attentively in group settings
 - Does not focus on the other party
- Misinterprets meanings
 - Does not understand the emotions involved
 - Cannot accurately restate/rephrase others' comments

STRENGTHS**□ Practices active listening**

- Active listening goes beyond hearing. It includes processing the information to clearly understand the speaker's intent and working to understand the speaker's emotion contained within the message.
- Active listening means capturing the main thoughts and ideas being presented. This requires focus and rephrasing/playback during the conversation to clarify the speaker's ideas.
- Socratic, or open, questioning is a fundamental part of active listening. This technique goes beyond simply sharing information. The purpose of Socratic questioning is to seek to understand the stimulating mental activity that creates insight or discovery.
- Asking Socratic/open questions avoids the trap of getting one-word Yes or No responses. Asking Who, What, When, Where and How will elicit more information.
- Attitude plays a very important role in active listening. The skilled active listener is enthusiastic and excited about the prospect of learning more through listening and promoting meaningful insights in others.
- The frantic pace at which most of us try to accomplish all our daily tasks can cause us to become distracted. Someone wants to talk, but your mind is on the next task, the next meeting, the stack of papers on your desk, or your e-mail inbox.

Skilled active listeners learn to focus their attention totally on the speaker. They make it clear that the speaker has their undivided attention by clearing the desk, filtering out interruptions and using body language (eye contact, sincere expression, leaning forward towards the speaker). The interaction does not have to be very lengthy.

- Active listeners actually save time by focusing on the issues that are being raised, and working together towards a solution.
- Skilled active listeners also practice cultural awareness. They double check the appropriateness of using eye contact, nodding in acknowledgement, initiating one-to-one conversations with persons of different gender, and so on.

STRENGTHS

- **Patiently hears people out, clarifies by playing back and then proposes solutions**
 - Active listening means giving the other party a chance to share information and express their thoughts and opinions.
 - Once a positive environment has been created, most people will say what they truly feel when they are encouraged to do so. This is especially true of shy, introverted personalities who may find it difficult to articulate their thoughts. Often they will have some very constructive and helpful opinions, but will be reluctant to share them if they sense that they are going to have to rush or curtail the process to avoid an impatient reaction in the listener.
 - Even though you may already know where the conversation is leading and have a solution at the ready, remember that the purpose of the interaction is to encourage open, honest dialogue so that the speaker discovers the solution himself.
 - Active personalities who have a tendency to interrupt or to talk over the other party often learn to be excellent active listeners by focusing wholeheartedly on what the other person is saying. They try to learn something new from the dialogue. As Bing Crosby said: “Oh—I listen a lot and talk less. You can’t learn anything when you’re talking.”
 - The active listener always clarifies what the other person has said using rephrasing and playback techniques. This gives the other person confidence and encouragement that their message has been truly understood.
 - Rephrasing and playing back what the speaker has said helps the active listener to fully focus on what the speaker is saying. The active listener ensures that he has understood the other person correctly. Only then does the active listener propose a solution. Ideally, the listener uses all the tools of active listening to encourage the speaker to arrive at a solution on his own. At the very least, the two should mutually cooperate to arrive at a solution.

STRENGTHS

□ **Clearly understands the emotion and issues in others' conversations**

- The active listener tries to grasp the speaker's perspective. Even when you don't agree, you can try to put yourself in his or her shoes and better understand what the speaker is saying.
 - Using positive body language, such as nodding and smiling appropriately, making eye contact, and sustaining a sincere expression, helps gain the speaker's trust and encourages him or her to speak frankly.
 - Be aware that the speaker's emotions are as important as their thoughts and ideas. The practiced active listener observes clues in body language as well as the speaker's words. If the speaker avoids eye contact, continues to look doubtful or uncomfortable after speaking, the active listener continues to probe until the real issue is revealed.
 - Even if the other person's opinion remains unchanged, the active listener has leveled the emotional playing field and established courtesy in the conversation.
 - Active listening is highly beneficial in group settings. Most disagreements and conflicts in meetings come from not understanding the perspective of others.
- ✓ To be an active group listener, it is important to:
- Focus on the present.
 - Use positive body language during group discussion—lean forward and make eye contact.
 - Smile and nod in agreement if appropriate.

DEVELOPMENT NEED

Does not listen, frequently interrupts others

DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

□ **Stop interrupting and listen!**

- Busy schedules, approaching deadlines, a plane or train to catch, 50 emails to answer. It's tempting to try and hurry the conversation along.

As soon as the other speaker pauses, do you jump in and finish the sentence for them?

If you are managing a team, or have been with the organization for a long time, it can be very tempting to butt into a conversation with a solution. "Been there, done that—I know the answer to this one!"

You might be right, but remember that the speed of change is so fast now that what was right for you even just a few weeks ago may no longer be the right solution for today.

- In a senior position, you may have been accustomed to an authoritarian style—"I'm the boss, do it my way." This "command and control" style of communication is now thought to be less empowering.
- When you interrupt, you can intimidate and discourage others. They may have some excellent ideas, but they will be less enthusiastic about sharing them if they know they are going to be talked down.

You can curb a tendency to jump in with the answer by using every interaction as a learning process. "What will I learn from hearing this person out?" Try it—you'll be well rewarded.

- If someone comes to you with a problem, schedule time to allow for a thorough discussion—the same day if possible. Don't rush the process.

There is one exception to this rule. Deal effectively with persistent time-wasters. If you have a born complainer in your team, coach and counsel to help them see their situation in a more positive light. If they don't respond, deal with them decisively and firmly.

ACTION PLAN

- ✓ If you know you have a tendency to interrupt, try to listen patiently to the speaker until they have completed their thought. A good active listener lets the speaker make their point.
- ✓ Don't press your point or come back until the other person has finished articulating their perspective.
- ✓ Avoid statements like "I know that," "I understand where you're headed with this," "I've heard all of this before." Let the other person finish their thought without interruption.
- ✓ Be sure that you are focusing on what the other person is saying, and not mentally framing your response before they have finished speaking.
- ✓ Your analysis may highlight that certain people, situations and/or subjects cause you to be impatient and unfocused.
- ✓ Patience is the key to stopping interruptions. Try to focus, maintain eye contact, and rephrase/probe the main idea to capture your attention.
- ✓ View the interaction as a coaching session, encouraging the other person to discover answers and solutions for themselves. Use Socratic and open questioning to explore more deeply where they are headed.

MEASURE RESULTS

- a. Control a tendency to interrupt by analyzing your conversations:
 - Who was I talking with?
 - What was the situation?
 - What was the subject?

- b. Role play conversations with colleagues. This is a technique that really does benefit from role-play. As you do so, you will learn to spot for yourself the situations, phrases and behaviors that cause you to interrupt and be most impatience.

DEVELOPMENT NEED

Misinterprets meanings

DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

- **Understand meaning, acknowledge feelings**
 - Active listening goes beyond just hearing what the speaker says. It includes asking the right questions to ensure that you clearly understand the speaker's intent, as well as the emotion contained within the message.
 - Unfocused listeners turn people off. When the person you're talking to taps his pencil, takes phone calls or allows interruptions during a conversation, or generally appears uninterested, you feel let down and disappointed.
 - Active listeners focus on the speaker. They really try to understand the other person's perspective by *playing back* what they've heard. To playback what you've heard, simply repeat what the other person says. Either repeat it word for word, or paraphrase what they've said. You can repeat verbatim short sentences and phrases such as, "You feel hurt," or "You want it by Friday." Longer phrases require you to summarize and playback the essence of what the other person has said.
 - Playbacks demonstrate understanding. When you playback what you've just heard the speaker say, you invite that person to agree with your summary. If they don't agree, you'll know that you've not yet completely understood what they're trying to say and can ask for clarification. People will trust you when they realize you have actively listened to them.
 - Playing back what you've heard is an effective technique in situations where you have to "think on your feet" such as in tough question and answer sessions after presentations. Rephrasing buys you time and helps ensure that you focus on the issue, not the questioner. This can be extremely valuable in times of heated debate. See **Clear Communication**.

ACTION PLAN

- ✓ Be sure that you are focusing on what the other person is saying, and not mentally framing your response before they have finished speaking.
- ✓ The most important quality to display in active listening is sincerity. The most effective way to do this is to make eye contact with the other person.
- ✓ Hear the other person out.
- ✓ Rephrase, playback or summarize according to the needs of the occasion.
- ✓ Playback a short statement to confirm to the other party that you have been listening and have understood the issue. You can simply say: “Let me see if I’ve understood what you’re saying...,” or “So you’re saying that...”
- ✓ One word of caution with playback. Don’t playback every statement or comment. It can sound mechanical, insincere, or simply like an echo!
- ✓ Summarize longer ideas. Break complex thoughts and questions into shorter ones and summarize each one individually.
- ✓ Continue to clarify until you have gained agreement or understanding on the issue.

MEASURE RESULTS

- a. Establish common ground with a positive opener. This is an effective starting point for dialogue. For example:
 - “Jeff, I know you’ve been putting in a tremendous amount of effort and extra time on the current project. Let’s explore what we can do to ensure that it’s completed on time.”

- b. Ask open questions. Encourage the other person to expand or elaborate on their point of view by probing. For example:
 - Tell me more . . .
 - How long has this been bothering you?
 - Why is this a problem for you?
 - What do you think the solution is?
 - Are there any alternatives?

IN A NUTSHELL

- ✓ Active listening goes beyond hearing. It includes processing the information to clearly understand the speaker's intent and working to understand the speaker's emotion contained within the message.
- ✓ Focus your full attention on the speaker.
- ✓ Use open/Socratic questions to probe, clarify and lead the other person to gain valuable insight.
- ✓ Playback to ensure you fully understand what the other person is saying.
- ✓ Listen patiently. Avoid interrupting, finishing sentences, and allowing distractions to invade the dialogue.
- ✓ Acknowledge the speaker's emotion. Defer the interaction if appropriate.
- ✓ Ensure you understand the real issue behind the dialogue. Use open questions, rephrase and playback to clarify the real issue.
- ✓ You can learn a great deal when you practice active listening.
- ✓ Use active listening in groups as well as one-to-one situations.
- ✓ Respect cultural differences when using active listening.

**FURTHER READING**

- ***Just Listen***—Mark Goulston
 - *Just Listen* is an excellent guide for learning how to break down barriers by listening. It is a primer on dealing with hard-to-reach people such as defiant executives, angry employees, and self-absorbed clients through use of well-honed listening techniques. These techniques and strategies are useful and applicable for everything from getting teams to work together, to handling tough clients, and getting your message across to even the most impenetrable people.
- ***Listen Up! How to Communicate Effectively at Work***—Eunice Lemay and Jane Schwamberger
 - The authors take an unusual and effective tack in communication: that listening to, and understanding people's viewpoints, is the key to communicating with them in a way that penetrates indifference and hostility to garner support for your ideas. They present easy-to-apply skills that will help readers to communicate more effectively with customers, clients, co-workers, and bosses across gender, cultural, and generational differences. An essential read for all supervisors.
- ***Listening: The Forgotten Skill***—Madelyn Burley-Allen
 - This book offers techniques for overcoming language barriers, interpreting body language, asking constructive non-threatening questions, and more. Features a wealth of worksheets, charts and graphs to make learning this skill easy. Each chapter concludes with a self-test to check progress.
- ***Communicating at Work***—Tony Alessandra PhD & Phil Hunsaker PhD
 - In this handbook for better business communication, the authors teach how to develop critical listening, questioning and clarification skills for business effectiveness.

The Complete Guide to

Building Leadership Competencies

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