A Top TED Speaker On the Most Important Leadership Skill Right Now

June 24, 2020 6 min read

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Shortly after George Floyd's death, I contributed an article to *Entrepreneur* that told the story of what happened when I responded individually to 170 emails from members of my list. I had asked them how I could best show up for them during this tumultuous time.

Based on how many of these folks took this opportunity not to ask for certain content, but to simply share their thoughts, I came to understand that what they most wanted was to feel heard.

In the article, this led me to emphasize that the most important thing a leader can do right now is show up with curiosity.

Rather than define how we respond to the social unrest with what we say to our followers, we can instead define it by what we ask.

This may sound like a nice idea, and perhaps many of us have a gift for asking the right questions at the right time. But it's one thing to ask good questions and another thing to create the kind of space in which people actually feel safe enough to answer.

In such noisy, emotionally charged times, how do we sort

through that noise and show up for those we are meant to lead in a way that fosters connection rather than hinders it?

It was with this dilemma in mind that I sought out a man by the name of Julian Treasure.

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A top TED speaker weighs in

If you know Mr. Treasure's name, you may be one of over 42 million people who have viewed his talk "How to speak so that people want to listen" on the TED website. He has gained such an enviable reputation throughout the world for addressing the noise we all face because, quite simply, his expertise is based on our relationship to sound.

And yet, while his popular talk is on being heard, and his recent book is called *How to Be Heard*, his advice for leaders isn't actually about making ourselves heard at all.

"One of the major human failings that we all share," Treasure says, "is the desire to be right. Most people are keener to be heard than to listen. And when that starts to dominate our relationships with other people, that becomes an issue."

As such, his advice for leaders centers not on how we can be heard, but how we can listen.

"Listening is key," he says, "because what's the point of speaking if nobody's listening? George Floyd said the phrase 'I can't breathe' multiple times in that hideous event, and nobody listened."

This point that Treasure makes is why this topic bears repeating here. We can aspire to show up with curiosity as I explored at the beginning of this article, but our very nature as human beings suggests that we want to be heard. We

therefore have a hurdle to overcome in exhibiting this curiosity. How do we ultimately train ourselves to be conscious listeners?

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A simple 4-part framework for listening

“I created an exercise on listening years ago called RASA, which stands for receive, appreciate, summarize, ask.” This simple framework, Treasure says, is how we can become more effective in our conversations.

“To receive we face the person, keep our eyes on the speaker, and pay attention.” And to demonstrate the opposite of receiving, Treasure imitates a person who is on their phone texting while still claiming to listen to the person. We’ve likely all been on both sides of that type of conversation.

“Appreciate,” Treasure says, “is the little noises we make, the bobbing of the head, the raised eyebrows. It helps a lot, for it oils the conversation and lets the other person know you’re still there.” The irony of Treasure conveying this aspect of the framework when he did is that we were on a video call at the time. I may have succeeded in doing these things when he told this to me, but because we were both looking at our cameras instead of our screens it’s likely that these nuances were somewhat lost.

“Summarizing is very powerful” he says. “I think of summarizing as closing doors in the corridors of conversation. You say, ‘So, this is what you said, did I get you?’ And when they confirm, you can move on to the next part. In this way, ‘So’ is a very important word for creating that summary.” He then goes on to make a point that leaders will do well to

remember that “so” is especially powerful in meetings.

“Asking questions straight through to the end is so important,” says Treasure. Not all questions are created equal, of course, as I alluded to earlier. What kinds of questions will support the kind of conscious listening we wish for ourselves?

“Ideally,” he says, “ask open-ended questions like *who*, *what*, *where*, *why*, and *how*. These questions help us to get further into the conversation and show the other person that we’re interested.”

The most important skill right now

As a person who helps thought leaders with their messaging, what strikes me most about Treasure’s expertise is that ultimately, it’s about cutting through the noise to show up for those we’re meant to lead.

“Conscious listening always creates understanding,” he says simply. He then suggests what we can do to begin this work as a stepping stone to supporting our followers.

“When you go back to your family, try paying attention to them and really, truly listen. You’ll probably get a reaction like, ‘What are you doing?’ But it would be such a gift.”

Indeed it would be. In a time when so many people feel unheard, or like they don’t matter, consider what could happen if you simply look directly at them and do everything else that Treasure suggests. Consider the connection that might happen as a result.

As the leader of a team, of a company, or even a community, arguably the most important skill you can have right now is not expertise in making yourself heard, but expertise in hearing others.

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