# How to Become a Master Communicator by Following This One Rule

If you’re ever talking with strangers at a networking event and want to identify the most successful person in the group, look to the one who’s quiet but really listening.

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If you’re ever speaking with strangers at a networking event and want to identify the most successful person in the group, don’t look to the “biggest” talker. Reason: The ability to *keep quiet and listen* to what others have to say is a common and critical trait of the most successful people out there.

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Listening, in fact, will open your mind to new ideas faster. Virgin founder and CEO Richard Branson said in this *Entrepreneur* video that he tended to move “things along just by paying attention to what employees are saying.”

When people know that they are being heard, they feel more valued: 78 percent of people polled by PhoCusWright said they believed that a brand cares about them more if management responds to their online reviews.

As an entrepreneur, you become used to speaking a lot. I’m constantly telling people about my business, sharing ideas

with my team and outlining business plans to the board and investors. It’s sometimes hard to remember that it’s just as important to hear voices other than your own.

That’s why I always keep in mind the following five tips, which help me be a better leader by listening.

## 1. Be the last to speak.

When Nelson Mandela was young, he learned a valuable lesson from the gatherings where the leaders of his village discussed important matters. Despite the fact that Mandela’s father was the tribal chief, the son couldn’t help noticing that his father was always the last person to speak.

As a leader, if you speak first, you’re likely to affect what others believe. In that way, your team members may naturally align their thinking to yours. Or they may see that your mind is already made up and you do not agree with their thoughts.

At that point, you’ll be more likely to have heard your team’s true thoughts, which you can to use to inform the opinion you yourself deliver at the end of the conversation.

## 2. Shut down outside distractions.

A key part of being a good listener is showing the speaker that he or she has your undivided attention. This gives those speakers the confidence to express themselves fully without feeling that they’re imposing on your time.

Besure to use that time wisely, by really listening: Close your laptop and put your phone away so that incoming emails and notifications don’t distract you or make the speaker think he or she isn’t the most important thing for you right now.

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**Communications Tips.**

I like to have meetings on the move and will often suggest going for a walk instead of sitting in a conference room. Getting out of the office is a great way to eliminate potential distractions and really focus on what someone has to say.

# 3. Mind your body language.

Studies described by The Nonverbal Group showed that as little as 7 percent of a message is conveyed through words. Body language plays a major role in how we communicate and how we listen. For example, folding your arms is a defensive position that suggests you're resisting what the other person is saying.

People are also inclined to mirror the body language of others, especially when they want cooperation. If your arms are folded, your speaker may copy you. This will make the speaker feel more defensive and less likely to speak freely.

When you're listening, then, be aware of what your body language is saying to the speaker. Unfold your arms and be open to what this person has to say.

# 4. Pay attention to the unsaid.

The renowned business writer Peter Drucker wrote that, "The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said." I understood exactly what he meant after my own meeting with a Coca-Cola executive who was completely dismissive of my company's flavored water idea.

By saying "Americans love 'sweet,'" he was conveying his belief that my business was doomed. But I heard the opposite. What he *wasn't* saying was that his company did not recognize the opportunity I was chasing. If I could move fast enough, I

would have a serious headstart over the biggest player in the market.

If someone routinely fails to address an issue you believe is important, ask yourself why. Can you take advantage of that person’s lack of knowledge or interest?

## 5. Make sure you hear quiet voices.

By 2006, Cameron Herold had grown his startup 1-800-GOT-JUNK into a $60 million business. While Herold was exploring ambitious new strategies, his VP of finance warned him about over-spending. But that finance guy was a naturally quiet person, so it was easy for the founder to ignore his advice.

Herold went ahead with his fast-growth plans, which ultimately proved unsustainable. When the economic downturn hit a few years later, the company nearly collapsed. Herold vowed to make sure that in future everyone’s voice counted.

When I myself am in meetings, I notice who hasn’t contributed to the conversation and make a point of asking for his or her opinion, even if that requires following up after the meeting. Hearing from everyone — even the quietest people — ensures I get the most rounded view of what’s happening at my business.

## Quiet on set!

As part of my work for The Kara Network, I host a podcast, *Unstoppable,* where I interview other entrepreneurs. The style is usually conversational, but we often need so-called clean quotes that we can turn into stand-alone clips. That means I can’t join in the conversation or even add verbal agreements like “uh-huh.”

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You can learn a lot about listening in these situations. So, next time someone is speaking, imagine that, like me, you can’t speak until the director says “cut”; that way, you’ll really hear what that speaker has to say.

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