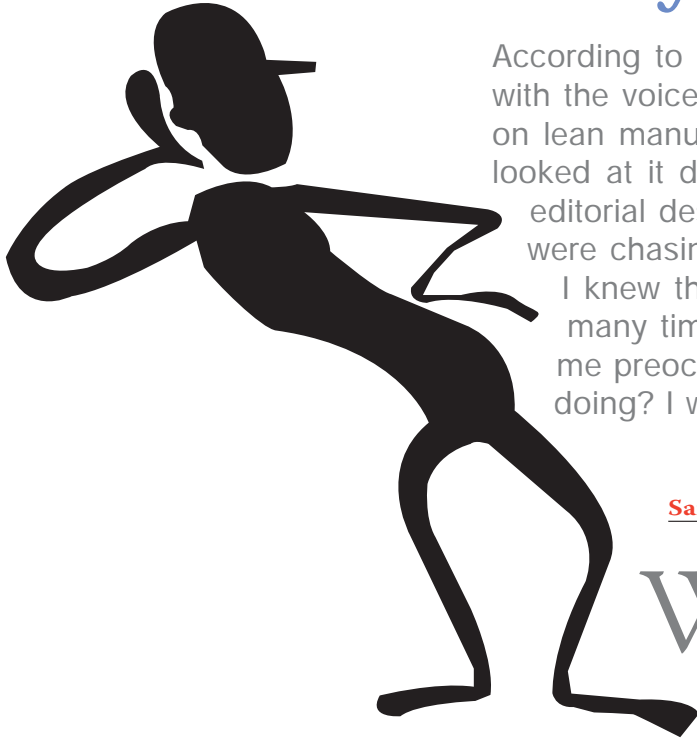


# Are you listening?



According to Woodrow Wilson, the ear of the leader must ring with the voices of the people. I was in the middle of a seminar on lean manufacturing when my phone must have rung, and I looked at it during the break to find six missed calls from the editorial desk of this magazine. I knew immediately that they were chasing my submission and the dead line had expired. I knew that I was to send in my stuff, I did remind myself many times to do it, but other subjects on my hands kept me preoccupied. When I told myself to do it what was I not doing? I was not listening...

**Sanjeev Baitmangalkar**

When I sat down to script a story I thought of sharing examples of people with leadership qualities.

Many names crossed my mind of fitting examples. Listening is a great quality of a leader. My mind flashed pictures of Benjamin Disraeli, Oprah Winfrey, some of my teachers, some of my colleagues at work; even some from the bureaucratic club who I know have this quality. Taking a break from my writing, I dug into my mailbox and found a mail from my friend Ravi who stays in the US. Ravi was a brilliant student during our college days, and perhaps is also an ardent reader. Ravi had sent me an article by Bruno Kahne who serves the aeronautic industry as a consultant. And Bruno talks about how we can learn about listening from the deaf. 'Wow', I thought what a great idea and how easily we miss it. So I decided to share something from Bruno's story and add my two bit to it.

In December 2006, when Bruno was developing a leadership programme for Airbus, he met an executive whose youngest son was born without hearing. Through this man and a French-language web site that he had founded to offer

online sign-language translation services, Bruno became familiar with the silent culture of deaf people. Bruno says as he immersed himself in their visual, intensely expressive language. He realised that through their 'handicap', deaf people had developed certain communication skills more thoroughly than most hearing people, which made them uncommonly effective at getting their point across. Thus he built a radical experiment: to work with deaf people as communication consultant for his corporate clients. The idea was not to teach sign language, although some deaf trainers remain convinced that such training would resolve many problems, but to help them adopt communication skills from the deaf world that would make them better colleagues and managers.

When they interact with one another, deaf people act in ways that let them communicate more rapidly and accurately than hearing people. Some of these behaviors are simple and obvious, but it's remarkable how often hearing people do the opposite.

"Listen. Do not have an opinion while you listen because frankly, your opinion doesn't hold much water outside of your universe. Just listen. Listen until their brain has been twisted like a dripping towel and what they have to say is all over the

*"There are people who, instead of listening to what is being said to them, are already listening to what they are going to say themselves."*

- Albert Guinon

floor,” said, Hugh Elliott. To improve your ‘listening skills,’ consider these suggestions. I will continue to use Bruno’s story to share some learning:

### Look people in the eye

In his initial meetings with deaf people, Bruno used an interpreter. He calls it a strange situation, looking at one person while listening to another. During one conversation he was struck by something a young woman had said so he started to write it down in his notebook. Suddenly the atmosphere changed. He looked up and saw the woman frowning angrily at him and asked him through the interpreter, what was wrong. “You are being very rude,” she replied. “Why?” he asked, totally lost. “Because you cut the conversation,” she responded, explaining that when he stopped looking her in the eye, he also stopped their communication. “I apologise,” said Bruno. “But what you just said was interesting, and I didn’t want to forget it.” Her answer was quick and sharp: “No, Bruno. You don’t write to remember. You don’t remember because you write!” It was incredulous. “What are you saying? That because you didn’t take any notes during this meeting, you will be able to remember everything?” Calmly, she answered, “That’s correct. Since I don’t write, I’m more present in the interaction and I can- concentrate more. And the more I do it, the better I remember.” Ten days later, when he met this young woman again, she was able to recall not just everything they covered in the original meeting, but also the colour of Bruno’s shirt, tie, and even how many chairs were in the room. From that day on, Bruno has stopped taking notes during meetings and interviews. And indeed, since then, he says that his memory has improved.”

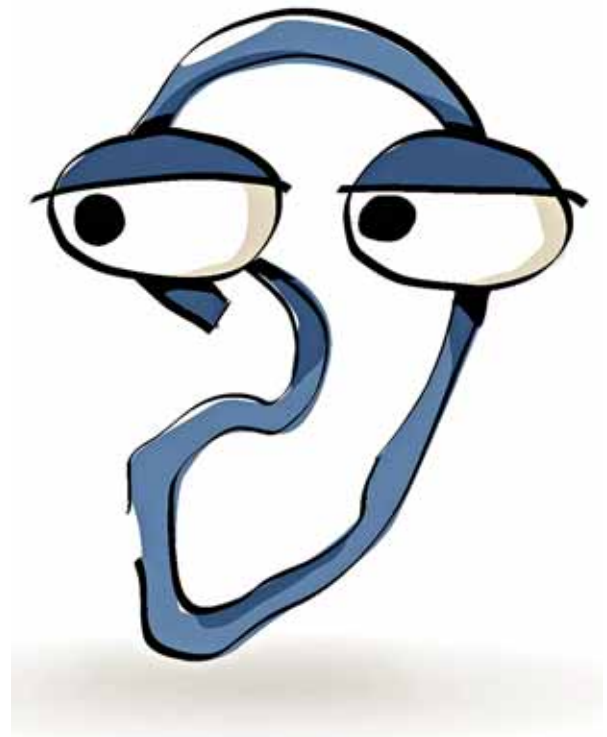
Although I have narrated Bruno’s story, I am not asking you to stop taking notes. There are various ways of overcoming forgetfulness, notes is one disciplined way. But when you are in conversation either with your customer, supplier, colleague, friend or family, remember to maintain eye contact.

### Do not interrupt

“When people talk, listen completely. Most people never listen,” said Ernest Hemingway. Deaf people follow a very strict protocol: Only one-person signs at a time. If another person tries to interrupt, the others in the group shake their right hands to signify to the ‘interrupter’ that he or she must wait until the ‘speaker’ is finished. This approach to communication, which at first feels slow is in fact extremely efficient because there is much less misunderstanding to explain or recover from. Consensus and agreement are arrived at more quickly than during a typical guttural overlapping conversation. By communicating sequentially, a deaf person ensures that he or she first understands the other speaker before trying to be understood. Try this the next time you’re in a business discussion or a meeting, let the other person finish what he or she has to say, then silently count to three before responding. You will find that, in the long term, slower is faster. “To listen closely and reply well is the highest perfection we are able to attain in the art of conversation,” said Francois de La Rochefoucauld.

### Say what you mean, as simply as possible

“Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening,” said, Dorothy Sarnoff. Deaf people are direct. This is why people with hearing sometimes perceive sign language as blunt to the point of rudeness. It’s not. It’s just explicit. The deaf tend not

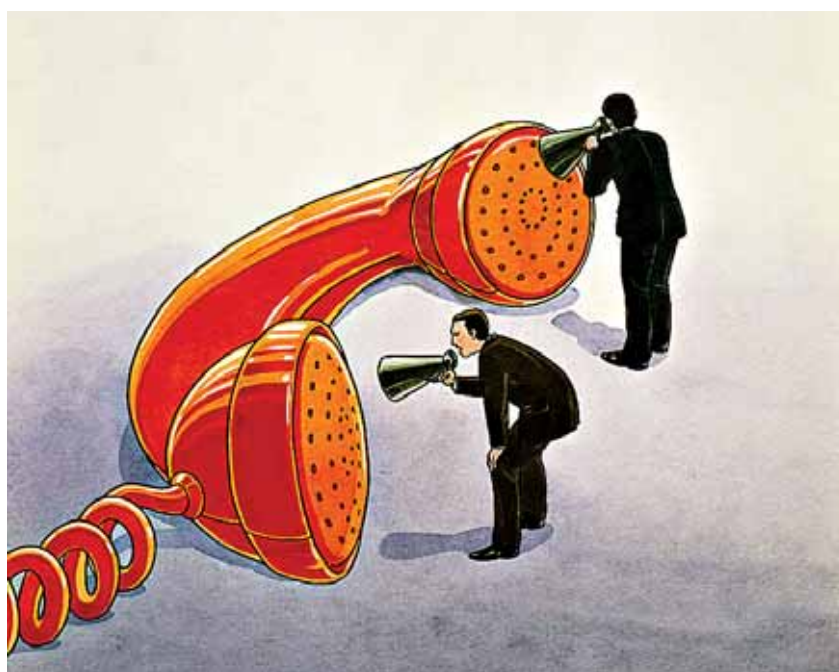


to hide behind soft language, struggling to find the most diplomatic wording and hoping that the listener will be able to discern what they 'really' mean. Indeed deaf people reveal not only

their thoughts, but also their feelings, both positive and negative, more clearly than hearing people do, as they express them with their whole bodies. Similarly, the deaf are often far better than hearing people at finding the most economical way to convey their message. For example, index finger placed between the eyebrows is sign for the familiar 'Bindi' adornment, and that is how they say India. So simple!

### When you don't understand something, ask

Because sign language is a constantly evolving language, not slowed down by the need to develop a written counterpart, new signs emerge all the time. Consequently, even if they use the same national sign language, two deaf people from different parts of the same country will use words unique to their region. Aware of this, deaf people feel completely at ease saying "I don't know" or "I don't understand." Those of us with hearing aren't nearly as willing to admit confusion or lack of comprehension. We often sit silently in meetings while our colleagues use acronyms or technical jargons we don't grasp because we think asking for clarification is a sign of weakness. Ironically, we'd rather leave a meeting clueless than risk being perceived as stupid. Many meetings conclude with some version of "So, do we all agree?" which discourages anyone from saying no or asking questions. A better approach, which encourages people to speak up, is to ask each person, individually, whether he or she would like clarification about anything that has been discussed.



### Stay focused

Rich DeVous, once chairman of the American Chamber of Commerce and Industry once said that he could only do one thing at a time. Psychologists tell us that men are poor multitaskers while women are better at it. We all know how difficult it is to concentrate on only one thing when the phone is ringing, e-mail alerts are pouring in, and a colleague has just stopped by. The deaf cut themselves off from any distractions, they don't multitask, and they focus their attention entirely on the conversation. In a recent meeting with some deaf people, Bruno presented a new workflow chart. He gave them each a document outlining the programme, planning to elaborate on it as they read the material. One of them asked if they should first read, then discuss or first discuss, then read. Doing both at the same time was impossible to them and of course, despite what we try to do, it is also difficult.

These are just a few of the many communication behaviors we can learn from deaf people. But overall, the most inspiring thing about communication with deaf people and the behavior most worth emulating is their incredibly strong desire to exchange information efficiently and without adornment. This desire is so strong, in fact, that it often highlights how feeble, misguided, and wishy-washy our own attempts at dialogue are by comparison. It turns out that the people who are truly handicapped in communication are not necessarily those with a physical disability. **MMT**



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