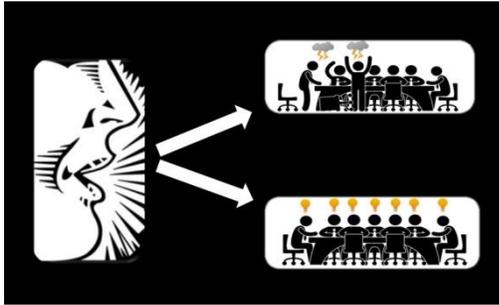


Active Telling: the art of assuring people listen to you



The worst mistakes I made over 24 years as an organizational leader were how I *told* things to people.

I know excellent leadership depends on great listening—I was a natural with that. Each moment of listening is a step forward in building commitment.

But, early in my career, my way of *telling* too often led to pushback or withdrawal into silence—it was like three steps backwards with commitment.

A recipe for people not really listening

At that time, my strong need for success led to a need to *convince* people of my ideas. So, I worked hard to present ideas in a powerful and inspirational way, minimizing weaknesses and flaws. I was well-prepared to quickly counter any perceived limitations or risks.

The trouble was that people almost always had concerns—few organizational actions are risk-free. Too often, my quick retorts made them feel not listened to. This would provoke debate we could not resolve well or silent discontent which slowed or blocked the actions I wanted.

A paradox of skillful telling

As I sought research and advice about telling, I discovered that even the most inspirational speech is lucky if it gets even 20% of people on board! (1) The large majority of people have to talk their way toward commitment in multiple conversations.

Paradoxically, people are more likely to pull together around an idea if they are able to freely express and explore concerns. Also, people need to be able to talk things over to figure out how an idea connects to what is important to them.

I even had to face the humbling reality that my best ideas had holes and flaws. In complex systems, no one person has the full picture and everyone has a perspective to learn from. It was very hard, but I gradually learned to link success with actually *seeking out* negative reactions.

A method for skillful telling

To tell effectively I first prepare myself by remembering “My best ideas are just theories to be tested and improved upon.” Then I proceed with a cycle of **Ask-Tell-Ask** (2):

- **Ask:** In a way appropriate to the situation, I ask permission to give my point of view. This is surprisingly powerful in facilitating openness and I have never had anyone refuse.
- **Tell:** I am careful to use “I” statements (i.e. “This is the way I am seeing things.” as opposed to “This is the way things are.”)—another very simple but powerful method to convey there is not One Truth and that I will be interested in any reactions.

- **Ask:** I ask people what they heard me say through some form of summarizing or repeating back. Because this can feel awkward, I may explain how easy it is for us all to misinterpret each other. Also, I ask for reactions and summarize what I heard.

Several cycles of Ask-Tell-Ask get a lot out on the table. People are more likely to feel taken seriously. Concerns can get then converted into issues for problem solving and action.

Risks and traps in active telling

I call this approach *active telling* because, like active listening, it is two-way—the goal is to assure *mutual* understanding and exploration of ideas even if there is disagreement.

I have experienced first-hand several risks and traps. Watch out for the inevitable lure back into convincing others. Also, I have learned to be careful that helping others feel heard does not lead to premature abandonment or revision of my ideas. The reverse can happen--dealing with negativity can easily pull us all, at times, into getting more rigid and discounting feedback.

Human affairs are never perfect. There is no guarantee these methods mean people will really listen to you. But, the chances for getting to true commitment are much higher.

Resources

- The tool **In the Moment Reminder for Active Telling** is available for subscribers only. To obtain the link, subscribe for free monthly resources at [Subscribe](#).
- Once you subscribe, you will also receive a link to the expanded tool for dialogic leadership **In the Moment Reminders for Dialogue**.

References

- (1) Baker, Neil [The Impact of a Visionary Speech](#).
- (2) Adapted from multiple sources including Miller, William R., Rollnick, Stephen **Motivational Interviewing** The Guilford Press 2012. See the tool on active telling for full list of references.

About Neil Baker M.D.

Neil Baker M.D. works with healthcare leaders and teams to enhance impact through *In-the-Moment Leadership and Team Strategies*. This means focusing on immediate work challenges—using any work situation, even the most complex and difficult--as opportunities to achieve immediate impact on quality of work relationships and on progress to results.

He has developed these approaches as a leader, speaker, consultant, and executive coach for 30 years. Past positions include serving as Director of Psychiatric Inpatient Services at the University of Colorado Health Sciences Center in Denver, Colorado; Medical Director of Quality

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