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As your role grows in scale and influence, so too must your ability to listen. But listening is one of the [toughest skills to master](#) — and requires uncovering deeper barriers within oneself.

Take, for example, our client, Janet, a successful principal in a management consulting firm. She recently received 360-degree feedback from colleagues that she needed to improve her listening skills. This confused her — she had always thought of herself as an active listener. When we asked her colleagues why, they described how she wouldn't exactly answer questions in meetings — and how she often had different takeaways from the rest of the team. Janet wanted to explore what was happening. It seemed simple enough, and yet why was she having trouble? The key, ironically, is to focus on yourself.

Ignore your inner critic. Janet realized that she wasn't tracking to the dialogue because she was nervous about her own performance. Her mind was attuned to a different voice — that of her own inner critic — monitoring how she was doing in the meeting. This was especially true during presentations. Janet's performance anxiety overshadowed her ability to hear the concerns underlying each question and kept her from noticing the audience's cues to move along. *Shift your focus from "getting a good grade" to the presentation's greater purpose. What excites you about the topic or audience?*

Expand how you see your role. To fully listen, you must first believe it is a critical part of your job. To quote from Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind's article, [Leadership Is a Conversation](#), "Leaders who take organizational conversation seriously know when to stop talking and start listening." As Janet continued to explore why she wasn't listening, she realized she'd boxed herself in. As a management consultant, she described her role as, "providing efficient solutions to clients." We discussed how she might update her view from problem solver to trusted advisor — one that not only provided

counsel but listened deeply to clients' issues and concerns. *Consider if you've boxed yourself in by role definition. Do you believe your primary job is to provide direction only?*

Put aside your fear and anticipation. Listening demands being fully present and ready to respond to what might get thrown your way. But our listening shuts down when we're anticipating what might happen next. Janet found that while another person was talking, her mind was already thinking about what she might say next or anticipating what might be said. This was especially true during difficult conversations, when she anticipated confrontation. She'd rush through what she wanted to say without listening as a way to avoid her fears of conflict. But listening is an especially important skill in navigating difficult conversations, where multiple interests and agendas must be aligned. Our full attention is demanded to understand what the hot-button issues are or what the potential misunderstandings might be. *Notice if your listening shuts down when you're emotionally uncomfortable. Are you aware of your triggers?*

Be open to having your mind changed. Janet also realized that she was working hard to appear confident and to make sure she was offering her point of view in meetings. In trying to be more assertive, she came off as having prematurely made up her mind. One of Janet's partners shared this tip, "I do have a viewpoint going in but I don't assume or try to show I'm the smartest person in the room. In fact, I go in with the assumption that my colleagues are smart too and therefore might have good reason for having a different position. I'm willing to hear them out for the sake of getting to the best answer, not just my answer." Listening, then, is actually a sign of incredible self-confidence. *Are you trying too hard to convey confidence and missing others' perspectives in the process?*

While tactically there are [many ways to strengthen your listening skills](#), you must focus on the deeper, internal issues at stake to really improve. Listening is a skill that enables you to align people, decisions, and agendas. You cannot have [leadership presence](#) without hearing what others have to say.

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