

Why listening is your number one tool as a first-time CEO

There is often the expectation that first-time CEOs will come pre-loaded with all the necessary experience and skills required for the job because they have typically had a successful career to date. In the eyes of others, they may make it look easy and appear to ooze confidence, but as a first-time CEO, there is still so much to learn.

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Often in a new position you want to take action straight away, however with over 70% of successful people experiencing anxiety and impostor syndrome symptoms about their abilities, they are left feeling lonely at the top and lacking in confidence. This is why the veneer of confidence needs to be converted into genuine, deep-rooted confidence, through the power of listening.

Having the strength to admit you don't know all the answers, and not being afraid to defer to the experts are both vitally important steps in learning. Often your team has the experience and knowledge to input into both the strategy and the plan, bringing different skill sets to make the best decisions.

This is why actively listening is a powerful tool. As CEO, you may not have all the answers but you will have a lot of excellent questions. Active listening means hearing and taking in what the other person is saying or the feedback you are getting from different groups and teams. Asking secondary questions gets results to get to the root of where they are coming from. Too many times we look for the snippets that may signal that our own opinion is the correct one and we anticipate and make

assumptions along the way. This bingo card consultation misses the real message that is being sent to you - the gold is the revelations you were not aware of.

In addition to translating what the message is telling you, you also need to understand the best way to communicate and work with all the key relationships that you have at work. As a coach/mentor for first-time CEOs, you often find that an impasse or disjointed connection between the CEO and the Chair or Board is a result of each side just speaking a different language - perhaps to do with the level of detail or frequency of updates. The job is then to act as the adaptor to ensure both sides understand each other and are more likely to actively listen to each other.

This is true at all levels within the company and with key relationships externally too. In my book *Become a Successful First-Time CEO* I examine three wide relationship areas that it's critical to get right and that make up what I call the *CEO Winner's Circle*.

Firstly, it's *you* - any issues you have with confidence and communication need to be addressed before you worry about anyone else. Secondly, it's all the internal relationships within the company you now run: managing upwards, getting the best out of your direct reports, and leading the wider company. And third, is the relationships we have outside the company with clients and suppliers, with partners, with the wider industry, and with the media. Becoming a key person of influence outside the company will attract the best partners and talent to want to work with you.



Active listening also sends the message that the speaker's opinion is valued and therefore the speaker themselves is respected. This in turn builds trust and loyalty. CEOs have to make decisions and need to take the temperature of their teams to understand the implications of different options and outcomes. However, you can't please everybody all the time, and the engagement fostered by excellent and consistent two-way communication - that includes active listening and explanations of why - will more likely result in respect and acceptance either way.

Becoming a first-time CEO can bring unique challenges, for individuals and for the team, which is why all new CEOs must understand the power of listening. Rather than considering it a weakness of not knowing all the answers, listening is a key strength of successful first-time CEOs, allowing them to create an engaged, respected and trusted workforce.

David Roche is a professional coach and mentor at Grey Area Coaching, Chair of London Book Fair and the author of *Become a Successful First-*

Time CEO.



'I just wish I'd had this as a reference twenty-five years ago.'

Glen Ward, CEO, Syngency

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