

Following: Inside Every Good Follower Is A Leader

“Slow down... Red light... Do you see that truck on your right? ...Speed limit is 45 here. ... Hey, watch out for that kid in the cross-walk.” Back seat drivers probably drive you crazy. So do some listeners.

Listeners commonly have two faults. The first, ironically, is that they talk too much. When one person is asked to listen to the other, the listener often does most of the talking, according to researchers. Second, the typical listener leads, directs and diverts a conversation by frequently using leading questions and statements. Few listeners are willing to follow the speaker's lead. It is a rare listener who helps the speaker tell his own story in his own way. Following skills give you an alternative to back-seat driving of the conversation.

Following skills are powerful responses to someone's speaking. They don't make you feel powerful. The role of a follower gets no glory. But when you can let the speaker be the leader, take the credit for having made a difference.

To understand the power of following, you'll want to know

- why you'd choose to do it,
- the secret of following,
- how following sounds different,
- what the skills of following are, and
- how you know if you are leading or following.

Why Should I Be a Follower?

When you're listening, it not your job to lead. As a listener, you do not know what the speaker is going to say. Therefore, you *cannot* lead the conversation, even when you think you know where it is going. Yet many listeners try to lead through

questions and statements. Soon enough, the listener is leading, and the speaker is following a direction that has little to do with what he wanted and needed to say.

To listen well you have to be comfortable not *being* the leader, but *following* the leader. You'll do the best job as a listener when you don't try to control the process or the outcome, but when you try to facilitate it through good listening. When you use listening skills, you control the part of the process that belongs to you: helping the speaker talk freely and unguardedly, soaking in what's said and sorting it out.

A good follower in any situation is not a bump on a log. A good follower knows what needs to be done to make the leader most effective, and does that without having to be told. A listener chooses behaviors that make the speaker most effective. In this way the listener is a follower actively supporting the lead of the speaker.

The Secret of Following

Are you ready for a secret? Don't tell the speaker... Shh... Here it is:

When you're following, you're actually leading.

It's not leading like you're used to. You don't get to be at the front of the line with your banner. This leadership is facilitation. You're leading the process, not the outcome. You're not the one with

the map; you're the one helping the map reader read the map.

The secret to this leadership is that the other person doesn't *feel* led. Nor is your intention to lead the speaker. Your listening guides the speaker through the conversation to where he or she needs the conversation to go. Confucius said that the leader knows his job is done when in the end people say, "We did it ourselves." That's how the speaker should feel. Following skills help you be that kind of a leader.

How Does Following the Conversation Sound Different than Leading It?

Here's how listening-to-lead sounds different than listening-to-follow.

Vying for the Lead

Speaker: I've really had it with John. Every time something's wrong, he blames us.

Leading Listener: Oh I know it. I'm getting tired of hearing his complaints. Did you hear him at the last meeting?

S: Well, actually I was thinking of a different time...

LL: Did he do it again? What are we going to do about him?

S: I don't know and I can't even think about that right now. I have a customer

who's upset, and I have to fix that.

LL: You know, when that happened to me...

Can you hear how the speaker is trying to stay in the lead of the conversation? The speaker is having to redirect the listener's attention to his or her own point of view. The speaker even had to tell the listener, "I'm not talking about *that*; I'm talking about *this*."

Following

Speaker: I've really had it with John. Every time something's wrong, he blames us.

Following Listener: Tell me more.

S: Do you know what he did this time? He told the customer that the delay was our fault!

FL: Really.

S: Yeah, so now I have to re-establish my reputation with the customer. That's the last thing I can afford at this point, another upset customer. Just wait until my director hears about this.

In this version of the conversation, the speaker is expending no energy redirecting the listener's point of view. The story unfolds as it makes sense to the speaker (not to the listener). While following skills sound unremarkable, they clear a space for the speaker to continue talking. Following skills help the listener show interest while talking less and letting the speaker decide on how to tell story.

What are Following Skills?

Following skills are brief, unintrusive verbal responses that help the speaker start talking or continue talking. They happen in the short pauses a speaker takes during a speaking "turn." Rather than interpret-

ing that pause as "Hey, it must be my turn to talk," the listener encourages the speaker to keep talking about the situation from the speaker's own point of view.

There are three ways of responding to the speaker to show that you are following his or her lead:

- Uh-huhs (which behavioral scientists call "minimal encouragers")
- Skillful questioning
- Invitations to talk

"Uh-huh."

These brief responses encourage the person to say more:

I see	Go on
Right	Yes
Sure	Wow
Really	Gosh
Of course	Hmm
Yep	Gee

People don't usually need to think about saying these; they are an unconscious part of the listening process. While these little words don't seem to do much, they actually do have a powerful effect on the speaker. Researchers found that the speaker gave 30% more information solely in response to these minimal encouragers. That's a good return on your investment.

Skillful Questioning.

Watch out! Questions are the easiest, fastest and sneakiest way for the listener to become the leader. It happens all the time. In fact, most questioning controls the conversation. It is a rare question that keeps the ball in the speaker's court. Listen to how the listener can use questions to start leading the conversation (this is the conversation just from the listener's mouth):

"Now, when did this happen?"

"Well, did you try...?"

"Did you think that would really help?"

"Why didn't you ...?"

When the listener uses questions to control the conversation, the speaker feels as if the listener has become a back-seat driver. The listener of course feels much more comfortable because he is in charge of the conversation. Questions direct the speaker to give the listener desired information, they convey opinions and judgments, and they give advice.

Skillful questioning means:

- asking questions that follow the speaker's lead, and
- limiting the number of questions you ask.

Constructive, listening-oriented questioning keeps the focus on the speaker's message. These questions prompt the speaker to ensure the listener's understanding or help the speaker further explore those dimensions that are important for fuller expression.

- **Clarifying questions.** These questions verify and check the understanding of the listener to prevent any misunderstanding. "Are you referring to the system breakdown last week?"
- **Door Openers.** Once the speaker reaches an impasse, these questions invite him to continue. "What were you thinking or feeling at that point?" "How have you approached this issue in the past?" "Would you be willing to elaborate on this issue?"

Avoid questions that seek to merely fulfill your curiosity, as they can easily derail the conversation. Also beware of advice and opinions masquerading as questions:

“Don’t you think that...?” “Have you tried...?”

Questions are a slippery slope; one question leads to another, and before you know it, you’re driving. Use questions sparingly. After you ask one, use other following responses to assure that you’re not at the wheel of the conversation.

Invitations to Talk.

Sometimes you can see that someone needs to talk but isn’t saying anything. Or the words you do hear are the tip of

an iceberg. At other times, you may want to get caught up on the status of a team or a project. In either instance, someone has not come to you and started to talk; you’re inviting them to talk.

When you sense that a person might like to talk but is reluctant or hesitant, invite him to talk. Some ways to invite people to speak are describing how they look (“You seem upset about that meeting”), showing interest in listening to them with body language, or simply asking them if they’d like to talk about it (followed by silence).

When you’re simply catching up on business, you might ask, “How are things going?” Sometimes a speaker stops before having finished. If you need more, you can ask for it by simply saying, “Tell me more.”

How Do I Know If I’m Leading or I’m Listening?

Here’s a quick baseline to see if you’re trying to take charge of the conversation or if you’re following.

	Following	Back Seat Driving
Brief Response	Mmm-hmm.	(interrupts and finishes sentence)
Question	“And how did that go?”	“Did you try...?” or “Don’t you think...?”
Statement	“Say more about that.”	“That happened to me once...”

With this framework in mind, listen to yourself in your next conversation. Were you riding, or back seat driving?

Conclusion

The best listeners refrain from becoming back-seat drivers in the conversation. If you saw them at work, following their speakers, you would hear them using uh-huhs, invitations to talk and skillful questions to keep the speaker in the lead. Further, they know that in being good followers, they are actually playing an important leadership role. Like any good director, they know they create a powerful outcome even when the other person is on stage and in the limelight.