



*This is the first in a seven-part series dedicated to effective leadership behaviors. This series offers their insight into how to develop these behaviors.*

## Leadership Behaviors: #1 Focused Listening

By Jamie Daniels

**M**any years ago we worked with a plant manager who was very demanding of his subordinates. He had created a culture in which employees worked long hours and were on call at all times. His management team would stay well past quitting time because he was likely to show up after hours and ask for them. You could see supervisors and managers “hanging around” when they should have been home with their families. One night everyone stayed very late into the night because the manager’s office light was on and his car was parked outside. The next day

**One of the most powerful tools you have for understanding your impact on others’ behavior is the skill of active listening.**

– Jamie Daniels

they learned his wife had picked him up for dinner and he had simply not returned to the office. The impact on morale was significant. Yet that plant manager had no idea how his behavior had impacted his staff and had undermined his own success.

Perhaps the saddest aspect of this situation is that no one was willing to tell that plant manager how his behavior was suppressing the performance of his unit. Not even an open-door policy would have garnered this information, yet without it this manager was never going to earn his employees' full potential. How about you? Are you unconsciously limiting your own success and the success of your group?

We can be very careless in the behaviors we make habitual. We act as we do because we believe that what we do is important to our success with others, but we rarely validate that belief or practice. In part this is because we don't know how to separate appearances from facts. When we see someone working late, we assume they are working hard. When we bark an order and someone jumps to comply, we assume that we have motivated them—without ever investigating the question of what we motivated them to do. Escape and avoidance behaviors are largely hidden but their cost is real. Effective leaders do not make facile assumptions about their impact on the behavior of others. They investigate.

One of the most powerful tools you have for understanding your impact on others' behavior is the skill of active listening. The techniques most commonly taught, such as asking open-ended questions, encouraging the speaker, and rephrasing for understanding, are fairly well-known and will not be discussed in this article. These techniques are designed to draw out the speaker's knowledge about a particular situation. You should master these techniques as they will enhance



your ability to deliver positive reinforcement—an essential leadership skill.

Before we talk about active listening, a word of caution. If you cannot listen calmly to comments that contain implied or stated criticism, you will severely limit your ability to have a free flow of information from your followers. Nothing good comes from limiting the free flow of information. If you cannot see criticism as an opportunity to learn more about your leadership skills you will soon find yourself relying on your position for authority rather than on your followers' good will.

We recommend practicing your active listening skills as a pinpointing tool. As you are trying to identify your impact on your followers' behavior, you are diagnosing their reaction to your lead. Without meaning to oversimplify things we suggest you look for the following types of responses as you listen to the speaker.

First, look for behaviors that suggest that the speaker is either trying to escape or evade responding. Do they give details freely or do they carefully manage what they share? Do they volunteer information on problems or do you have to drag information out of them?

Do they alert you of pending problems or wait for you to learn about them on your own? Are they nervous when they talk to you or are they calm and relaxed?

Here you can tell the effect you are having on them and whether you are exercising positive or negative control over their behavior. Where punishment is anticipated, your followers will engage in escape or avoidance behaviors. If they see a pattern of punishment they will seek to placate rather than to please you. They volunteer nothing that might upset you. They worry as much about your reaction as they do about the incident itself.

The problem for leaders here is that this will lead to cover-up actions and hiding of bad news. Instead of leading they will find themselves reacting to events. The more leaders use negative consequences with their followers, the more it seems to them that they have to be personally involved in everything. Over time the effort required by the leader will only increase as they try to stay ahead of the bad news.

Although it is not common, leaders should also look for evidence of indifference or apathy. Some examples of this would be a lack of preparation where there has been sufficient notice and time, a pattern of failure to anticipate and prepare for problems, or an absence of effort to deal with recurring issues. The lesson for the leader here is that the follower doesn't much care what the leader thinks or does. Where the follower is indifferent to the consequences, there is no leadership.

Verbal behavior is still behavior. You must use your active listening skills to shape the

followers' responses. Positive Leadership has as its goal open communication. Prompt and honest upwards communication is essential to effective decision making but it can be stopped very easily. If you interrupt, talk more than you listen, decide your course of action before the follower has finished talking, or fail to encourage a full disclosure of



the speaker's report, you will have a negative impact on the free flow of information, up the chain of command.

As you can see, leading others is more about self-management than anything else. Decisive action is not good if it is based on inaccurate data. Leading from the front is not good if the followers are hanging back. Being smarter than everyone else doesn't matter much if you're the only one who understands and cares. You must manage your own behavior if you intend to lead others. And it starts with active listening.

• • • • •

**Leading from the front is not good if the followers are hanging back.**

## [About the Author]

### JAMIE DANIELS, PH.D.



Jamie Daniels is a former leader and long-time associate of Aubrey Daniels International, having developed productivity and quality improvement systems for corporations in the United States, Canada, South America, Australia and Europe. Jamie is coauthor of *Performance Management: Changing Behavior that Drives Organizational Effectiveness* (fourth edition) and *Measure of a Leader*.

## [About ADI]

Regardless of your industry or expertise, one thing remains constant: People power your business. Since 1978 Aubrey Daniels International (ADI) has been dedicated to accelerating the business and safety performance of companies worldwide by using positive, practical approaches grounded in the science of behavior and engineered to ensure long-term sustainability. ADI provides clients with the tools and methodologies to help move people toward positive, results-driven accomplishments. Our clients accelerate strategy execution while fostering employee engagement and positive accountability at all levels of their organization.

### CONNECT WITH US

[aubreydaniels.com/stay-connected](http://aubreydaniels.com/stay-connected)

**web:** [aubreydaniels.com](http://aubreydaniels.com)

**blog:** [aubreydanielsblog.com](http://aubreydanielsblog.com)

**twitter:** [twitter.com/aubreydaniels](https://twitter.com/aubreydaniels)

