



# Excel Leader Advisory Letter

ISSUED BY THE EXCEL LEADERSHIP GROUP

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## Excel's Mission Statement

Help business leaders exceed their goals by creating a culture that unleashes the talents and creativity of all associates.

## Thought for June

"The body of every organization is structured from four kinds of bones. There are the wishbones, who spend all their time wishing someone would do the work. Then there are the jawbones, who do all the talking, but little else. The knucklebones knock everything anybody else tries to do. Fortunately, in every organization there are also the backbones, who get under the load and do most of the work."

-Leo Aikman



**Effective leaders intentionally create a high performance work environment based on high levels of employee engagement and discretionary effort. Their cultures in turn contribute directly to producing sustainable world-class results and higher profits. Therefore, despite the current economic climate and all its related challenges to your bottom line, you should continue investing in the development of your own leadership skills and those of your management team.**

Last month, I talked about the emerging economic recovery and a key challenge facing all companies: retention of top talent. Within the coaching tips on how executives can help retain their top performers, I emphasized two important steps: communications and demonstrating empathy. This month, I'd like to continue with that theme, but go a bit deeper by talking about the critical skill of listening and how it plays an important role in both building effective communications and demonstrating empathy.

Listening, as all executives know, is an essential skill for effective leadership. Here are five levels of listening and some coaching tips on how to strengthen your skills:

**Level 1: Not listening.** At this level, we simply choose to ignore what others are telling us as well as the non-verbal cues they are sending. Although this approach is sometimes tempting, especially when dealing with difficult people, it does not foster either effective listening or leadership.

**Level 2: "Yes, but" listening.** At this level, we may hear the words, but our thoughts are really focused on our rebuttal to what is being said. Not an approach that leads to either understanding or win-win solutions.

**Level 3: Passive listening.** At this level, we also hear the words that are communicated. We may even spot the non-verbal cues missed in level three. However, what is missing is any follow-up to make sure we are truly understanding the real message.

**Level 4: Active listening.** Here we are employing the important element of a feedback device, such as paraphrasing. Here is an example: "Let me play back to you what I think I heard you saying, and you tell me if I am on the mark or not". We are seeking to understand, although at an intellectual level. In other words, we are seeking clarity of the head.

**Level 5: Empathetic listening.** At this level, we truly attempt to feel what it would be like to be in

the other person's shoes. What he or she is feeling as well as what they are saying. In other words, we are seeking true understanding.

Now a few coaching tips to help you build your skills in level four and especially level five listening:

**1. Clear your head and your agenda.** Practice quieting your mind. Put all the internal clamor that all of us experience to rest and truly listen to what the other person is saying.

**2. Make Time for People.** Every leader experiences very demanding schedules which test one's patience and ability to manage time and events effectively. That said, as leaders we must make others' concerns and feelings a top priority. We must avoid brushing people off and sending the message that we do not consider them or their issues important. Remember, as leaders, we will be judged by our actions and not our words.

**3. Learn to Listen Beyond the Words.** Sometimes people do not always express their true feelings or concerns directly. Listen for the feelings with which the words are being expressed. Listen for the other person's needs. All of us yearn to be recognized for who we are, acknowledged as having a legitimate point of view and included in the process. Remember that we don't have to agree, just listen, acknowledge and strive to understand.

I trust that you will find these tips helpful in your journey to becoming a more effective listener and leader. As always, I encourage you to contact me anytime at [mike@excelleadership.net](mailto:mike@excelleadership.net) with your comments and questions. Also, if I can be of assistance with your leadership needs, please contact me. We'll talk to you again in July. Be well and best regards.

Join our Web-based "community" devoted to open and honest discussions on topics related to leadership challenges and solutions. To join, simply visit [TheExcelLeadershipGroup.net](http://TheExcelLeadershipGroup.net) and click on "Community."



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