

May I Please Finish?

BY BARB VOLPE, M.ED.

“May I please finish?” said one of my siblings during a discussion on the care of my elderly parents. I had just interrupted with what I thought was a helpful suggestion. Another sibling said in a low voice, “See, I am not the only one who interrupts.” The third sibling said, “We are a family of interrupters!” I quickly shut my mouth and mentally told myself to stop thinking of what I wanted to say and LISTEN! This incident reminded me that even though I work hard on my communication skills, I may need to monitor myself more with family and also at work. I started to wonder how well I had really been listening.

Communication skills are a fundamental competency in [Leadership Essentials](#), one of the three domains of the [Whole Leadership Framework](#). Being a good listener is key to being an effective communicator. Early childhood leaders and administrators spend much time listening to children, families, staff, and community members. To listen well, they need to understand what is being communicated, stay engaged in the conversation, be mindful of their perspective, and listen with a focus on empathy.

I have been fortunate to work with several colleagues who are good listeners. They make it a priority to listen to understand rather than being quick to respond. I notice that when they listen, they don’t prejudge, and they ask questions to enhance their understanding of what is being said. They serve as a model for me as I aspire to be a better listener.

Now that I am more aware that my habit of interrupting has crept back into my behavior with family, friends, and colleagues, I plan to focus on improving my listening skills. Below are five simple strategies I will practice to strengthen my listening skills.

1. **Be mindful and aware.** To change my behavior, I need to monitor it. Therefore, I will be more mindful and aware of when I interrupt or have the urge to speak rather than listen. I will practice meditation breathing techniques while I listen to others. This will help me slow down and process the information being shared.
2. **Acknowledge and apologize.** I have shared my desire to curb my interrupting habits with my family and colleagues. This allows them to help hold me accountable for changing my behavior.
3. **Take notes.** At work, I often worry that I will need to remember questions, ideas, or key points. If I write down my thoughts, I will be prepared when it is my turn to speak. I will keep a notebook with me, especially during meetings. Doing this will allow me to capture my thoughts without interrupting.
4. **Stay present and patient.** Life is busy; there is no denying that. But sometimes, that sense of busyness has a negative impact on my listening skills. When I am in a rush or preoccupied with other tasks, I can feel distracted and sometimes interrupt to speed things up. I will work to stay

present and patient when listening. When I become distracted by a sense of urgency, I will refocus on the conversation at hand or suggest a better time to talk when I know I can be a more supportive listener.

5. **Listen to Understand, Not Respond**. As the Director of Professional Learning, I am often involved in creative thinking and problem-solving. In many ways, coming up with solutions serves me well. However, it is critical that in conversations with others, I remember that the first goal of listening is to understand. I will focus on making understanding what is being said my priority rather than jumping into the role of problem-solver.

This will take dedicated effort, but I believe I can become a better listener. The next time I am with my siblings, I hope to hear them say, “Thanks for listening!”

“The most basic of all human needs is the need to understand and be understood. The best way to understand people is to listen to them.” ~Ralph Nichols

Interested in learning more about communication and leadership? Communication skills are just one of the topics discussed while building leadership skills in the [Ready to Lead leadership academy](#). Information can be found [here](#).

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