

You'll Need These Three Anti-Skills To Be a Great Leader in 2025

#2 is what most people find the hardest

Many leaders fall into the trap of thinking the answer to their insecurities is to do more:

- I'm not sure the team are clear on what needs to happen, so I'll tell them again.
- I've got a 1-to-1 meeting, so I'll need to do most of the talking.
- It's important this is done right, so I'll do it myself.

But here's the problem:

The more you do, the less effective a leader you are.

01 TALKING Listen and ask more questions.	02 TELLING Stay curious and create thinking.	03 TAKING IT ON Give authority, information and a clear result.
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The solution is to develop your anti-skills.

A skill is when you learn how to do something in order to achieve a positive outcome; an anti-skill is learning how to not do something in order to achieve a positive outcome.

Sounds weird, I know, so bear with me.

Imagine you want to improve your relationship with your teenage child. A skill might be to compliment them more often. An anti-skill might be that you resist making a sarcastic comment about their clothes or an opinion they have.

If you want to be a highly effective leader, then often it's as much about what you don't do as what you do.

Talking

It's totally understandable that as a leader you'll need to do a lot of talking. After all, clarity of communication is essential when it comes to effective leadership at whatever level you are at.

However, it quickly becomes the law of diminishing returns when we are the ones talking too much. We all spend too much of our time talking and it usually falls into one of two categories:

COSMETIC LISTENING

The act of "listening" while doing something else, such as typing on a keyboard, making dinner or scrolling on your phone. Often we aren't even looking at the other person. We forget what they said within minutes of the "conversation" ending. We are under the illusion a conversation has taken place; they often have the perception it hasn't.

CONVERSATIONAL LISTENING

The act of "listening" while actually being more interested in the voice inside our heads that's disagreeing with what the person is saying and is already formulating a response. We miss chunks of what was said, or make assumptions based on half-understood sentences.

The real skill is to listen and ask more questions.

When we talk, we only hear what we already know. When we listen and ask more questions, we hear so much more and we learn more. This is active listening.

Asking more questions also has the benefit of showing that you are interested in the other person and what they have to say. That single act builds more connection. Connection is the holy grail of communication and leadership.

When your people feel heard and understood, they are more engaged. When they are more engaged, you get more discretionary effort and better results. You also get more time back because you don't need to check as much, as they display more initiative and ingenuity. Who doesn't want more time?

DO LESS

Talk less. Listen with intent. Ask the question that helps someone else think.

Telling

The evil twin of talking is telling. Sure, there are times when we do need to tell people what to do. However, the more we tell, the less we know and the more we create dependency. The more dependency we create, the less time we have and the less creativity and collaboration we see, leading to poorer results.

In ten years of working as a leadership coach and trainer, I would say that more than 70 per cent of the teams I've worked with have said their leaders tell too much and don't take a coaching approach.

It tends to be down to a number of reasons, including:

- That's how they were treated on their way up the ladder.
- They have never been shown another way.
- They think coaching takes too long.
- They think it's all about being soft and fluffy.

As we said in the first point, when we talk we only learn what we already know. When we ask questions, we open ourselves up to a world of what we often didn't know. The questions become the answers.

The trick is to remain curious, not judgemental.

Sadly, much of our curiosity and creativity is slowly eroded by our educational system to a fraction of what we all started out possessing. The good news is that you can get it back. It just takes time and practice.

Start small. The simpler the question, the better:

- What am I assuming here?
- What might I not know?
- How might we do this differently?
- What do you need from me to make your job easier?
- What is happening for that person?
- What are the barriers to you doing your job better?

A SMALL WATCH-OUT

Try to avoid a question beginning with the word "Why". It can come across as judgemental and shut down thinking.

DO LESS

Tell less. Stay curious. Use simple questions to create ownership and insight.

Taking It On Yourself

Nothing kills efficiency like a bottleneck. It doesn't take much to clog things up. Think of a motorway. Ever been stuck in a traffic jam caused by rubberneckers looking at an accident on the opposite carriageway?

Doing everything yourself is the equivalent of rubbernecking. It often comes from our insecurities, which lead to micro-managing behaviours.

Get out of your own and your people's way and let them get on with the job they are being paid, and want, to do.

USE THE AIR MODEL

A	AUTHORITY	Give them the authority to do what you want them to do and to make decisions on the way to achieving the desired outcome.
I	INFORMATION	Share what information they need to know and what's not known, as well as anything else pertinent.
R	RESULT	Be clear about the desired result, including timescales, budgets, metrics and other expectations.

Then get out of their way and let them get on with it. They may not do it the way you would; they might just do it better.

Your job as a leader is not to have all the answers. If you do, you have a problem. You may be the technical expert, but the team and the organisation can't grow when you know and try to do it all.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

A skill is learning how to do something to achieve a positive outcome. An anti-skill is learning how not to do something to achieve a positive outcome.

To be a more effective leader, focus on three anti-skills: talking, telling and taking it on yourself.

THE AQR WAY

Find the friction. Focus on what matters. Measure the difference.

If you would like to explore what might be making leadership or team performance harder than it should be, talk to AQR Consulting.

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