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How CEOs (and the rest of us) can listen properly

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We all know the feeling.

It might be a meeting in the middle of the day, or just after you get home from work. You're there in the room and seemingly tuned in to what your colleagues, partner or kids are saying ... but you're also checking your emails, cooking dinner, or thinking about that unfinished errand.

You're listening – but you're not.



All ears: Woolworths CEO Brad Banducci (right) listens to chairman Gordon Cairns. *Louie Douvis*

It's a battle that even our most high-powered business leaders have, according to [the annual Chanticleer CEO poll](#).

Asked what skill or quality they want to develop over the next 12 months, [IAG](#) chief Peter Harmer, APA Group boss [Rob Wheals](#) and Woolworths chief [Brad Banducci](#) all nominated listening as an area for improvement.

"Being more present in meetings and active listening," the Woolies boss said when asked for his 2019 goal.

It's common problem for executives, according to deep-listening expert Oscar Trimboli.

"The most important thing a CEO needs to listen to is what is unsaid," he says, using neuroscience to back up his point.

The average person thinks at 900 words per minute, or as much as 1500 words for super-smart people. But we can only talk at 150 words a minute. Not only are non-verbal cues crucial, but the data says there's only an 11 per cent chance we say what we really mean on the first go.

"You get better odds at Crown Casino," Trimboli jokes.

There are a few key tips for chief executives.

First, don't get distracted by electronic devices, which he says are the biggest barriers to active listening and a common complaint among the CEOs and directors he works with. Second, help the speaker to express themselves by using silence (which invites them to speak) or by using a simple phrase like "tell me more".

Finally, listen for context, not content. Trimboli says CEOs are too intent on listening so they can spot a problem, fix it and move on. But in doing this, you risk missing the patterns that give the bigger picture.

He gives the example of [the big banks' AUSTRAC problems](#). "If you looked at the patterns and not the individual issues, those problems were easier to spot."

It wasn't all about listening. [AGL chief Brett Redman](#) wants to get better at talking.

"I want to improve my story-telling," he said. "There's a huge change going on in energy which leads to a positive future but we have to connect ordinary Australians to it. I think I can make this easier if I can tell the story of where we are heading and what it means to everyday life."

[Peter Coleman](#), chief executive of [Woodside Petroleum](#), has a similar aim.

"I'll be working on my motivational skills in the year ahead," he says. "Our focus is now on delivering our growth projects: Senegal, Scarborough and Browse. That means our staff will be working round the clock and it's my job to keep them at the top of their game and with all eyes on the ball."

Not surprisingly, given the pace of modern business and life, several chief executives also nominated time management and prioritisation as their key skills to develop.

Energy Australia boss [Catherine Tanna](#) said her area for improvement was saying no.

"Or, put another way, getting better at knowing where to focus my time," she said. "I recently learnt that 'no' is a complete sentence. So now I'm going to try to unlearn giving lots of reasons why."

But it's not all about soft skills. Some CEOs are planning to take 2020 by the scruff of the neck.

"It might sound obvious but all leaders need ambition and what I mean by that is that the scale of your vision and strategy for your organisation must be commensurate with the scale of the challenge you are facing, or the level of change you want to achieve," [Telstra's](#) chief executive [Andy Penn](#) said.

"In today's world every business model is facing major technology-enabled disruption and Telstra is no exception. In this environment there is no point making minor tweaks. You must be ambitious and you have to be bold."

[Orica's](#) [Alberto Calderon](#) has taken some lessons from his favourite non-fiction book of the year called *Appeasement: Chamberlain, Hitler, Churchill, and the Road to War* by Tim Bouverie. Calderon says it tells the story of "Chamberlain's inability to change a losing strategy".

"Reading *Appeasement* has made me think about leadership," he says. "While you have to take counsel and listen to all sides, you can't please everyone, and you can't make decisions by committee. You have to lead from the front. So maybe the challenge is to be more Churchill and less Chamberlain!"

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