



Photo by David Guenther on Unsplash

# Before You Speak, Remember the W.A.I.T. Acronym: "Why Am I Talking?"

---

Adam Bryant

*A core (and often under-appreciated) leadership skill is listening. You have to slow down and be self-aware about why you're talking. Here's a great reminder of the "WAIT" shorthand from my [The ExCo Group](#) colleague [Dave Goebel](#), who often shares this advice with senior executives. You'll find many gems of wisdom in here.*

**Q. What are some common themes that come up with the senior executives you advise?**

A. Early on in the relationship, I often become the catalyst for one of them because I typically ask them if there's anything that makes them afraid. Many of them talk about feeling a sense of anxiety about not wanting to disappoint their team. More recently, I'm also hearing a lot of concern about how they're going to navigate the digital revolution that's disrupting every industry.

**Q. When they bring up their concern about their team, where do you go from there?**

A. I'll ask them about their cadence of communication and feedback. How much time do they schedule for dedicated one-on-one meetings over a typical month that about the professional and personal development of their direct reports, rather than strategy and operations. Frankly, people want nothing more than a dedicated one-on-one meeting when their leader is fully present for them.

**Q. The digital question is vexing for most executives these days. What is your advice to them?**

A. It is a huge landscape, and the most important thing is to try their best to simplify and

focus. There are going to be 15 different people in their organization who have very good reasons to promote their particular initiative around technology and digital solutions. So the leader – and this is probably harder than anything else they've done – has to try to simplify what winning looks like for the core strategy.

Anyone can walk into their office in the next 30 minutes and convince them they have an idea for a great program. The challenge is to figure out which ones float to the top, based on the strategy and top priorities. One of my principal tasks is to help the person slow down to think through some of these tougher questions.

**Q. What other advice do you often give to your clients?**

A. There are two expressions I often share with them. One is the acronym WAIT, which stands for "Why am I talking?" And the other is, "Let the silence do the heavy lifting."

The most powerful thing we can do is plaster the words on our forehead, "Why am I talking?" The point on the first is that as we climb through the ranks and become leaders, we have a lot of people looking at us and expecting answers from us. The most powerful thing we can do is plaster the words on our forehead, "Why am I talking?" Instead, ask the open-ended question and be quiet, because that's leadership. And when you get to that uncomfortable moment of silence, it is natural to want to fill that silence and start talking. Avoid the temptation. Let the silence do that lifting for you. That's how you learn.

**Q. What insights have you gained about culture through all the different executives you've worked with?**

A. I've seen time and again the importance of not just articulating the rules of engagement -- the short list of expectations about how the team will treat one another – but also making it part of regular discussions. I see it unravel when the leadership team is not paying enough attention to those fundamental, non-negotiable rules. When you have that glue in an organization, it's so helpful.

**Q. What have been some of the values that you've used in your career as a leader?**

A. One is, "No pocket vetoes." If there's an issue on the table, you can't be nodding your head but privately disagreeing. You have to have the courage to speak up. We also used "Respect for loyalty to the absent." That was out of Covey's "7 Habits" book. It says that one of the biggest sources of potential cancer in an organization is when people take the license to talk about other people when they're not around, and it's not a positive comment. It's gossip.

I would say to my employees, "It's hard enough for us to honor it ourselves because we're all human. But here's the tougher part, and here's what I'm asking of you: When you see it in the organization, or if you're walking by a couple of people who are doing that, stop and say, 'That's not who we are. If you've got that kind of comment to share, please go to the person who needs to hear it.'"

**Q. What is the X factor that separates the best leaders from everybody else?**

A. For me, it is the ability to connect really well all the way up and down the organization -- with the board, with the leadership team, and with the person on the factory floor. It has to be authentic, and it can't be contrived. When I see that in a CEO or a C-suite executive, it's amazing how people want to follow that person. When you really connect with someone, you don't want to disappoint them.

**Q. What has been a key leadership lesson for you?**

A. A tougher lesson for me was understanding the importance of very strict accountability, and being comfortable having conversations that start with, "You know what? That's not what we agreed to, and that's unacceptable. It's important right now to understand how we are going to fix it."

"It's all about balancing the toughness and accountability with the people skills."

It's about finding that balance between being the CEO or the leader who, first and foremost, wants to help people grow and develop and to help be the glue in the culture of the organization while also holding people accountable and being willing to make the tough calls. Because at a certain point, I've got enough data, and you have to be comfortable saying, "This is the decision. This is where we're going. Everybody get on the page and let's walk out of here with our hands clasped." Sometimes you also have to be very direct with people who are

just relentless about not letting go on something. It's all about balancing the toughness and accountability with the people skills.

**Q. If you could only ask somebody one question in a job interview and had to decide whether to hire them based on their answer, what would that one question be?**

A. I ask the same question at the end of all my interviews. I'll say, "I appreciate everything we learned together, and I've given you the opportunity to ask me a few questions. I'm now going to ask you a question, and this is not just about your professional life and your career, nor am I probing into the personal side of your life. But I'm just going to ask you one question: what's important to you?" Then I let the silence do the heavy lifting.

That always gives me great insight into a person. I've seen powerful resumes, and one time I was interviewing a potential chief marketing officer who my entire team thought I should hire. And I heard some things in their final answer that turned me the other way. Sometimes people use the word "I" too many times. I'm looking for a little bit of selflessness, particularly for the people they're going to lead. I just learn a lot about their heart with that question.

---