

# Leadership Survival Kit



# Attentiveness

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

Attentiveness means being aware of what's going on in your environment. It can be as simple as noticing when someone is getting bored, to sensing that now's not the right time to put your ideas across. It's knowing when to act and when not to act.

Attentiveness is also the ability to tune into a problem and come up with its essential components. "What's really going wrong here?" That insight provides the basis for envisioning something that will truly work better.

The fictional detective, Sherlock Holmes, who was created by Arthur Conan Doyle, had legendary powers of attention to detail. Sherlock would notice a dropping of cigarette ash on the carpet, or a faint smudge of billiard chalk on a finger, or recognize that a person's accent didn't go with his Middle Eastern garb and he'd have the clue he needed to solve the case.

Attentiveness means you're open to outside stimuli entering your field of perception or, if the stimuli are subtler, entering your intuition. It means you're open to more information coming in through your eyes and ears, through your sense of touch and through what's known as your kinesthetic sense. That means how your muscles and the organs of your body react. Our bodies can tell us loads about how other people are feeling if we're attentive enough. Earlier we discussed the trait of empathy, putting yourself in the other person's shoes. The ability to be attentive to others allows you the access to the other person's feelings, and sometimes those feelings are mirrored in your own body - feelings such as fear, sadness and discomfort.

There's an old parable about a very educated English gentleman visiting a well-known Buddhist master to see what he could learn from the spiritual teacher. The holy man poured a cup of tea for the Englishman and kept pouring and pouring until there was tea all over the floor.

Finally, the Englishman could not sit silently any longer and asked: "Why are you overfilling the cup?" The Buddhist master replied: "This cup is like your head. It is so full that nothing else will go into it. You must empty yourself first in order to learn anything new for me."

The trait we're discussing - attentiveness - works a lot like that. In order to be attentive, we need to empty ourselves of other thoughts and set ways of seeing things. When we use our senses to take in all we can about other people, we can much more accurately adjust our behavior to the needs of others. When we're attentive to situations, we can exercise that power of vision we spoke of earlier to make positive changes for others and ourselves.

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# Bluntness

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

If you can't understand this one, you're pretty stupid... See what I mean? Most of us know better than to call other people names and insult their intelligence. Being assertive about our opinions and beliefs is fine, but at some point, assertiveness crosses over into bluntness. And that means you haven't taken the other person's feelings into account.

Find out if bluntness is a problem for you. To do that, simply ask five of the people closest to you at home and at work something like: "Do I come across as too blunt sometimes?" "Do I say things that hurt other people's feelings without realizing it?" If you get back some "yes" answers, then you need to pay attention to the ways you communicate. Any one of several things can make your communication hurtful when you don't intend it. One is obviously your choice of words. Another is the tone of your voice. The words can be fine, but the tone conveys hostility. How would you feel if someone said to you: "That's a great piece of work." [said flatly with a slight edge of sarcasm — could be taken as positive or negative]

Many people don't realize that their tone is gruff or negative sounding. One way to tell is to tape record yourself having a phone conversation. Tape your end of it and play it back. Make sure it's a substantive conversation where you can really hear yourself speaking at length, preferably to someone you're not trying to impress. Listen to the tape carefully; pretend it's someone else. How does this person sound to you? Friendly? Matter-of-fact? Or is there an edge in the voice that's unfriendly?

Hearing what we sound like to other people can sometimes be a revelation. If there's a hostile edge to your voice, then you'll need to consciously modify your tone. That'll take time - weeks, maybe even months. But nationally recognized speech consultant, Carol Fleming, in her audio program, *The Sound of Your Voice*, says it can be done, if you're willing to put in the conscious effort. Modifying the sound of your voice may be the single most important thing you can do to improve the first impression you make on people, after your appearance. One woman I know was told by Dr. Fleming that she pushed the pitch of her voice down [Say next part in lower pitch] in order to sound more authoritative. The woman had to consciously work at allowing her voice to find its natural pitch. It took several months of effort, but it made her speaking voice sound more alive and musical.

In general, overcoming bluntness in your communication style means becoming more aware of other people's feelings. The more you can do that, the more successful you'll be in developing satisfying relationships. If you have a tendency toward being authoritarian, you can work on recognizing when it's appropriate to back off. If you listen more to other people's opinions, ideas and concerns, you're less apt to express your own in a blunt way.

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# Being Unapproachable

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

No one who wants to improve their relationships or gain influence with others would describe herself as "unapproachable." Yet sometimes we hear: "I'm sticking to my guns no matter what." Or, "Don't come to me with a problem if you don't have a solution." Or, "I'm only interested in what works." The attitude behind those kinds of statements is: Don't bother me unless it's worth my time and corresponds to what I already believe. Not exactly conducive to collaboration!

Being outright unapproachable is one thing. If you make it known you really don't want people coming around, you'll get what you ask for. But you may think that doesn't apply to you, yet you could be putting out "unapproachable" messages in more subtle ways. You could always be so busy that anyone who comes to you feels they're not getting your full attention. Co-workers and employees may then perceive you as being swamped with too much work, so that they'll bring only the most important items to your attention. This may result in your knowing less about what's happening than if you had made yourself more approachable.

Another subtle "unapproachable" style comes from people who seem to live from crisis to crisis. If you know that every time you engage Mary in a conversation, you'll hear about the latest problem or tragedy in her life, you'll probably avoid her.

How about people who don't take the time to have an acceptable level of personal appearance? They might have dirty hair or clothes that don't fit them well. These folks often find themselves cut off from social discourse.

Another way to make people want to avoid you is if you talk too much. I'll steer clear of you if I know that every time I say "hi" I'll be subjected to at least a five-minute monologue.

So there are various ways to establish yourself as unapproachable. The most common is to set up a lot of conditions about what kinds of things you're willing to entertain and how they should be presented to you. Another way to do it is to be so preoccupied with your own needs that anyone approaching you either gets short shrift or gets a full dose of your problems. A third way is just to make yourself so physically unappealing that no one wants to be around you. And another surefire turnoff is to talk too much, especially about yourself.

The antidotes to these problems should be clear. You need to cultivate a style that says, "open" not "closed." You need to give your full attention to the other person when they're approaching you with their needs. All of this behavior adaptation takes conscious effort. You can't change old patterns in a day. But you can change. You might have to do something uncharacteristic like reaching out and asking someone how she's doing, or what's on her mind.

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# Positiveness

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

Positiveness means maintaining a state of positive expectations about people and situations, including a positive state of energy in your thoughts and emotional patterns. Dr. Norman Vincent Peale's book, *The Power of Positive Thinking*, was published over 40 years ago and it continues to sell well because it contains such a universal truth: the attitudes we hold help to shape the reality we experience.

Having a positive attitude isn't something you just tack on to your old personality. That positiveness isn't external like a new suit. It comes from deep within you. It has to or it would get wiped out with the first sign of a countervailing negative force. Positiveness is built on having your own positive life philosophy, on knowing what strengths you have, and on surrounding yourself with other sources of positiveness.

Many of us haven't taken the time to consider what our own life philosophy is. If you haven't, it doesn't mean you don't have one. You're just operating from it unconsciously. By life philosophy, I mean, in simple terms, something like: I know I'm here to live up to my potential, make a contribution to society, and have a good time. Someone else might say: I'm here to serve God through being of service to my fellow human beings. Another philosophy might be: I'm here to show others that despite physical handicaps, you can lead a productive life and enjoy what you have.

Your personal philosophy can contain a vision such as: I'm here to save the planet from environmental destruction. Or, I'm a valuable member of a company that's improving the way human beings communicate with one another. Your philosophy acknowledges who you are and what your purpose

is for being alive. A truly positive philosophy, one that's motivating, encompasses more than just you. Again, if you haven't formulated one, your unconscious personal philosophy might sound something like: "I'm here to make it through the day, day after day, until I die." Or, "I'm here to grab as much as I can of material possessions and thrills, because you only live once." Having a well-articulated personal philosophy gives you a sense of purpose and it can help you get through rough times as well.

The second aspect of positiveness comes from knowing what strengths you have to build on to achieve that life philosophy. This involves taking a personal inventory about your talents and skills and also what you like to do. Ideally, we'd all like to make a living or spend our time doing what we love. The people who come the closest to that are those who actually take the time to figure out what they love doing. Then you figure out what skills you have and which ones you need and take a step closer to matching your ideal life's work with the reality of your work life.

Having a positive life philosophy and knowing what strengths you have to build on will only get you so far. The third aspect of positiveness is surrounding yourself with other sources of the same energy.

Occasionally we hear stories of people who struggle against great odds, prove the naysayers wrong and achieve the nearly impossible. They turn around a defunct company, they stop a highway from going through virgin land, they bring out a new product line in record time, or they beat the odds on terminal cancer.

By definition, they had to have had a positive philosophy to get them there and they had to know what they could do themselves and what they needed to get from others. Those stories rarely mention the fact that those people always had some other source of positive energy outside themselves that kept them going. Most probably it was other people they could rely on for support. Other people who were also positive about their ability to succeed. Perhaps they were also motivated by the example of some historical figure. Perhaps they drew strength from a spiritual source. The point is, they didn't do it alone. They needed to be embedded in some sort of supportive, positive context that recharged them when their own batteries were running low.

Ideally, you surround yourself with the kinds of people who exhibit the positive traits we're talking about. Avoid the two-dimensional folks who tend toward the negative traits we discussed earlier - the ones who see things as either/or, right or wrong, and don't care to entertain any other thoughts. These people don't help recharge, they drain you.

Ever since Dr. Peale introduced his formulation of positive thinking, we've been hearing the notion of "having a positive attitude" from every motivational book and speaker you could name. It's not that we don't need to be reminded once in a while to get out of a negativity rut. We do. But the way "positive attitude" is sometimes presented is like buying a new outfit or getting a haircut. Just go out and do it. How?

I hope in this brief discussion I've given you the beginnings of a deeper understanding of the How. It begins inside you with a positive life philosophy, a positive sense of who you are and what you bring to the table of life. And it requires that you embed yourself in a context of positiveness - to tap sources beyond yourself. If this trait isn't already in your repertoire, then begin here. The trait of positiveness is so attractive, other people will be drawn to you.

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# Empathy

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

The root of the word empathy is PATHOS - the Greek word for feeling. SYMpathy means acknowledging the feelings of someone else as in "I sympathize with you." EMpathy is a term for a deeper feeling. It means, "I feel what you feel. I can put myself in your shoes." Sympathy results in kindness and sometimes pity. Empathy results in actually feeling the pain, or the joy, of the other person.

You can see how the willingness to be flexible comes more easily when you can put yourself in the other person's shoes. Empathy is a key skill taught in negotiating. William Ury, in his book, **GETTING PAST NO**, makes the point that every human being has a deep need for his or her feelings to be recognized. Knowing this can help tremendously in a difficult negotiation by creating a climate for agreement.

Ury counsels that it's important to acknowledge both the factual point, and the feelings of the other person. He uses the example of an employee approaching a boss. The employee says: "I just found out Dale makes two thousands dollars more a year than I do for the same job." Trying to explain why Dale makes more money, even if the reason is a good one, only makes the employee angrier. Instead, you must acknowledge the fact and the feelings first: "You think we're taking advantage of you and you're angry. I can understand that. I'd probably feel the same way."

That isn't what an angry person expects. By acknowledging the employee's feelings, you've helped him calm down. His next statement might be: "Well, why shouldn't I make as much as Dale does?" That shows he's ready to hear your explanation.

The feeling of empathy is much easier to come by when you care about the other person and take the time to feel what they're feeling. In the worlds of business, politics, or the professions, that feeling of empathy may not come as easily.

All the great teachers of empathy for others start with the same point: You cannot truly feel the pain or the joy or the emotion of another until and unless you're able to feel the same thing in yourself. Do you acknowledge your own pain? Can you feel your own joy? Real empathy lies in simply finding the same place within yourself that the other person is experiencing. You might not have had exactly the same experience but you've known the sadness of loss or the anger of feeling cheated, or the sense of righteousness at injustice. Some of us don't take the time to feel our own feelings, so when someone else expresses a feeling, we don't have much to refer to.

Let me give you another tip. Sometimes we can share a deep feeling vicariously through reading a great novel or seeing a powerful movie. If you're on a steady diet of action movies, they don't usually dwell on individual feelings. You might want to take the time to broaden your reading and viewing habits.

Men are being encouraged to express and share their feelings more these days through the efforts of Robert Bly and others. And not just soft, vulnerable feelings, but feelings of anger and frustration as well. You might be concerned that expressing a caring approach toward another person will result in the other person manipulating you. This isn't about abdicating your own needs or point of view. It simply means that you're able to step into the shoes of another and acknowledge their feelings. Having that ability is an asset. You can always wear your own shoes, and you do most of the time.

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# Discontent

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

The next characteristic that belies flexibility is discontent. I'm talking about someone who's just never positive or completely happy about anything - the naysayers, the faultfinders who've decided that their mission in life is to tell you the glass is half-empty, in case you missed it. In more vernacular terms, this person is called a complainer, a whiner, a wet blanket.

One possible reason for this type of inflexible behavior is that the person has set high standards for him or herself and no one, including the person herself, measures up. They pride themselves on being able to analyze things critically, to bring a discerning eye to the table. But someone whose primary response is faultfinding, who seems discontented with almost everything, will get little cooperation and respect from others.

If you think that there's a faultfinder lurking within your personality, ask some people close to you who'll give you honest feedback. If your suspicions are confirmed - Yes, you can be a wet blanket at times - Yes, people are afraid to share their tentative ideas with you for fear of getting them picked apart.

Develop the habit of saying something positive BEFORE you say anything negative. You'll have to make a conscious effort at first if your tendency is to just point out flaws. But if you really do think to yourself "say something positive" before you open your mouth, eventually it'll become a habit. Sometimes you may have to really stretch to find something good to say. But again, I'm stressing that the way you engage, and the way you communicate is every bit as important as the gist of what you say.

Starting with the negative often stops the flow of a process. If you're willing to be flexible about how you present your feedback, other people will be much more open to sharing your high standards.

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# Confidence

By Dr. Tony Alessandra

Having confidence means you believe in yourself, you trust your own judgment and resourcefulness. In his many books on self-esteem, Dr. Nathaniel Branden defines self-esteem as the sum of self-confidence and self-respect. For him, self-confidence is knowing that you have the wherewithal to function reasonably well in the world.

You feel competent to make choices, competent to satisfy your needs, to chart the course for your life. Having confidence in specific situations, such as in gaining influence with someone, would flow from a general self-confidence about your ability to meet life's challenges.

A person who exhibits confidence appreciates a sincere compliment and doesn't brush it off. A confident person is comfortable giving, and receiving, compliments. He's also able to handle criticism if it comes his way because he basically likes himself and knows that a single negative incident won't change that.

Confidence in yourself gets built up over time. You can fake confidence, and you may need to at first, but real self-confidence comes from a history of small victories and accomplishments that add up to a sense that you can handle yourself well in most every situation. I suggest you take an inventory of the major accomplishments you've achieved over the past few years. Then remind yourself of the minor ones too. What about the computer course you completed?

Have you built anything that still standing? What about those kids you're raising? That's (!) an accomplishment. Don't be modest. Tell the truth about how hard you worked, what sacrifices you've made. If you can't think of any, then begin by congratulating yourself for living as long as you have. Sheer survival is an accomplishment these days! Seriously, it pays to take the time to know your strengths and appreciate them. What's unique about you? What skills do you bring to an organization or project that you can count on?

Confidence is a fundamental trait for flexibility. It's hard to be flexible when you're fearful, or easily intimidated. Confidence is indispensable if you want to engage someone's attention.

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