

COULD IT BE AS SIMPLE AS LISTENING?

BY RICHARD SEARLE

Talking and listening are pretty fundamental to leadership. Great oratory is much esteemed in leaders we admire – think of Winston Churchill fighting them on the beaches, or Martin Luther King having his dream or Jesus Christ sermonising on the mount. But of the two, I reckon listening is far more powerful than talking.

When I work with senior leaders I focus primarily on how they are listening, and how well they can hear their own and others' listening, and how adept they are at shifting how they and others listen. Powerful listening is what allows for effective talking, relating and acting.

Listening is like an onion with many layers. At one level, it is the ability to allow another person to simply finish what they are saying and to be paying enough attention to know what it was that they said. In my experience this first level of listening is much rarer than we would like to admit and its absence can be the cause of enormous inefficiencies. It can take a lot of work to get a group of senior managers to listen just at this level.

Another level of listening is to be able to hear not just the words and thoughts, but the emotions and passions that accompany the words. This is empathic listening and it is very powerful. Ask any advertiser – feelings have much more energy and motivation in them than words. Yet some senior managers are so uncomfortable with emotions (“they have no place in rational decision making”) we have trained ourselves to both hide them and to ignore them in others and ourselves. So much valuable data goes to waste!

Generative listening is at an even deeper level again. Here the important thing is not just what we listen to but what we listen for. And what we listen for is the reality we help generate! I find that some senior managers are very judgemental in what they listen for in both others and themselves – and this can be very prejudicial and disempowering. Some of us habitually listen for what is right or wrong in what is being said, or what we agree with and don't

agree with, or what we like or don't like. Often we don't even know we are doing it but the speaker can experience it as trying to communicate through syrup!

There are much more powerful things we could be listening for and helping to generate. We could listen for what we can appreciate in another, or what nugget of gold we can find in what they are saying, or what they and we can contribute to each other. Ironically, we often listen most cheaply and habitually to those who are closest to us leading to the phenomenon known as "intimate strangers".

But there is an even more powerful and creative, yet less familiar, way for senior managers to listen than all of the above. I call it mindful listening! Here the important thing is where we are listening from. In mindful listening we listen from stillness and silence, or what existentialists might call nothingness. It takes practice to learn how to listen this way but the impact of this form of listening is so powerful it is transformative.

Dialogue is my method of choice when I am helping Executive Teams or senior management groups work better together, or solve tough issues or respond creatively to new challenges. I find that such dialogue can go through certain stages and the work of William Isaacs at MIT has helped me understand these stages. Initially, groups are often communicating and relating in "polite, norm-based ways" which are designed to avoid conflict and tough issues. The collective listening at this stage is so habitual and norm-based that it is often invisible. Here the leadership moves can include naming the elephants in the room and even challenging the prevailing norms.

If successful such moves may result in groups engaging in much more positional and conflict-based dialogue. This is more honest, and real issues and power alliances can be brought out into the open, but at this stage it is mainly heat that gets produced. One of the leadership acts at this stage is to be able to manage conflict constructively, and I find that this is the time when some CEOs get very, very nervous. Many senior management groups lack this ability and the conflict scares them and they rush back to their ineffectual normative dialogue and swear not to come out of there for another couple of years!

The collective listening during the positional stage of dialogue is very judgemental. One of the critical leadership acts to move a group beyond this stage is for a few players to begin to “suspend judgement” in how they are listening to others. Sometimes it takes only a few to be able to shift the listening in the entire group.

If successful a group will now move into a third stage of dialogue where the listening is much more reflective. Things slow down now. Parties are genuinely listening to each other and not insisting that others agree with them. Parties can actually hear each other now. Ironically, in this reflective stage of dialogue groups can deal productively with much greater conflicts, with much tougher, more divisive issues, and with the great frustration that often accompanies thinking creatively.

Indeed, if senior management groups spend enough time in reflective dialogue they may find themselves suddenly becoming much more generative. The dialogue may speed up again and become much more creative. There can be an experience of being in the flow and when one person speaks it is as though they are speaking the mind of the whole group. Now novel, innovative solutions start to be generated to old intractable problems! Such is the power and mystery of listening!

Searle, Richard *Leadership On Top: How Managers and Others Become Leaders*
2016, 28-31

