



Listening: A Key to Creating Change

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"He was taught by the river. Incessantly, he learned from it. Most of all, he learned from it to listen, to pay close attention with a quiet heart, with a waiting, opened soul, without passion, without a wish, without judgment, without an opinion," wrote Hermann Hesse, the German novelist, in his book Siddhartha.

Listening in new ways are important to create new possibilities for self, others and for organizations. Because we listen all the time, we take our listening for granted, and how we listen becomes automatic. Many a times we believe that not interrupting others while they speak is listening. Creating change requires a new way to listen. When we are aware that we listen automatically then we can choose the automatic way of "listening" – the one that improves on what exists, or we can choose a new way of listening – one that helps us create change.

Like individuals, the Organization's culture or the collective identity of the organization also tend to listen in an automatic way that could be distinct to the organization. Have you already noticed that most organizations have a specific way of listening that is already present before the act of speaking happens? This is the automatic way of listening. When I was working on a culture integration project after a merger I had an interesting experience that explains this concept. Let us say a merger of company X and company Y. I asked senior executives of company X what they think the Y company executives beliefs about the X company. They said, "Based on our short interaction in the last six months we have a sense that they (The Y company) think we are ruthless, miser, street smart and focused on bottom line". I did this exercise with the Y company executives and asked them what they think the X company executives beliefs about their company. As you can see our automatic listening is from a place where we have already made some assumptions.

While writing this, just now I got a call on my phone from an unknown number and there was this automated message "Hi I am Neha Bharadwaj from CNN IBN and you can win a free trip just by participating..." "by that time I disconnected the call. My automatic listening believes that all these free offers will have some catch and its waste of my time. In an organization setting we might not disconnect the call or walk away from a conversation but mentally you would have taken a stand based on your style of automatic listening influenced by your assumptions about the person, the topic and your larger worldview.

Unexamined Assumptions

The unexamined assumptions form a culture of listening that limits the ability to create change in our organizations. We might be still trying to create improvements keeping these unexamined assumptions and it could be possible to create improvements. But it would be difficult create fundamental and change and transformation.

We here this often, "That's the way it is around here!" This leaves us able to affect only the kind of change that improves on what exists already rather than creating change that is a new possibility of being and doing for the organization.



Jiddu Krishnamurti, the philosopher, wrote about deep listening in a beautiful way. "I do not know if you have ever examined how you listen, it doesn't matter to what, whether to a bird, to the wind in the leaves, to the rushing waters or how you listen in a dialogue with yourself to your conversation in various relationships with your intimate friends your wife or husband. If we try to listen we find it extraordinarily difficult, because we are always projecting our opinions and ideas, our prejudices, our background, our inclinations, our impulses; when they dominate, we hardly listen at all to what is being said. In that state there is no value at all. One listens, and therefore learns, only in a state of attention, a state of silence in which this whole background is in abeyance, is quiet; and then it seems to me, it is possible to communicate."

You might think, how could listening or a specific way of listening could create organizational change. Have you noticed that how we listen shapes what we say, which in turn shapes not just our *actions* but also the *actions* of those who are listening to us. Thus, the nature of how we listen predetermines the *results* and the *future*. Have you ever noticed that when someone starts to say something, you already have an impression of what it will be? Even when you enter a conversation intending to be open, generous and neutral, within seconds you are reacting in predictable ways. This happens because of the aspect of listening we call "automatic."

When I grew up in Kerala, I noticed a stone that jewelry makers use to test gold and its purity. They rub the jewelry on the stone and tell you if its gold or fake. Similarly, our automatic listening has this internal stone that tests every information that we receive to see if the information fits into our existing mental models. If it is not fitting in, we might even bend it a little so that it fits into our existing world view. We can look at some specific ways our automatic listening shows up.

1. Assessment and judgement

Here we are listening for: Do I agree or disagree? Do I like it or not? Is it right or wrong? Can I use it or not? And, does it fit with and confirm what I already know? We have opinions and assessments about everything. We are automatically assessing our self and others *all the time*. There is no intention on our part to do this and this assessment is going on in the background without being consciously aware of it. Being consciously aware of this background assessment help us to understand our mindsets.

Once when I went to do a keynote address in annual sales meet of a multinational company. Just before my session time, the CEO briefed me and told me that he will go to the stage first and introduce me and I need to "sprint to the stage" that time from the front row where I am sitting. The antennas of my automatic listening went up and I told him immediately that I would walk up to the stage slowly. He had a puzzled look on his face and later when we had a chat he mentioned that all meant and expected from me was an energizing session and in the past, he has seen speakers walking up to the stage energetically. I also realized that sprinting to the stage, in my mind had an impression of a motivational speaker and I had an assessment of me that I am not a motivational speaker. What I realized that time was that I did hear his intent but all I heard was that he wanted to label me as a motivational speaker which I resisted.

2. Unconscious Biases



We have unconscious biases about people their ethnicity, geography from where they come from and gender. While lots of organizations might be driving initiatives around gender and inclusion, the fabric of the organization might still have that bias and on top of that they might be driving an initiative to improve things. As long as our listening is through the filters of these biases, we might be able to improve the situation, but we might not be able to create new possibilities.

We think that our opinions are our personality or is part of our personality. When I look at some of the assumptions I have about gender, ethnicity, political biases and life in general, I can understand that these assumptions are influenced by the place I grew up, my family values I picked up as an early stage and life experiences I had. There is a nothing wrong in having an opinion, assumption and worldview. But the first step is to bring the awareness to the conscious level and learn that you choose to use these filters while you listen and take decision. Once we know we could choose, then we know it's not part of your personality but a choice you have. But when we think that is me, I do not think or reflect but merely listen, talk and act from my existing Biases.

3. Already Know and comparing.

This is listening for what we already know, to have whatever is happening fit with what we already know. Better yet, to confirm what we already know. When I demonstrate hypnosis, something that I do often, some people will ask me, "Oh is not similar to mediation?" Or when I talk about our leadership model, some would say "Yes this is similar to Leading Self, Leading others and Leading Organizations, right?"

This way by fitting things into what we already know, we stop being curious and are unable to operate from a space of not knowing. When we need to create a new possibility that is not the extension of the past, we need to embrace new information, new assumptions and new mindsets. But if we connect and relate all the new information and ideas to what we already know, we are still stuck in our past. While reading this paper if you are comparing in your mind what you earlier read or hear about listening, you can now catch you in action and bring that awareness to the conscious level.

4. Looking Good...At Almost Any Cost

Here we listen with a filter, Is this safe for me? Will I be embarrassed, or will I embarrass another? Am I going to look good? Is this going to promote my point of view? Who will get the credit? I am not saying we think all these before listening to someone. We all have a great need to look good, look knowledgeable, in control, on top of things, smart etc. That's the image we have of our self or the image we want others to have about us. Have you noticed when you learn something new, you do not look that good. Think about your driving learning days or if you have gone to learn a new dance. So, we might safely say, you cannot look good and learn something new.

Sometimes a client says, "In our meetings everyone is trying to prove a point and many a time prove that other person does not know his stuff". And we expect breakthrough outcomes from these meetings! Another client says, "No one speak up or question in our townhalls and then



outside they disagree to what was said and agreed in the townhall”. Not speaking up could be our need to look good.

How could we take a stand that not looking good at times is also ok!

5. This is it..

Here we listen in a matter of fact way and have an underlying assumption that this is how things are going be. Life is like this so there is no point in exploring a new possibility. There is already certain way do things and all one need to do is to unjust with that and flow with that. Whatever we do here, will not work. This is how we always have been. When you say, “I am this or I am this way” you are also saying “I am not, or I am not that way”. And if listens with that lenses we will never be able to find out what else is possible for us. I believe good and great could be enemies of possibility.