

The Transformative Power of Listening

Preview: Listening is the gateway to equitable school transformation. The “test-and-punish” era created a culture of compliance that made it difficult to hear parent, student, and staff voices. Listening Leadership offers a simple yet groundbreaking way of being and leading.

This chapter is designed to help you:

- Consider the impact of the testing era on educational leadership.
- Compare and contrast common leadership archetypes.
- Gain a practical tool for shifting school conversations toward equity.
- Explore critical challenges that listening addresses.

LEARNING TO LISTEN

When I arrived as a school coach in fall 2009, the Arts Academy was in disarray. A year before, the district had appointed a new principal named Lauren to tackle declining test scores and parent concerns at this racially and economically diverse middle school. During her first month on the job, Lauren had made sweeping changes, including dismantling a signature arts program, without consulting any of the staff. According to one veteran teacher, “The arts program was our whole identity as a school. It allowed struggling students to become successful through the arts, and she chopped it up into a horribly watered-down version. She didn’t consult with teachers on a lot of decisions that affected us.” In short, the leader had failed to listen.

Her purpose made sense: She hoped to close the school's achievement gap by increasing instructional math and English language arts instructional time for students. But her process alienated the staff and diminished the value of the arts to the school's identity. Veteran teachers felt particularly disrespected, and in the spring of Lauren's first year, they organized a vote of no confidence in her leadership. Soon after, the assistant superintendent brought me in as a coach to help her repair this contentious relationship.

In our early conversations, Lauren seemed puzzled. A first-time principal but a longtime district teacher, she had arrived with a clear vision for the school and felt she had begun to implement it. She couldn't understand why the staff had chosen to publicly humiliate her. For the next few months, I held one-on-one sessions with her, as well as what felt like educator group therapy sessions with her and a cadre of teachers we came to call the Veteran Seven. The union president, a remarkable woman, participated in these meetings as a listener and cofacilitator.

Through coaching, I asked Lauren to identify her core beliefs, to observe where her behavior had deviated from those beliefs, and to consider small shifts in approach. She articulated what she thought was missing at the Arts Academy: "People need to feel they can take risks. . . . In a well-functioning school, there's respect and a generative discourse." She acknowledged her miscalculations in addressing the issue: "I made a lot of individual decisions my first year. In my actions, in my persona, I have created a lack of trust." From there, we set a basic goal: to reopen dialogue in what was by now a toxic climate.

The group sessions were awkward at first, but over the course of several meetings, the dynamic began to shift. I invited the teachers to voice their concerns and encouraged Lauren to practice listening and taking responsibility for her actions when appropriate. At one emotionally charged gathering, she raised her hand. Everyone seemed to hold his or her breath as she spoke slowly and steadily: "I want to apologize. I am sorry for the ways in which I disrespected you and the history of the school. That was not my intent, and I know we can do better moving forward together."

The room heaved a collective sigh of relief. Shoulders relaxed, and contorted facial expressions loosened into something closer to acceptance. We didn't sing "Kumbaya," but I sensed that this once-demonized leader had become more human in the eyes of her teachers.

At the heart of this process lay a simple, yet transformational, skill: the leader's ability to listen. Listening allowed Lauren to discern her colleagues' unspoken messages—their deeply human need to matter, to be seen,

heard, and valued. It gave her the courage to take in difficult feedback. And it helped her recognize and transform a negative group dynamic.

The principal repositioned herself as an ally, but she didn't stop there. Lauren asked the Veteran Seven to help her reimagine the school's identity: "In this moment, with our increasingly diverse student body, how do our mission and model need to evolve?" Together, she and her former foes led their colleagues through a process to address the question, What do we want our students to know and be able to do as young artists and thinkers, and how will we measure this? The ensuing conversations were rigorous and generative, and they built social capital—the collaborative power of the group.¹

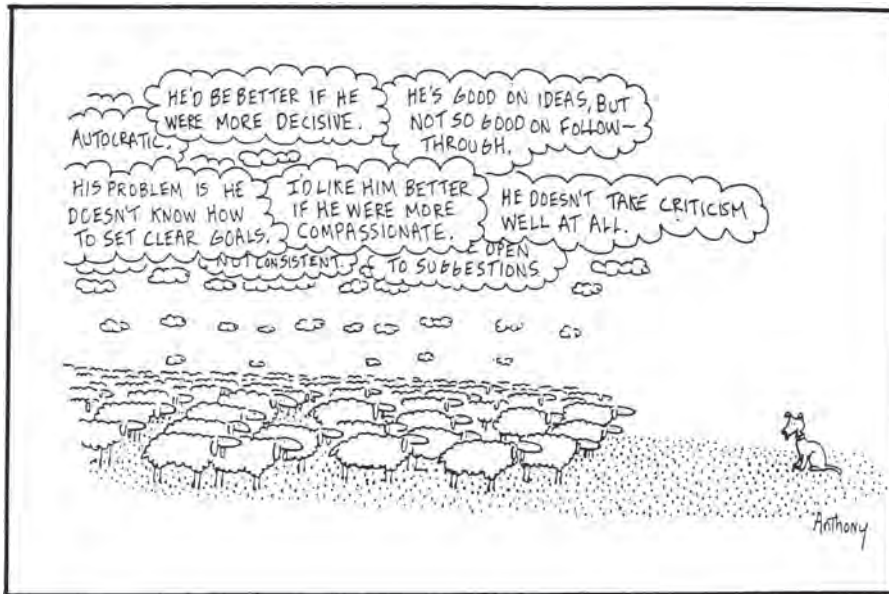
By June 2010, the Arts Academy staff had rallied around a shared vision. Polished through dialogue with families, this vision established a local definition of success that all stakeholders signed on to. How did a divided community unite within a year? It was actually very simple: The leader slowed down and learned to listen. Rather than continuing to go it alone, she harnessed the collective intelligence of her staff to fashion a new future for the school. Moving from the politics of resistance to the promise of collaboration, the Arts Academy was reborn through its leader's willingness to listen.

WHAT WE'VE INHERITED

In her initial struggle to listen, this leader was not alone. The test-and-punish era made it increasingly difficult for leaders to listen to their communities. Parent, student, and teacher voices receded amid a cacophony of well-packaged interventions and initiatives. Ask yourself and ask a colleague, *When is the last time you felt truly listened to at work? To what extent do you feel seen, heard, and valued in your organization?* Listen for the human data that surfaces.

We have all inherited the consequences of this era of mandates, accountability systems, and sanctions. (Figure 1.1 humorously depicts the competing messages leaders have to contend with.) A 2013 Metropolitan Life Insurance Company survey revealed that 75% of principals feel that their job is too complex, and half feel under stress most of the week.² Central-office administrators, teacher leaders, and coaches endure similar levels of stress in a domino effect that intensifies across the system. In this compromising situation, even the best-intentioned leader can become overwhelmed and begin to miss critical signals coming from stakeholders.

FIGURE 1.1 SHEEPISH THOUGHTS



Anthony Taber/The New Yorker Collection/The Cartoon Bank

Two leadership paradigms became prominent in the accountability climate: the **Manager** and the **Driver**. The **Manager** gets things done within the parameters of the status quo. He or she is widely viewed as competent and reliable, and follows the system's playbook to keep his or her school running smoothly. With a focus on compliance over cultivating relationships, however, this leader can become tone deaf—unable to perceive and respond to subtle messages.

The **Driver**, by contrast, is a change agent. Propelled by a sense of urgency, this leader is decisive and authoritative, moving quickly to promote a results-driven agenda. Although people tend to respect this leader as a visionary, the Driver often creates a fraught adult culture, as he or she tends to view the concerns of teachers and staff as a distraction from student needs.

A third, less common paradigm is the **Peacekeeper**—the leader who places a high value on relationships but lacks a strong change agenda.

In the Peacekeeper's context, people tend to *feel* good and enjoy their work, but little improves with respect to student learning.

This book proposes a powerful alternative, Listening Leadership, which draws on the strengths of the other three approaches while mitigating their weaknesses. The Listening Leader cares about getting things done; he or she is a skilled manager or effectively delegates managerial tasks. Like the Driver, the Listening Leader has a deep and abiding commitment to equity and is a change agent at heart. And like the Peacekeeper, the Listening Leader has a people-first orientation. But his or her methodology stands apart.



First, the Listening Leader understands that school transformation, if it is to be sustainable, requires a long-term investment: There are no quick fixes, “turnarounds,” or shortcuts.

First, the Listening Leader understands that school transformation, if it is to be sustainable, requires a long-term investment: There are no quick fixes, “turnarounds,” or shortcuts. Second, this leader uses *listening* to foster a healthy culture of improvement and to build the skills and capacity of the staff. Third, instead of proclaiming a vision, the Listening Leader *constructs* a vision through a collaborative process in which dialogue and dissenting perspectives are welcome. Finally, this leader embraces an expansive view of data, including human experience as a vital source of evidence.

Think of Figure 1.2 as like a Twister board—that childhood game where you spin a wheel and then stretch your hands and feet to reach different circles. As a leader, you want to have a limb (or at least a pinky!) in each quadrant, but you need to be firmly rooted in the Listening Leader domain.

A FEW CORE BELIEFS

This book will encourage you to slow down and tune in to the range of voices in your community, particularly the quietest ones and those that are most often silenced. This includes strong dissenting voices and those of historically marginalized stakeholders, such as immigrant and monolingual families, students and staff of color, and paraprofessionals. Through

FIGURE 1.2 LEADERSHIP ARCHETYPES



listening, you'll discover the missing ingredient in most school reform efforts: a deeply felt, *collective* sense of purpose.

Listening Leadership is not a recipe or a curriculum but an adaptive framework anchored in a few core beliefs:

- Communities have the ability to solve their own problems.
- Although we can learn from other schools and districts, the best solutions are homegrown.

- Every community must shape its own path to excellence.
- Through listening, leaders can create the conditions for equitable school transformation.

These beliefs represent an unwavering faith in people and democracy that runs counter to the educational policies of the early 21st century, when policymakers increasingly tried to control and “teacher-proof” schools with pacing guides, rigid curricula, and centralized assessments. Well, enough is enough. It’s time to entrust leaders, educators, and communities to chart their own course. We begin by exploring the critical challenges that listening can help correct.

KEY CHALLENGE 1: THE PERSISTENCE OF INEQUITY

Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.

—JAMES BALDWIN³

Listening Leadership will help you make progress on the fundamental issue facing American public schools: inequity. Far too many children continue to attend substandard schools and receive a low-quality education. In a groundbreaking article, authors Eugene Eubanks, Ralph Parish, and Dianne Smith explain how the dominant language of school improvement serves to maintain the status quo and perpetuate inequitable outcomes. They call this Discourse I and furnish familiar examples:⁴

- Children “need more structure” because they are “from disadvantaged conditions” or “from single parent families” or “working families” or are “more dangerous.”
- Teachers participate in “staff development,” “in-service,” and “school improvement,” which have evolved to mean that “people in schools can go through a process that appears to be change oriented but, in fact, has not resulted in any substantial improvement of student learning.”
- Staff may say, “We’re a school in transition. Things have changed; students just aren’t what they used to be. You just can’t teach as much as you used to.”

To be clear, as coauthor Smith reminded me in an interview, discourse isn't just the words educators speak. It includes our beliefs; our values; our perceptions of children from urban communities; and our perceptions of race, racism, and gender equality in schools. Recent research at Johns Hopkins University confirms the power of perception in a study demonstrating that White teachers tend to have lower expectations of African American students. For example, White teachers were 30% less likely than their Black colleagues to believe that the same African American student would graduate from a 4-year college and 40% less likely to believe that the student would graduate from high school.⁵



Listening Leaders tune in to the power of perception and language and model a shift toward Discourse II, in which uncomfortable truths are laid squarely on the table for discussion.

As leaders, we have the power to transform this reality by first listening to the ways in which our schools and districts talk about, think about, and organize the work of improvement. Listening Leaders tune in to the power of perception and language and model a shift toward Discourse II, in which uncomfortable truths are laid squarely on the table for discussion. (Table 1.1 summarizes the differences between Discourse I and II.) They reject a quick-fix mentality, taking time to ask hard questions and examine root

TABLE 1.1 DISCOURSE I VS. DISCOURSE II

Discourse I	Discourse II
Language typically used to talk about, question, and design the work of school improvement. Discourse I maintains the status quo while appearing to respond to demands for change.	Language that names uncomfortable, unequal, ineffective, prejudicial conditions and relationships in schools. Discourse II explores the root causes of inequity and models an inquiry approach to improvement.
Attributes	Attributes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Singular truths • Answers and technical fixes • Symptoms • Improving what exists • Externalization/"looking out the window" • Limited time and ability • Reproduction of inequity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Multiple stories • Inquiry, adaptive challenges, and root causes • Causes • Changing something significant • Internal reflection/"looking in the mirror" • Getting started anyway • Transformation

Adapted with permission from "The Nature of Discourse in Education," by the Bay Area Coalition for Equitable Schools, now the National Equity Project, 2004.

causes. And they ensure that colleagues of color and those from other historically marginalized groups feel safe enough to share their perspectives and experiences. Table 1.2 provides examples of shifting the discourse, and Exhibit 1.1 models how a white ally can practice Discourse II.

For students to attend humanizing schools, adults must *work in* humanizing schools. Every grown-up who enters your building—whether he or she is a custodian, parent, paraprofessional, or teacher—should feel seen, heard, and valued. This begins with listening—not to external demands, but to your own community and to what you believe is right.

TABLE 1.2 EXAMPLES OF SHIFTING THE DISCOURSE

Area	Discourse I	Shifting to Discourse II
Academic data and equity	The achievement gap	The opportunity gap or the “education debt” to historically disenfranchised students. ^a
Time and change	“We don’t have time for all this talking and processing about equity. We have students to teach!”	“Changing the status quo takes courage and time. We need to make a long-term investment and still get started somewhere.”
Student behavior	“We can’t let <i>those</i> students interrupt others’ learning.”	“It seems like there’s a cultural disconnect between some of our staff and students. As a result, Black and Latino boys are frequently getting kicked out of class. How do we consciously name and address this pattern?”
Student expectations	“Not all our students are college material. Some of them would just do better in the trades or remedial classes.”	“We have to ensure that all of our students have choices, just as we did as young people. How do we guarantee that every student is college-ready so she is empowered to make a decision about her future?”
Universalism vs. targeted support	“We want <i>all</i> students to succeed. We make decisions to serve <i>all</i> students’ needs.”	“According to our data, we are struggling to meet the needs of English language learners (ELL students). How can we build our capacity as ELL instructors and culturally responsive practitioners?”
Instruction	“I teach the content. It’s just that the kids are lazy and don’t want to do the work.”	“How will we know students have learned the content? How can we differentiate based on interests, learning modalities, and culturally responsive practices to engage every student in the learning process?”

^a Ladson-Billings, G. (2006). From the achievement gap to the education debt: Understanding achievement in U.S. schools. *Educational Researcher*, 35(7), 3–12.



MAKE IT MINDFUL

Take a few minutes to jot down your thoughts on these questions:

- In your context, how do people think about and talk about school improvement?
- What common examples of Discourse I would you like to shift?
- What would Discourse II sounds like?

EXHIBIT 1.1 WHITE ALLIES AND DISCOURSE II

In November 2015, Black student leaders at the University of Missouri initiated a wave of protests against the university president for his mishandling of certain racist incidents. The football team, including White players and coaches, went on strike, and within 3 days the president had resigned. A backlash by White students ensued, including anonymous death threats to students of color. Should students be required to attend classes in this environment?

Here's the stance of one White professor, Bradley Harrison Smith, which I offer as an example of Discourse II practiced by a White ally. In this Facebook post (<https://www.facebook.com/bradley.t.smith.587/posts/10100549703032872>), Smith directly names the unequal experience of students of color and White students and "looks in the mirror" to consider his own potential complicity in an unjust scenario.

I'm writing to tell you that I'm cancelling class tomorrow (Wednesday 11/11/15).

The truth is, despite all of the threats on social media, I would still probably feel safe on campus were we to have class. But that's because I am a white man. I would not feel safe were this not the case.

By holding class at our regular time, I would be forcing my students who do and probably should feel threatened to implicitly disobey me in order to protect their lives by not attending my class.

Which means that, were I to tell you something like, "We are going to still have class, but stay home if you don't feel safe . . ." (which is what I originally planned to say) I think I would be participating in the marginalization of minority students by tacitly supporting an educational environment in which certain students feel safe while others cannot. Attending class tomorrow, in light of the recent threats, would be a privilege not available to all my students, and I have therefore decided it will not be a privilege for any of my students.

KEY CHALLENGE 2: INTEGRITY IN THE FACE OF PRESSURE

The test-and-punish era created another serious challenge for leaders: how to maintain integrity in the face of mounting pressures. Listening supports integrity by allowing us to slow down, turn inward, and reflect on our core values. C. S. Lewis defined integrity as “doing the right thing, even when no one is watching”; researcher Brené Brown describes it as “choosing courage over comfort. Choosing what’s right over what’s fun, fast, or easy. And *practicing* your values, not just professing them.”⁶ Given the number of demands placed on leaders today, it can be easier to maintain the status quo than to practice our values. We may be so busy *doing* that we forget to do the right thing.

A study by Rick Mintrop and his colleagues at UC Berkeley found that schools with high levels of integrity are able to manage external pressures by holding strong to their values.⁷ Of particular interest, they found that integrity comes directly from a school’s leader and the culture he or she builds. A high-integrity faculty culture is characterized by open communication, dissent, and a learning orientation.

So just what does integrity look like in the context of schooling? It looks like Cindy Marten, superintendent of San Diego Unified School District, choosing to scale back test mandates in her system. “Students come to school to learn, not to take tests,” Marten said. “Testing takes up valuable time that could be used to teach and learn.”⁸ Another example of integrity comes from the San Francisco Unified School District. In 2015, the state superintendent of California cancelled the summer administration of a mandatory high school exit exam, leaving thousands of students across the state in the lurch and disproportionately affecting students of color and ELL students. The San Francisco school board chose to flout the law and award diplomas to 104 students who had completed all graduation requirements but failed to pass the now-defunct exam.

Integrity can also look as small as taking time to listen deeply to a parent or a colleague in distress. It can look like committing to weekly one-on-one coaching meetings with teacher leaders to make sure they feel supported. It can look like encouraging a student leadership initiative, even if you don’t entirely agree with the students’ perspectives. It might even look like modeling the value of work-life balance by scheduling cell phone- and email-free times and encouraging colleagues to do the same. At whatever grain size, integrity implies listening to and acting on your internal moral compass.

Throughout this book, you’ll meet high-integrity leaders at all levels of the school system. Each of these people has found ways to manage

external demands with integrity. Each inspired me to share a vision of what's possible by choosing what's right over what's fun, fast, and easy. They taught me that in any political climate, you have agency. You can decide what you believe is the right thing to do for your students and your school, and you can decide how to navigate demands that run counter to your beliefs. Exhibit 1.2 offers an example of bold, integrity-driven leadership from outside the education field.

EXHIBIT 1.2 FINDING COURAGE



Brittany "Bree" Newsome removes the Confederate flag from a pole at the Statehouse in Columbia

Note. Stringer/Reuters Pictures. Used with permission.

When we hold strong to our beliefs and values, we are more likely to act courageously in service of our students and communities. Educational leaders can gain inspiration by looking outside our field to contemporary activists like Bree Newsome. On June 27, 2015, Newsome scaled the 30-foot pole in front of South Carolina's capitol building to take down the Confederate battle flag. In the wake of the Charleston church shooting, in which a White supremacist murdered nine African Americans sitting in a prayer circle, calls to remove the

symbolic flag had been on the rise. Ms. Newsome was part of a collective action to construct a new symbol and foster collective consciousness of the power inherent in bold, direct action. This iconic image has become a visual touchstone of empowerment and courage across the globe, inspiring a hashtag, artistic renderings, and superhero cartoons.

Commenting on her participation in the action, Newsome said, “We removed the flag today because we can’t wait any longer . . . It’s time for a new chapter, where we are sincere about dismantling white supremacy and building toward true racial justice and equality.”^a

^a Hale, J. (2015, July 15). Confederate flag controversy underscores need for educational activism (commentary). *Education Week*. Retrieved from <http://www.edweek.org/ew/articles/2015/07/16/confederate-flag-controversy-underscores-need-for-educational-ac.html>



MAKE IT MINDFUL

As you cultivate integrity, think about the symbols of oppression in your context that you would like to take down or transform. What are they? What level of courage would it take for you to transform them, and where will you find that courage?

KEY CHALLENGE 3: DEALING WITH TRAUMA

Listening will also help us address a pressing challenge that confronts so many of our schools today: students who come to class having experienced



A listening approach will sharpen your emotional intelligence—the ability to detect others’ emotions, understand your own, and use this information to guide your interactions.

trauma in their home or community. A listening approach will sharpen your **emotional intelligence**—the ability to detect others’ emotions, understand your own, and use this information to guide your interactions. Daniel Goleman popularized a framework for emotional intelligence that includes self-awareness, self-management, social awareness (or empathy), and relationship management.⁹ In later work, Goleman highlighted a strong link between emotional

intelligence and leadership, noting, “Without it, a person can have the best training in the world, an incisive, analytical mind, and an endless supply of smart ideas, but he still won’t make a great leader.”¹⁰

Several studies document a correlation between school leaders’ emotional intelligence and school performance.¹¹ Stone, Parker, and Wood looked at 464 principals and vice principals and found that those who received above-average ratings from teachers also scored higher on a survey of emotional intelligence.¹² The most effective leaders showed skill in the areas of empathy and relationship building. In another study of 48 administrators, emotional intelligence explained nearly 40% of the perceived variance in leadership abilities.¹³

Listening with emotional intelligence is crucial in school communities impacted by **trauma**, which is defined by the American Psychological Association as “an emotional response to a terrible event” such as an accident, violence, or even relentless poverty.¹⁴ In the immediate wake of a traumatic incident, victims typically experience shock and denial—but delayed reactions include volatile emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and physical symptoms like headaches or nausea. If you work (or grew up in) a high-trauma environment, you know these signs well. At schools, they’re often the harbinger of academic and behavioral challenges.

I remember a girl, whom I’ll call Tiana, from my ninth-grade English class in East Oakland. One day she arrived to class in the foulest of moods, refused to engage in the lesson, and when pressed, spouted off the classic, “I don’t have to listen to you!” At that point, I summoned deep wells of patience and asked her to step into the hall. “What’s going on, Tiana?” I questioned. “This behavior is totally out of character for you.” Her eyes brimmed with tears as she stammered out, “Yesterday I saw someone get shot in my neighborhood. I’m really upset and don’t know what to do.” Had I not checked in with her, Tiana and I would have sparred over her “defiance,” and she might have landed in the office with a referral, as do so many children suffering from trauma. Instead, I dug deep to listen, she took a risk and told me what was going on, and we strengthened our relationship. More important, I gained insight that led to action: I soon reached out to my school’s mental health team to arrange some support for her.

Education professor Christopher Emdin and co-researcher Napoleon Wells studied the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) among young Black males in urban public schools.¹⁵ Wells, a PTSD specialist and psychologist, compared students’ avoidance of certain topics of discussion and heightened reactions to others with the ways in which

military veterans respond to sustained trauma. The overlap was so striking that Wells coined the term “post-racial tension stress disorder” to describe the experience of youth who feel powerless in a world rife with conflicting messages: They hear that race no longer matters, while at the same time they are subjected to “physical and symbolic violence (at the hands of police and schools) because of their race.”¹⁶

Recent studies have identified the phenomenon of secondary trauma for educators working in communities impacted by poverty and violence. Secondary trauma manifests in various types of symptoms—for example:¹⁷

- Emotional—feeling numb or detached; feeling overwhelmed or maybe even hopeless
- Physical—having low energy or feeling fatigued
- Behavioral—changing your routine or engaging in self-destructive coping mechanisms
- Professional—experiencing low performance of job tasks and responsibilities; feeling low job morale
- Cognitive—experiencing confusion, diminished concentration, and difficulty with decision making; experiencing trauma imagery, which is seeing events over and over again
- Spiritual—questioning the meaning of life or lacking self-satisfaction
- Interpersonal—physically withdrawing or becoming emotionally unavailable to your coworkers or your family

One teacher leader I interviewed reflected on the absurdity of attending run-of-the-mill staff meetings after dealing with student trauma:

The education context is so stressed that people often aren't at their best, especially when working with kids in trauma. You're just always frazzled. You're going from being with kids all day and all of the different stresses that go with that, and then you have your staff meeting after school with the message: “Okay, now be fresh and professional! Be your best self.” Well that's just not going to happen 90% of the time.

A listening orientation will help you address trauma and secondary trauma by honing your emotional intelligence. Too often, we ask young people and adults to check their emotions at the school door, and then lament the absence of trust that inevitably results. A powerful antidote lies within reach: Learn to listen and listen to learn. Learn to treat people's experiences and feelings with compassion. This doesn't mean that we have

to solve every issue that crosses our path, but it does mean standing with people in their struggles. Chapter 5 provides practical strategies for deep listening, and Chapter 10 offers adult learning routines that allow people to safely express their emotions.

KEY CHALLENGE 4: DISCONNECTED DATA

Finally, listening will help us address a troubling consequence of the test-and-punish era: overreliance on data that is far removed from student learning. Many of us have grown accustomed to setting goals in reaction to periodic bursts of data that rain down on schools. This leads to a mismatch between the problems we face and the solutions we design. Assessment expert W. James Popham argues, “America’s students are not being educated as well these days as they should be. A key reason for this calamity is that we currently use the wrong tests to make our most important educational decisions.”¹⁸

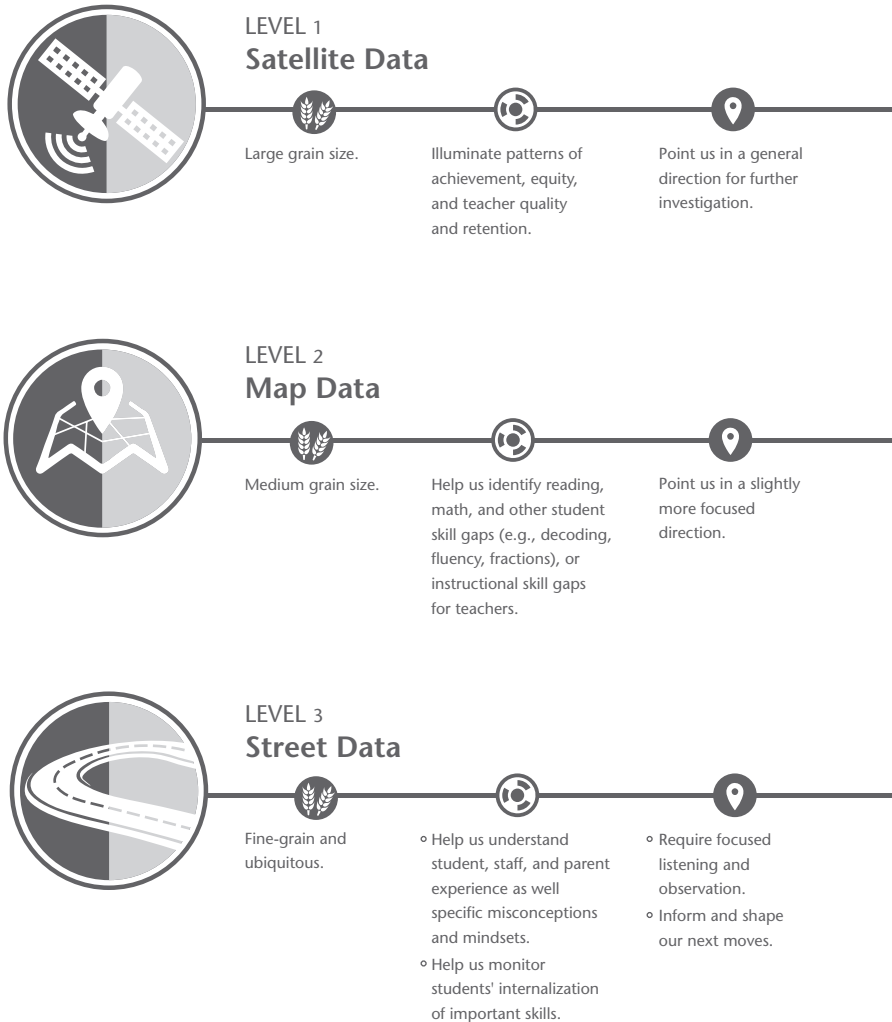


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Listening Leaders recognize that much of the data we need is right before us if we choose to listen—speaking, sending emails, showing up in our offices every day. It’s in our close observations of students working on tasks and of teachers engaged in collaboration. These street-level data tell the story of school transformation. The Levels of Data framework (see Figure 1.3) allows us to consider the types of data we need in any given context. Although Level 1 “satellite” data orients us in a general direction, it fails to illuminate what’s getting in the way of student (or adult) learning, or what’s working best for kids. Level 2 “map” data gets us closer to pinpointing a subskill or priority area of need. But Level 3 “street” data is the key to designing supportive structures, achieving equitable outcomes, and developing high-capacity teachers.

My colleague Noelle Apostol Colin taught under a new administrator who asked her staff to regularly analyze benchmark assessment results—Level 1 data—in order to determine which skills to reteach. Apostol Colin found this process frustrating for a couple of reasons. First, her students struggled mightily on the tests, and in the absence of additional data, the results made her feel like a “bad teacher.” Second, the benchmarks failed

FIGURE 1.3 LEVELS OF DATA



to clarify *why* and *how* her students were struggling, so she was left feeling powerless. She needed Level 2 and Level 3 data to inform her planning and instructional moves.

Apostol Colin's principal could have offered the benchmark data as a starting point to establish patterns of achievement before asking teachers

to think about what other evidence they needed. Should Apostol Colin administer a running record—a literacy tool that helps teachers identify patterns in student reading behaviors—to diagnose precisely where a child’s comprehension was breaking down? Should she closely observe a student while he solves a math problem, noting the strategies he employs and where he gets stuck? These are examples of Level 3 data that help teachers navigate the complex path to learning.

As we change the conversation about data, here are a few principles to keep in mind:

Local accountability Work to create a culture of local, peer-to-peer accountability for results. Design opportunities for students to publicly demonstrate and reflect on their learning. Structure regular opportunities for staff to analyze student work. Cross-reference Level 3 data with Level 1 and 2 data to check for alignment and rigor.

Timeliness The data is most useful when it gets in the hands of educators quickly. Build teachers’ capacity to collect daily informal data about student misconceptions. Coach teachers to listen carefully to student dialogue in the classroom. Give everyone a clipboard, and invite him or her to capture quotes and observations.

Experiential data Value people’s experiences—students and adults—as a form of evidence. Listen keenly to how people tell the *story* of their experience, and pull out common words and narrative patterns. We’ll talk more about this in Chapter 7.

Formative vs. punitive Don’t use data as a hammer; use it purely for improvement, and you’ll see how much more open teachers become to its positive potential.

Alternative assessments Multiple forms of data tell a story about students that paper-and-pencil assessments can’t. Stretch yourself and your team to consider other measures, such as portfolios, graduation capstone projects, and performance-based assessments, that offer a fuller picture of who each student is.

Use the tool in Table 1.3 to identify your purpose in looking at data before selecting the data you need.

TABLE 1.3 A FRAMEWORK FOR LEVELS OF DATA

	Level 1: Satellite Data	Level 2: Map Data	Level 3: Street Data
Definition	Large grain size. Helps illuminate patterns of student achievement and equity. Points us in a general direction for further investigation.	Medium grain size. Helps identify reading, math, and other skill challenges (e.g., decoding, fluency, fractions). Points us in a slightly more focused direction.	Fine-grain and ubiquitous. Helps identify specific student misconceptions and monitor internalization of key skills. Requires careful listening.
Evidence of Student Learning	Standardized and external test scores (SBAC, SAT, PSAT, statewide graduation exams, district benchmarks, etc.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reading Lexile levels • Oral fluency assessments to estimate correct words per minute • Student perception surveys • Performance-based assessments (portfolios, senior defenses, etc.) • Scholastic Reading Inventory (SRI) or other similar assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student nonverbal cues • Student interviews and focus groups • Teacher observation notes from guided reading or guided problem solving to gauge a student's misconceptions • One-on-one running records • Student work artifacts • Observation of students engaged in sorting activities to check misconceptions and internalization
Evidence of Teacher Effectiveness	Standardized and external test scores, disaggregated by teacher	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrator observation notes from formal observation and evaluation • Teacher performance-based assessments (portfolios, end-of-year reflective presentations, etc.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher interviews and focus groups • Teacher nonverbal cues during lessons • Leader's notes from listening to teacher discourse in one-on-one meetings • Notes from regular, informal observations • Video clips of students engaged in a task

Note. Adapted from the Scaffolded Apprenticeship Model (SAM), Baruch College. For a downloadable tool to apply the Levels of Data framework, go to my website: shanesafir.com/resources

Of course, better data alone won't transform our schools. To improve outcomes, we have to strengthen the instructional core—the “black box” where teacher, student, and content intersect.¹⁹ In his synthesis of over 800 studies of what works best in education, professor and researcher John Hattie found that leaders have little *direct* effect on student learning.²⁰ They can, however, create the right set of conditions for good instruction by discerning which initiatives matter and which do not; defining, as the Arts Academy staff did, local measures of success; building the capacity of teachers and teacher leaders; and working hard to foster a collaborative culture.



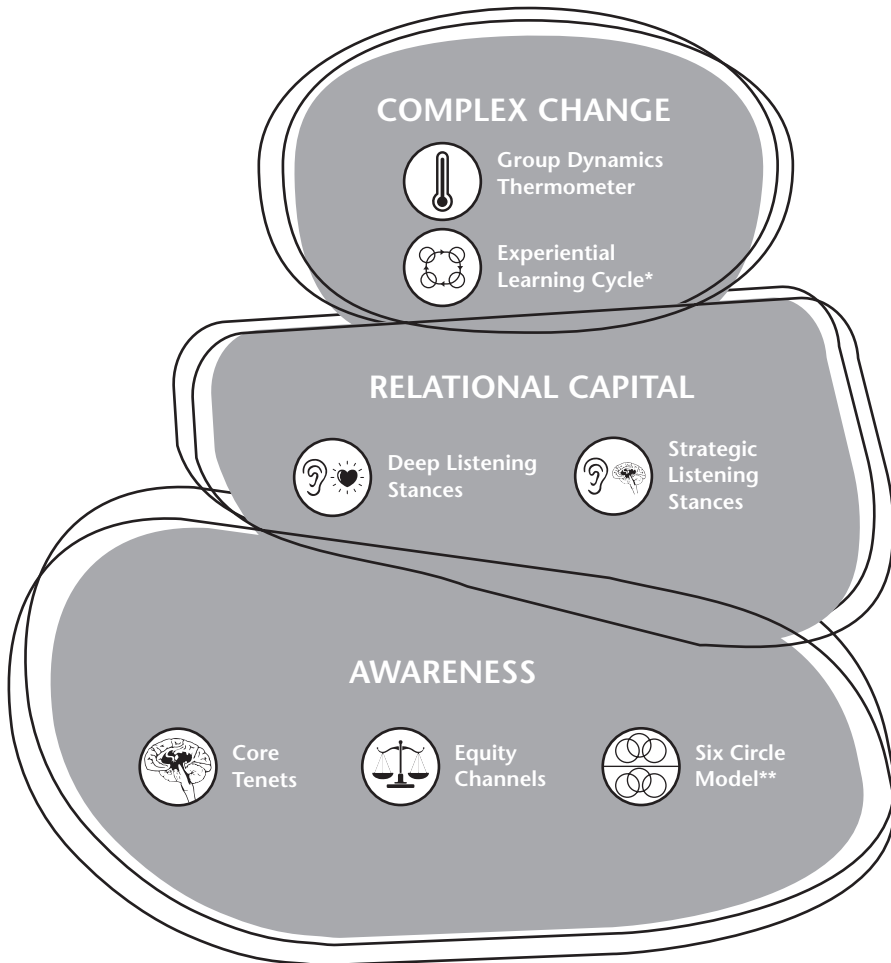
MAKE IT MINDFUL

- What do you want every exiting student to know and be able to do?
- What values do you want students to develop?
- What types of data will you use to measure success?
- If you transform your school or system, what will parents, teachers, and students be saying 3 years from now?

BECOMING A LISTENING LEADER

Reflecting on the dynamics of school leadership, my colleague Jessica Gammell noted to me, “The higher you move up the food chain, the more you're rewarded for compliance.” To that I would add, “and the less you're rewarded for listening to your staff and community.” Listening runs counter to the archetype of a charismatic leader who unites his or her community through dazzling speeches. But charismatic leaders often do more harm than good because they foster dependency and serve as symbolic role models who can never be replaced. Listening Leaders, by contrast, understand their central mission as building the capacity of others to help lead and sustain change.

This book will walk you through three developmental areas of Listening Leadership represented in the acronym ARC: awareness, relational capital, and complex change. ARC provides a road map for listening and leading in ways that fuel equitable school transformation. Figure 1.4 depicts the three areas as rocks in a cairn—a human-made pile of stones

FIGURE 1.4 THE LISTENING LEADER ARC


*The experiential learning cycle is attributed to John Heron.

**The Six Circle Model was created by Tim Dalmau and Steve Zuieback, based on the work of Margaret Wheatley.

that serves as a landmark. (We'll explore this metaphor in Chapter 9.) Inside each rock are key frameworks that appear in that part of the book. It's important to note that each area builds on the previous one, providing a balanced collection of practical knowledge and skills.

Why do we need an entire book about listening, you might wonder? Human beings listen all the time—in personal, academic, and professional settings—yet not always with intention or rigor. Scholars have found that listening is a central yet undervalued aspect of leadership. Consider the following:

- We have learned 85% of what we know through listening.
- The average professional spends 33% of the workday listening and only 26% speaking.
- Very few professionals have had formal training to understand and improve listening skills and techniques.²¹



School transformation arises from the micro-interactions of each day—how a teacher talks to a student about her late arrival to class, how a parent is greeted when he enters the school building, or the ways in which you give and receive feedback.

We don't have models of Listening Leadership, nor have most of us learned *how* to listen well. No surprise, then, that listening functions like an underdeveloped muscle. But here's why it matters: School transformation arises from the micro-interactions of each day—how a teacher talks to a student about her late arrival to class, how a parent is greeted when he enters the school building, or the ways in which you give and receive feedback. These moments are the building blocks of a culture, and you can model a listening approach in each one.

A WORD ON MINDFULNESS

Mindfulness, a technique that has been used since ancient times, is an important backdrop to Listening Leadership. Since the 1970s, mindfulness has gathered steam internationally as a method for managing emotion and promoting physical and mental health. Programs based on Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) have found their way into prisons, hospitals, veteran centers, and schools. Research documenting the positive effects of mindfulness training continues to mount, pointing to improvements in focus, cognitive flexibility, stress reduction, emotional self-regulation, relationship satisfaction, and compassion.²²

Listening allows us to practice two elements of mindfulness: *awareness*—bringing attention to the present moment by observing one's thoughts,

feelings, and sensations without judgment—and *acceptance* of whatever is happening in that moment. At the same time, mindfulness enhances listening. Learning to step back from your autopilot thoughts in order to listen mindfully will help you transform any dysfunctional dynamics that get in the way of student learning. It will also help you cultivate empathy for yourself, emotional resilience, and an increasing ability to connect with others and across difference.

Mindful listening is the foundation of a comprehensive theory of change. By developing the competencies in this book, you will move the needle on

- **Teacher retention:** More teachers will stick around for the long haul if they feel respected, included, and heard.
- **Teacher skill:** Teachers will get better at their craft by working together in a safe, trusting climate where they're not anxious about the leader's next move.
- **Family engagement:** As you learn to listen, families will feel increasingly invested, welcomed, and willing to show up for you and your school or organization.
- **Student-centered instruction:** As you model the value of multiple perspectives and Level 3 street data, teachers will become more and more open to bringing student voice into the classroom culture.

THE ARTS ACADEMY REVISITED

Between 2009, when I first met the principal in our opening vignette, and 2013, the Arts Academy soared. In this 4-year window, the school received a number of positive parent reviews on an online school-quality website. Here are a few examples:

- “The Arts Academy has a strong set of teachers, an amazing principal, and a very involved parent community. During my four years so far there, I have seen things only get better for the kids, the school and the community.”
- “The Arts Academy is a school with a fully engaged principal, completely committed staff, and an active family community.... Add to that, progressive ideals and a truly diverse student body, and it's near-perfect.”
- “The Arts Academy is a great school with a hard-working and thoughtful principal, creative and dedicated teachers, and a giving and

involved parent community. We are a diverse group, with students from all different backgrounds and the principal and teachers work hard to create a welcoming, safe, and engaging learning environment for all the kids.”

This is the very same principal whom veteran staff conspired to remove at the end of her first year! As a parent, I find these reviews compelling, and parent satisfaction is definitely an important measure of school improvement. But as an educator, I want additional data. California has long ranked public schools on an Academic Performance Index (API), scaled from 1 (low) to 10 (high), in two ways: against all other schools and against similar-demographic schools. I’ve always found the latter ranking more illuminating.

Between 2010 and 2013, the Arts Academy raised its similar-schools status from a 4 to an 8, an impressive increase. It’s particularly significant that Latino and students of low socioeconomic status—two groups that had historically lagged behind—kept pace with the school’s growth. On one standardized measure, Latino students even exceeded the overall proficiency level of 76% with 92% proficiency.

I’m convinced that the leader’s shift in mindset and approach is what tilled the soil for the Arts Academy to bloom. Through listening, she created conditions for equitable school transformation that jump off the pages of the parent reviews. In 2012, she retired with great pride in the school and the work that her team had accomplished together.

What do you want your legacy to be? How do you need to grow as a leader to manifest this vision? If you were to invest in your own development, what might be true a year or 3 years from now? Here is the naked truth: No curriculum, program, or policy will save your team, school, or system. Only you, as a leader, can transform the current reality by learning to listen to your most vital resource—your people. The next chapter will reveal the exciting role of the brain in this process.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- In the current climate, leaders at all levels are under tremendous stress and are pulled between competing archetypes (Manager, Driver, and Peacekeeper). Listening Leadership integrates the best of each approach into a powerful new way of being and leading.
- Communities have the ability to solve their own problems and grow their own solutions.

- The dominant language of school improvement, Discourse I, often serves to maintain the status quo and perpetuate inequity; Listening Leaders model a shift to Discourse II.
- Listening will help you address critical challenges including persistent inequity, student and adult trauma, the need for integrity in the face of pressure, and disconnected data.

LISTENING LEADER INQUIRY

Question: What do I do when my interest in Listening Leadership is at odds with the style and philosophy of other leaders I'm working with?

My thoughts: First of all, I would encourage you to think of Listening Leadership as a developmental process rather than as a model one adopts or rejects. Remember that many leaders have been influenced by the policy climate toward a more managerial or top-down style. Can you expose your colleagues to the principles and premises of Listening Leadership? Engage them in conversations about how and why to incorporate elements of this model? Ultimately, although you don't need to follow an identical playbook, you do want to have a baseline level of philosophical alignment with other leaders. You may benefit from a team retreat to hash this out.

Question: Taking feedback is hard for me—and apologizing to my staff, forget about it! Publicly apologizing will decrease my credibility and make me look weak. What are your thoughts?

My thoughts: Taking feedback is hard for most of us; I completely empathize. For me, the toughest part of being a school leader was that I felt as though I had to get everything "right," and didn't have room for my own mistakes and learning. In *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, author Douglas Stone writes, "Nothing affects the learning culture of an organization more than the skill with which its executive team receives feedback."^a Welcoming feedback—and sometimes apologizing—is anything but weak; these moves model strength, integrity, and a willingness to grow. To prepare yourself to hear difficult feedback, try the following: Take a few deep breaths, have a supportive colleague or coach with you, tell yourself "it's just data for improvement," and identify one or two points that you want to work on.

Question: Standardized tests aren't going away, and I *do* feel accountable to them. If we don't raise scores, I could lose my job. How am I supposed to practice the data principles you offer?

(Continued)

My thoughts: This is a familiar bind for most leaders, and one of the persistent causes of inequity. Higher performing, affluent schools tend to enjoy more autonomy over curriculum and instruction, whereas schools in poor communities are constricted and held more accountable for specific results. I have found that as a school shows evidence of deep student learning, standardized test data become more of a secondary indicator of success rather than the whole story. At June Jordan School for Equity, all of our students engaged in a performance assessment process to exit 10th and 12th grades. They selected, revised, presented, and defended their best work before a group of teachers, students, and a significant adult in their lives. When we began to invite district officials to listen in, our relationship with the district shifted; no observer could deny the powerful learning demonstrated by students. This public process helped us negotiate a more comprehensive definition of success with the district.

Question: It's hard to stay true to my values on a day-to-day basis, given how many external mandates and pressures I juggle. Any advice?

My thoughts: Slowing down to listen to your own thoughts and feelings, and to set regular leadership intentions, will help you stay grounded in your values. This can be as simple as establishing a Daily Five ritual: Start your day with 5 minutes of writing or meditating on the question, *How will I model my values today?* Or find a colleague for a weekly Integrity Walk during which you spend 30 minutes walking and reflecting on the past week. Ask each other, "In the past week, where did you have success and where did you struggle to practice your values?" "What can you learn from either moment?" Finally, remember that integrity flows from listening to the voices of our students and families—the focus of Chapters 7 and 8.

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