

# Radical Listening in Leadership

In local government, **listening** is an essential skill. | BY JUSTINE JONES

**You've probably heard** the quote by Greek philosopher Epictetus, who said, "We have two ears and one mouth so we can listen twice as much as we speak." Listening is difficult to master no matter the industry. In local government, listening is an essential skill for developing relationships, making and executing decisions, resolving conflicts, effectively communicating, and shaping culture. Admittedly, it can be hard to know where to start, especially with the intensity of daily operations, the fast pace we are often required to move, and the efficiency we strive to strike.

Deputies and assistants regularly interact with individuals in very different roles in our workplaces. Because we are in a time when local governments are highly scrutinized, recruitment

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and retention rates are low, employees are leaving in record numbers, and we have suffered a loss of trust in public agencies, we can no longer afford to miss prime opportunities to address the significant barriers we are confronted with. In essence, deputies and assistants can use their positions to give time and space to allow those we interact with to express their story wholly and without interruption by listening empathetically, which is dually beneficial to the speaker who feels genuinely understood and the listener who holistically understands what was conveyed.

Deeper, more intentional, and mindful listening is known as radical listening. The concept was first introduced in the late 2000s, when Joe L. Kincheloe, a professor



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at McGill University, introduced it to his students and colleagues as a strategy for tuning into others' voices without inserting one's own ideas and perceptions into the conversation. Radical listening is silencing your thoughts, removing the internal filters we typically use, and exercising self-control to resist the instinct to interrupt. Instead, we honor the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of others when we work to understand rather than being understood, as referenced in Stephen Covey's book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*. It demonstrates respect, builds empathy, allows us to be open to learning others' perspectives, and provides opportunities to strengthen relationships and ultimately develop better approaches to challenges.

We should strive to remain objective, nonjudgmental, and have no preconceived notions while we radically listen so speakers feel safe in sharing their perspectives in a manner reflective of their culture, experiences, and identity. This creates the foundation for an inclusive environment that recognizes and welcomes the value of diverse thought and opinion in our workplaces.

By understanding the importance of relationships and how to leverage them so we can execute our jobs more effectively, radical listening enables us to become trusted partners who are self-aware, open, vulnerable, and genuinely curious to learn from what others have to say. It is an equally vital skill to master, although admittedly easier said than done, particularly when we are expected to understand and accurately represent the interests of those we work with. When working with various parties with dynamically different perspectives, radical listening is valuable in finding the common denominator, which helps with problem solving. Practicing this skill could be the key to successfully building cooperative working relationships, working effectively with other key departments and stakeholders, and fostering innovative solutions.

In my experience as a new town manager who was a newcomer to both the organization and to the community, listening was incredibly important. My highest priority in the first 30 days was to meet individually with each councilmember, my direct reports, business owners, community leaders, and stakeholders and simply listen. In full transparency, I clearly stated my intent to learn what kept them up at night; what aspects of the organization were operating effectively and which areas needed attention; what the community really needed and ideas about possible solutions; what motivated and inspired the staff; and explored opportunities to collaborate geared to move the town to the next level.

The feedback received was a blend of concerns, frustrations, and disappointments, as well as their hopes, dreams, and aspirations. I reiterated what I heard by reflecting their responses back to them. In some instances, the speakers had to clarify. I was committed to ensuring that I understood accurately what was being conveyed so I could utilize the responses to help inform my future work. Through focused listening, evaluation, and observation, it became clear that there was a need for operational improvements and accountability in several areas. I began modeling transparency and accountability by proactively providing monthly performance metrics; improving the safety and security of town offices; introducing departmental financial forecasting in preparation for upcoming projects; and drafting a purchasing policy designed to expand economic opportunities, increase parity and equity, and better control costs by expanding pricing competition.

It takes time to establish trust and respect. However, by genuinely listening, I demonstrated that their opinions mattered and their perspectives were valued. Not only did I gain better insight into operational strengths and weaknesses, but I also established positive relationships in the community right from the beginning.

After I completed my listening campaign and began the real work of how best to make operational improvements, deliver efficient and effective services, promote transparency and accountability within each department and decrease the propensity for fraud, waste, and abuse, I attempted to emphasize that I had truly heard them, genuinely cared about issues that were most important to them, and that I was doing my best to ensure my work was a direct reflection of the honest insight they had entrusted to me. As a manager, the risk of not genuinely listening may mean you put yourself in jeopardy of not being listened to, which can create the risk of losing touch with the organization's realities and opening up yourself and the organization to stagnancy at best and failure at worse.

As stated by Lainie Heneghan, "When people have a true understanding of what the organization is endeavoring to do and how they fit in, they can own their actions and results in a very powerful way." Although I am a work in progress, I espouse the skill of radically listening and am committed to working to improve it every day in my work. **PM**