

Listening: A Key to Creating Change¹

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New futures for our organizations and for the people that we work with are possible even when we don't see how to make them happen – if we learn to listen in new ways.

If you already know you could improve how you listen, I would bet that you are already good at listening. In my experience, “good listeners” are the ones most likely to be concerned about improving their listening ability.

I have a lot of evidence that how we listen determines how well we fulfill on the expectations that we have, and that others have for us. Because we listen all the time, we take our listening for granted, and how we listen becomes automatic. This is why we are not likely to notice that how we listen can either keep things the way they are or improve on them. This is not “creating change.” 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.

Sounds simple enough and we are smart people, so why do some changes seem so difficult? What blocks innovation; what stops us from creating change at an organizational scale?

There is an aspect of how you and I listen that works to keep things the way they are and to maintain reliability, predictability, and certainty. This important and essential aspect of listening is like “super-glue” holding the existing foundation together so that “business as usual” can continue. My colleagues and I have spent the last 20 years studying the nature of listening and this “super-glue.” There is something operating in the background – something that has it appear nearly impossible to do more than “improve” what is already there distinct from creating something brand new.

Numerous reports of organizations creating change clearly demonstrate that it is possible. But for the most part, it is argued that this kind of change is a by-product of adverse circumstances rather than a result of how we listen.

¹ This document is a major revision to an earlier work of Generative Leadership Group. It draws on and/or quotes major portions of the preceding work that was published for the firm by Barbara Fittipaldi in [When the Canary Stops Singing](#).

In their book "Breakthroughs," Nayak and Ketteringham studied twelve cases of organizational breakthrough and concluded that breakthrough cannot be planned but is a product of the circumstances, often adverse circumstance. What an organization can do, they say, is wait for the right circumstances and then be ready to take advantage of them.

Arden Sims, CEO of Globe Metallurgical Inc. said, following that organization's 8-year transformation, that "Globe found what worked - and what worked are the innovations that make today's cutting edge companies." He later said, "The innovations were serendipitous."

I propose there is another possibility – that what appears to be serendipity or circumstantially-based, is in fact, accessible, but only after we examine fundamental aspects of how we automatically listen.

To create change, we must first identify and get underneath the "super-glue" that holds our listening in place. Operating within this existing, unexamined culture of listening, at best, results in improvement that is a continuation of the past. While improvement is worthwhile, even continuous improvement is not enough to meet the challenges that we face in today's fast-moving business climate.

How do we continue with what is working for our organization and create together what is missing without impairing or dishonoring what has been built so far?

Let's start by looking at where our organization is "located." This does not mean that we find its office, plant or warehouse locations, its papers of incorporation or the minutes of its meetings, or, for that matter its products or services. These are compelling artifacts that represent and symbolize our organizations but they do not locate them. I suggest that all organizations are "located" in conversation and, more specifically, in an aspect of conversation called "listening." It is a particular *aspect* of "listening," that is already present before we speak, that forms the "super-glue" holding the seemingly fixed reality of our organization in place.

Automatic Listening

Let me give you an example of what I mean by the term *automatic listening* by quoting from an early publication on the subject of listening.

Two competitive U.S. corporations were working on a joint project. The first step was to build a team composed of engineers from both companies. They were all very committed. The project was going to be profitable for both companies (\$650 million over 2 years), and yet nothing was moving forward. It seemed that nothing could get done, and there was always a point of disagreement or argument.

When both teams were asked to think about the assumptions that they brought to their new working partnership, they started to discover the fundamental and underlying judgments, evaluations and assessments that they had about one another, such as:

They are our competitors - we can't trust them.

Our engineers are better than their engineers.

*We do things our way - the **right** way; they do things wrong.*

Whatever we do, they're going to steal.

They're going to steal some of the contracts.

We don't really want to work with them (after all we've been in bidding wars with them on other projects).

They are really the enemy.

No amount of effort could build teamwork on top of these unspoken assessments, on top of what each team member already *knew*. All of this is what they had already "listened" to in their own minds.

This is what I am referring to by the term *automatic listening*. It is possible to have a breakthrough in how we listen by just seeing that once we have listened to something it is too late!

The more I work with people on creating change in their organizations, the more convinced I am that what is already "heard" or known, before anyone speaks or acts - what we've already listened to - will shape and determine the future because it shapes and determines our actions.

One of Generative Leadership Group's clients transferred to a new division of her company as a senior executive and we asked her for examples of "automatic listening" found in her new role. She told the following story:

The first week in my new position, another senior officer called and welcomed me to the division. She told me: 'Pat, the first six months are hell. There is a ritual hazing that women are put through here. You might as well know it going in. It will go away after six months.'

I said to myself, 'Oh no, as a women I'm now in for hazing.' Then I asked a few people about it, and one of the guys told me that it's not just women, it happens to everyone who's new. Then I realized that the woman who told me about hazing "automatically listened" that hazing only happened to women.

Some ritual hazing I experienced included deliberately ignoring me or parts of what I said and then later taking credit for my idea. Or joking about the division I worked for. From the moment that colleague told me about ritual hazing, I watched and listened for it everywhere - my antennae were up, wondering when it would happen next.

I now wonder what work would have been like if she had never told me that, if I wasn't always looking and listening for ritual hazing.

Unexamined Assumptions

The unexamined assumptions such as the one exemplified above form a culture of listening that limits the ability to create change in our organizations. Unexamined assumptions are there when we join, or try to change any organization, and over time we resign ourselves to: "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 consistent with what is needed in rapidly changing business landscapes.

These often unspoken and unexamined assumptions, that we and those we work with have listened to before we start any endeavor, color and determine the future of our work far more than anything we have to say, anything we know, or anything we might attempt.

What is *critically* important to realize is 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. 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."

Automatic listening has some notable dimensions, and until they are recognized, it is difficult to have the freedom to choose another way to listen that allows for "creating change."

Radar Metaphor

Think of these dimensions of automatic listening as if they were antennae tuned to receive in a particular way, like radar. Radar is very selective; it locates solid objects. Objects that are not solid don't reflect the radar's signal so, for example, it does not pick up wind. Radar picks up what it is designed to pick up – solid objects.

Like radar, automatic listening only picks up what it is designed to pick up. It works like a filter that rejects what does not "fit" the design. However, automatic listening goes beyond radar because it can reshape the input to fit its design. Automatic listening can reject or reshape any possibility outside of what the design allows for. Thus, if we want to move beyond improving what exists and create something new we have to find a new way to listen, so that when someone says something that doesn't fit with what we already know, it can register on our radar as a possibility rather than be rejected or reshaped.

Until we get beyond automatic listening we are left with extensions of what we already know, which improve on what is already there rather than create change.

Don't get me wrong – sometimes an improvement on what's already there is valuable and important. What we are discussing here, however, is a way to listen that creates entirely new possibilities.

Let us examine six dimensions of automatic listening that form the "super-glue."

1. Unending Assessment About Everything and Everyone

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. You say something and those who are listening "vote," instantly and automatically. We are automatically assessing our self and others *all the time*. There is no intention on our part to do this; we do it without work or effort. "Voting" is going on in the background of every conversation.

For example, a senior manager told me he was beginning to recognize when he was listening through the filter of assessments, and in those moments he was free to listen for new possibility, to listen to "what is actually being said." He began to ask himself; "What is here that I don't yet see?" Something very powerful is possible out of that kind of listening.

He then related the following incident:

A senior vice president in my corporation issued a memo to senior management in which he said that the way we were succeeding in certain areas was accidental. As I read it my immediate reaction was that it was an accusative and derogatory comment. Then I found myself asking, "What does he really mean by this?"

And when I looked again, I saw that he was saying that we really didn't have a clear design for what we were doing. While for the most part what

we were doing was successful, some of our success was accidental. His point was to draw our attention to what was missing in our design. And I said to myself, "Very worthwhile statement," and I put the memo away.

I came into work the next morning and you wouldn't have believed how upset everyone was. We must have lost at least a day's work from senior people because they were upset about this memo - because they took it as an accusation that what they were doing was "accidental."

I realized they were already listening "through" assessment: "He is out to criticize me!" Listening from assessment led to defending themselves and what they were doing – and there was no possibility.

I spoke to the manager who sent out the memo. He confirmed that he was not putting anyone down or accusing anyone and apologized for leaving people with that misunderstanding. My biggest frustration was that I was trying to communicate the opportunity in his statement to people who were upset, and I could not get through to them even though everyone knew that this person often said things that were a little awkward.

If everyone had seen that they were caught in "automatic listening" for assessment, they would have realized that the assessments were not the *truth* or the *facts*, but rather just one of many valid interpretations. This would have left them free to find out or to listen for what was intended. As important as it is to see how our own automatic listening colors how we hear and interpret what is happening, it is also important to see that other people are also listening in this mode.

What starts to become obvious is that we often do not hear each other. What we hear is what *we* are saying *about* what another has said. Sometimes we even assess that we assess too much or have an opinion that we are too opinionated. Try to stop it - and it's already too late!

And right now we are looking into what we are "too late" for. Our assessments about everything and everyone (how it "should" be) are in the background and unspoken, yet shaping what does and does not seem possible as well as the actions we do and do not take.

2. Taking it Personally...Everything Is Personal Even When We Say It's Not

We think that assessments are *personal* assessments - we are making them individually, without the influence of others.

Part of "automatic listening" is that we think that our opinions are ours personally - predetermined and controlled by us. If that is true, if your opinions are yours personally, you can simply stop having the ones that don't work and have ones that do.

What if your opinions are really not yours? Our history and the experience we derive from living set a pattern of opinions. Taking into account where we were born and into what kind of family, what our parents did for a living, how many other children in the family, what profession we are in and a couple of other things, and a pattern of opinion becomes predictable. This is because opinions are not a matter of thinking. We do very little real thinking - a lot of *having* thoughts, and that's not the same as thinking.

It seems that we take everything personally - if traffic is bad, we take that personally. If we are "cut off" on the highway, we take that personally. However, thinking we are *doing* this thing that I am calling assessing leaves us with a sense of control (albeit an illusion), as if we could stop assessing or stop voting on things. For example, "I make my own assessments, it is something I personally do - a personal phenomenon inside me - and I control it."

In fact, the kind of assessments I am pointing at here happens automatically, not as a matter of choice. We meet with people at work. We already know that they or we are not good enough, or committed enough, or too committed, or too smart, or out to feather their own nest. We already know how people are, how the project is, how the company is.

And it appears that we are personally "doing" that assessing and should stop. If you are personally doing that, then stop. Go ahead and try it! We are no more "doing" assessment than we are "doing" growing new cells or "doing" our heart beats.

3. Already Know...All The Time...Always

A third dimension of automatic listening, or the third filter that we listen through, 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. Have you ever found yourself relating to new information with thoughts such as "Oh, that's like Senge's 'Learning Organization' or that's like Prahalad's 'Strategic Intent' or that's what Hammer was talking about in 'Reengineering the Organization'" - instantly referencing what you already know.

We automatically listen for fit and confirmation. We agree with what fits what we already know, and we write off what does not fit. We have, at best, a two-minute window for what doesn't fit. We have almost no tolerance for not knowing, not understanding, not having the answer. We want to know: What is it? What is the definition? What is it good for? How do I do it? What can I use it for? And what will I/can I get out of it?

Once we have these answers and explanations, we understand. We don't have to wonder or inquire into what is possible. This is now a closed case. No

possibility - we've got our answers, never noticing that it is what we already know that is suffocating us. *We will never fit new possibilities into what we already know!*

A top salesperson was in a training program on new sales techniques. As she listened, she found herself saying, "This will never work. I know how to sell. You can't approach a customer like that. If you did it would take all day to handle one customer." Despite overwhelming evidence that the techniques worked, she heard herself dismissing the possibility over and over again. The good news is that each time she caught the automatic listening she was able to hear possibility in what was being said and to listen in a new way.

We pretend to listen openly, but our "listening" is not a clean slate. We approach situations like this:

I already know what sort of person I am, and I know what sort of person you are and what sort of people are on my team, and I know about this project, this field, this economy, this world - *now*, what is it you have to say?

We are conditioned to confirm what we know, and if something is said that does not fit, we will disprove it, reject it out of hand, or make it fit in some way. We don't decide to do this - it happens automatically and our actions are therefore pre-shaped by automatic listening. Here is what's interesting. We live like that is all inside us. But what if it is not inside us but we are inside "it" - this automatic listening we have been examining? And that automatic listening or "super-glue" determines your future; it is there before you even get there.

4. Looking Good...At Almost Any Cost

A fourth aspect of automatic listening is: 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?

We don't "think" that, and we don't consciously plan to listen that way. We don't even have to remember to listen that way - you and I are already organized to listen that way.

If you view yourself as a team player, as a leader, as open and candid, and then anything happens that is a threat to that view, that threat must be "explained" away. We see ourselves in a particular way, and we do not want that disrupted. We are organized for maintaining the continuity of our view in most if not all matters.

Avoiding any disruption in our view of ourselves is not something that we consciously do; it is automatic. Yet this mode of listening determines our behavior. People would rather say nothing than risk saying the wrong thing. We are deeply concerned about being “right” and looking good. And we are committed to eliminating, avoiding or explaining away anything that threatens our point of view. Given that no new possibilities will get through the filter, our career, our work life, and the future of our organization are seen against a background of our having to look good. We don't have the freedom to create change from here. We are left with only a limited range of options, which are consistent with the past and, at best, an improvement over the past. That is not a future based in possibility; it is a future based in the past. In other words, there is no real possibility, only a limited range of options.

5. Description, Getting it Right, and “Talking About”

Our background listening says, “Work is a certain way, you are a certain way, the team, the project, the company are all a certain way.” And we use language to talk about or describe and label it “the way that it *already* is.”

A fundamental idea about language is that language is merely for labeling and describing what is already there; and therefore, there is no power in talking, except to label and describe things accurately or inaccurately. Work occurs as subject/object; there's you and other stuff that is already a certain way, which language represents. So we can *talk about* or describe work, the future, or a project, and we can talk about it correctly or incorrectly. We can put the right labels or the wrong labels on, but there's no real possibility, no new thinking. Our work is set against a background of being deeply resigned regarding any real possibility.

Everything about this dimension of automatic listening is designed to minimize risk. The listening in the background organizes to already know and understand everything. Its design maintains continuity of the past into the future and conformity (including conforming by being a non-conformist). It is all already there, and it appears to us as fact, as truth.

This is automatic listening - we are not “thinking” this, it is “thinking” us - and it's not a personal problem. From here there can be no authentic stepping out into the unknown.

6. Resignation

We go into work as if today were just another version of yesterday and what will happen today were already known. We do not recognize this as resignation - we see it as being realistic, or worldly, or skeptical, or appropriately cynical.

We don't open our mouths and speak as if what we spoke and how we listened would alter the future. We open our mouths and talk, and others talk, but we are not expecting much that is new to happen.

When I interview senior executives in a major company it is not uncommon to find some men and women completely resigned about possibility for the future beyond some version of what already exists. These are good people, working hard, who really want to empower the vision and strategic intent of their company, but they are working against a background of resignation. They have little belief that their speaking and listening can open up new possibility for their company, for the work at hand, or for those doing the work. Rather, while they may be working hard, wanting great things to happen, they already know that "business as usual" will continue, and they adapt to and settle for that, resigned that there will be no new possibilities or breakthroughs.

It is important that you begin to see that if you are resigned to the fact that work *is* a certain way and you *are* a certain way and other people *are* a certain way and your organization and division *are* a certain way, then all that's left is to adapt to "the way that it is around here." All that is left is to settle for what is already so and listen for tips and techniques to improve it. It is even more important to see that this is what is given, and it is given before we even get to the scene...that this is what we have stepped into...it is not what we created...and it is what we perpetuate.

We are not an empty vessel, listening for what is actually happening, for what someone is saying, or for what is possible. We don't listen to conversation as it is; we hear selectively. Something is going on already, and we pretend that it isn't there. It is this mode of listening that acts as "super-glue" and keeps a future of limited options locked in place.

When you are unaware of something, it controls you in that you are at its effect. Once we are aware, we have choice in the matter. The real power in this whole insight is to go beyond simply being aware to "actively" catching one's self-listening this way.

Here's the good news: if you have accomplished as much success and produced as many results as you have unaware of this "super-glue," there is no telling what might be possible out of the freedom given by recognizing it, including stepping beyond it.

Are you willing to take a chance on a real possibility? Are you willing to challenge the "given?" Are you willing to take on the possibility that you don't know how next week is going to go? Are you willing to sacrifice who you *know* you are for who you *could* be? If you are, then we could have a conversation that would determine how next week, next month, and next year are going to go. That is our invitation to you and all of our clients.

Rather than finding the best adaptation to “business as usual,” we ask, “What’s possible? What’s outside the predictable? What new future can we invent?”

The first step in creating change is gaining the freedom to think in new ways. If you can see the design of the “super-glue,” and get it out into the light of day, the result will be an enormous freedom to hear possibility in what is being said, to listen in new ways, to recognize and identify the automatic listening that limits you. This will give you the power to see, create and fulfill new possibilities for yourself and your company.