

Generative Listening: the single most powerful transformational behaviour

Though crucial for authentic Dialogue, true *listening* does not come naturally. It is *an art* that requires practice and *a specific disposition*, so that both speaker and listener connect in such a way that *meaning can truly flow through them* (as suggested by the Greek root of the word, *dia-logos*, “meaning flowing through”).

And the *dance of meaning-building* at the heart of authentic Dialogue starts with a first step: **Listening.**

When it comes to listening, *Generative Listening* holds the greatest potential. More than deep, or active listening, Generative Listening enables *a level of connection* between the one who speaks and the one who listens that is *truly generative*, i.e. it creates *new possibilities for action* that neither parties had thought of or even expected before starting the conversation. Through my practice as an organisational consultant, I have developed *7 principles* for Generative Listening:

1. *Slowing down and noticing more of what is present*: often as we enter a conversation (especially in an organisational context), we come filled with thoughts, ideas, or concerns related to what just happened earlier today, or what is scheduled to happen just after this conversation. This first principle invites us to enter the present moment, and slow down all this mental activity linked to past and future
2. *Listening with all my senses*: we could be forgiven for thinking that listening only involves the ears. But in fact all our other senses are important in the act of listening. Sight of course, for it helps us read body language – another crucial conveyor of meaning. But expressions such as “what I heard left me with a bitter”, or “I warmed up to him after listening to this”, or even “this situation doesn’t smell right” shows how much all of our senses are involved in connecting to a reality that we are hearing. In fact, by heightening our 5 senses, we also reduce our often hyperactive cerebral cortex, thus managing to listen not only with our head, but also with our heart
3. *Listening to the words / images chosen*: speaking is like painting with words; as we speak, we choose (even if sometimes unconsciously) specific words – and not others – to paint a picture of the reality we are attempting to describe. As a listener, it is crucial to notice those words, the images they convey, the power (or dullness) that they hold, so that we really try to inhabit that world that is being described. Attention must be placed on unusual words, or slips of the tongue, for they too convey an important meaning about the speaker’s inner world, and the mental models that may be structuring his thinking and his actions
4. *Listening to the emotions conveyed by the person who is talking*: emotions are the bedrock of a person’s presence in the world, the roots of someone’s mental models, thoughts, and actions. Listening fully, or even listening to the full person in front of me, requires me to listen to the emotions (s)he conveys. This can be through body language and the choice of words and images (see above), but it will also be through the tone of the voice, its tempo, its pitch; through the silences as well as the hesitations
5. *Suspending judgement*: this is probably one of the most difficult of these 7 principles, yet probably one of the most crucial. It means suspending both moral and cognitive judgement. By moral judgement, I mean splitting into good or bad, acceptable or

unacceptable, mature or immature, etc. For a true, authentic dialogue, this moral judgement needs to be suspended whilst I am listening, so that I can truly get into the lived experience of what it is like to be the person who's speaking. It doesn't mean that I have to agree with it, or accept it; just that I let it coexist with my own perspective. If you are still not convinced, try to imagine being judged as you speak – your perspective, and who you are, not being allowed into this space of Dialogue ... Equally, it is important to suspend my cognitive judgement, i.e. my tendency to classify or dismiss what I am hearing into true and false, new thinking or old thinking, right-wing or left-wing, etc. As well as my tendency to finish someone's sentence for them, as if I knew before they spoke what they are actually going to say

6. ***Noticing what I don't understand or what triggers questions for me***, rather than what I don't like about what I hear. I would argue that we greatly underestimate how much we don't actually understand in what someone is telling us. Working often in international context, I have come to observe that the greatest misunderstandings happen between people who speak the same language, and not those who are trying to express themselves through a foreign language. So checking my understanding rather than working on assumptions and shortcuts in meaning is crucial. If I come to feel that I don't like what I am hearing, rather than dismissing it, this is the time to check that I have understood correctly – rather than jumped to conclusions – and if the feeling continues, use it to clarify what questions it raises for me rather than stay in a place of judgement
7. ***What do I feel as I listen to what is being said – and why?*** Finally, just as it was crucial to tune to the feelings of the one who is speaking, it is fundamental to connect to my own feelings as I am listening. On the one hand, it may provide useful information into the reality being presented. On the other hand, it is a prerequisite before the second act in Dialogue: Generative Speaking. If I don't pay attention to the feelings that have been evoked by what I heard, I will not be able to constructively respond to what I heard; instead, I will merely act out my inner state, thus putting the Dialogue at risk

For some of my clients, and at times for me too, Generative Listening has been ***the single most powerful tool*** in enabling the organisational transformation they were looking for. The complete shifts in the way organisational members related to one another generated a huge ***release of meaning, energy, creativity***, and, at times, ***healing***. As ***leaders*** started ***embodying their role*** primarily through listening rather than through controlling and/or giving advice, the whole dynamics at work moved towards ***collaboration and engagement***, leading to new ways of working together, new activities, and new sources of performance.

For others, whilst Generative Listening proved to be a crucial ***first step*** in the dance, they realised they were still in need of some tools or processes to ***help them speak to one another authentically***; to be able to bring up tough issues without breaking down the quality of the Dialogue. So I started working with them on Generative Speaking ...