

Framing Leadership through Empathetic Listening

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EMPATHETIC LISTENING

In the past seven years of Supreme Court deliberations judge Clarence Thomas has uttered exactly one comment. In a courtroom famous for the opportunity to produce quotable phrases enshrined in American canonical law, Thomas has eschewed questions, interruptions, and commenting while listening to impassioned complex oral arguments. Pressed for reasoning, Thomas has quite simply stated, “I just don’t think you can understand much if you’re talking all the time.”

Naturally, the anecdote of Clarence Thomas is not intended to exemplify sound leadership – his taciturn manner can be interpreted by many as self-righteous and aloof. Rather, it illustrates the paramount role listening plays in a sound decision making process. It is the type of behavior that occurs every day in responsive astute organizations by competent leaders. To extrapolate further, empathetic listening is vital in forming a culture within an organization that promotes caring and understanding, positive self-worth in individuals and groups, and ultimately, more effective organizational outcomes (Druskat & Wolff, 2001). It is with these ideas in mind that have led Costa and Kallick (2000) to label listening with understanding and empathy as a habit which intelligent people practice when confronted with problems: a habit of mind.

My deliberate reflections and early experiences as an aspiring leader have repeatedly brought great attention to the art of listening. Much time must be employed in order to understand how it relates to the intricacies of interpersonal relationships from a principal’s perspective.

The ability to listen with empathy and understanding presents itself, upon first cognizance, as a rather simple elementary routine commonplace among most adults. However, as Costa & Kallick point out, effective listening is associated with a high emotional intelligence

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(2000). Before one can adroitly listen to another's perspective on an issue of concern, he or she must first be "in tune" with their own emotions and feelings; they must be self-aware.

This awareness was elaborated and made practical for me early in my studies when Dr. Judy Brody instituted Jung's personality type test. The test's assessment of my innate feelings towards a variety of real-life scenarios provided an introspective window into my personality. Dr. Brody stressed how an educational leader's personal emotions will filter and shape their understanding of potential conflicts and decisions within education (personal communication, September 8, 2013).

The significance of this emotional awareness cannot be stressed enough. Druskat and Wolff note that organizations and groups have complex emotions existing in three forms: individual members, as a group itself, and between varying groups in a larger system. (2001). Organizational teams are living breathing beings. Without the ability to be aware of one's emotions and other's emotions, the listening process so vital in all communications as a leader in a group is severely compromised. Goleman, Boyatzis, & McKee put forth the idea that self-awareness is the paramount skill from which all competent leadership is built upon. They reason that without self-awareness, regulation of all emotions becomes an impossible task (2002).

Superior listening extends far beyond principal/staff interactions. It is instrumental in a variety of audiences an educational leader will encounter. The opportunity to see this in practice was immediately presented on the very first day of my internship. A school bus accident prompted my principal to call the homes of many concerned parents forcing her into an unexpected position. I watched as she listened intensively and empathetically recalling her own concerns as a mother and asking for understanding, yet never interrupting a parent. This silence

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was not a sign of agreement or acceptance of blame, but acknowledgment. As Costa & Kallick (2000) state, often times we state we are listening “but actually we are rehearsing in our head what we are going to say when our partner is finished (p.24). “ In my writings I reflected my awe at how these skills and habits of mind were called upon in such stressful times with ease and fluidity (Journal 1, September 10, 2013). It is a habit that I have inquired about with Ms. Jones-Tate directly.

Ms. Jones-Tate is aware of her obvious habitual skill. She notes the immediate purpose as twofold: a way to share decision making with staff, and to gain trust among various stakeholders (personal communication, October 3, 2013). These purposes, in turn, will have the desired long-term effects of a better climate and increased student learning. Ms. Jones-Tate is mindful that shared decision-making allows for an increased accountability and an increased morale among team members.

An earlier RTII meeting was an example of Ms. Jones-Tate’s purposeful silence in order to empower her staff. I noted at the time “the collegiality of each member and how the literary specialist and instructional specialist led the meeting. Each member had a role and next steps were determined for each student (Journal 4, September 29, 2013).” This habit of listening allows members to organically raise their own interdependent accountability, which research has been shown to increase team outcomes (Fandt, 1991). The effectiveness in this RTII is not by accident. Careful design has enabled it to become one of our school’s foremost strengths improving student learning.

The most important result of listening with empathy, however can be its linked to it’s increased trust. Any survey of teachers’ most favored qualities in a principal will undoubtedly

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yield trust in its top rankings. Bennet has written that teachers would rather a less effective principal that they can trust, than an effective one that they cannot (as cited in Evans, 1996). Ms. Jones-Tate could not stress this enough.

Obtaining trust allows a principal to eventually institute necessary change in culture, curriculum, and gain approval on any number of difficult decisions. She recalled that during her first year not one change in scheduling, curriculum, or culture was implemented. It would have been dangerous to do so. She understood the need to listen to everyone's concerns and hear what was being said. Each member of her new staff was invited to personal summer meetings where she asked questions and listened to what they felt needed to be changed in the school. This attentive listening was instrumental in procuring trust from the entire staff. When the time came for changes to be implemented in the following years, including a new math curriculum and decisions on teaching assignments, she felt the staff was readily able to trust her judgment because they felt their concerns had been heard (personal communication, October 3, 2013).

Ms. Jones-Tate's practice is consistent with what Evans noted in implementing school change. Since change is viewed as loss, we must approach it from the perspective of emotionally intelligent listeners who value our employees (Evans, 1996). Priscilla Dawson echoes these thoughts in our first school leadership meeting (personal communication, September 8, 2013). When presenting a case study on how to initiate a new English program, she blanched at the responses given. She noted that the novice leaders failed to include "listening to our staff's concerns" and "gaining trust" as a prerequisite in our plans of change. Ms. Dawson's surprise at this obvious omission remains in my mind as a lesson on how a group of well-intentioned

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individuals can be so misguided because they simply did not take the time to be empathetic listeners and gain the trust of others.

The irony of learning to listen empathetically is that I would have listed the trait as one of the strengths in my personal character. I have often retold the Clarence Thomas anecdote to others, imploring them to be more attentive and understanding. However, the habit of mind needs to be comprehended as more than physical auditory listening. Assessing the climate or culture of an audience, or as Costa and Kallick put it, listening to the words beneath what is being said is a sublime application of the listening habit (2000).

This was made authentic to me as I worked to unveil changes within our school's bullying procedures. In my haste to make effective change, I almost overlooked the very crucial role of listening not just to my staff, but my students' and parents' literal words and indirect feelings. It was only through the advice of my university mentor, observations, and literature readings where I could clearly see the error about to occur. However, I am not chagrined about this oversight. Every small error is just one step closer to moving effective listening from a mindful awareness, to a habit of mind.

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