

Listening Leadership: An Academic Perspective

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Much of the literature on leadership continues to focus on the leader who has the ability to shape a vision and articulate that vision, a vision that resonates with the mission, values, personnel and technology that make up the organization. To shape and articulate a resonant vision, the effective leader must be willing and able to listen. Only through listening to the stakeholders can a leader know how that vision should best be framed and implemented. One significant way that leadership listening can be implemented is through listening sessions. This study provides a detailed example of the effective use of listening sessions in an academic setting. University of Maryland administrators offer observations on the role of listening to engage students, faculty, staff, and administrators in developing strategic plans for moving forward.

Leaders are considered to be those who articulate a vision and inspire their followers to realize that vision. “Leaders who effectively communicate meaning draw on past experience, present opportunities, scenarios of the future, fundamental values, and cultural traditions to articulate inspiring visions of their organization’s future” (Bryson & Crosby, 1992, p. 48). The effective leader is one who can transform the organization by inspiring and empowering the followers to higher levels of motivation and even morality. “The result of transforming leadership,” writes James MacGregor Burns (1978), “is a relationship of mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders and may convert leaders into moral agents” (p. 4). Reviewing the research on transformational leadership, Hackman and Johnson (2000) identified five primary characteristics of transformational leaders: creative, interactive, visionary, empowering, and passionate.

The transformational leadership model has been recognized as a cornerstone of public administration. Koehler and Pankowski (1997) argue that administrators need to “make dramatic changes in the way they lead” if an organization is to be efficient and effective (p. 110). This requires leaders to “recognize that organization success emulates from the bottom of the organization. . .and that there will be little change. . .unless leaders at the top understand that their role is to lead others to lead themselves” (p. 110). And that change must address “the entire institution, including its mission, values, personnel, and technologies” (Terry, 2003, p. 59).

Another notable and important leadership model in academia is “servant leadership.” Developed by Robert Greenleaf (1997), servant leadership is believed to be especially powerful in settings where the organization and community seek to “do good” in the world. As Mittal and Dorfman (2012) explain, servant leadership differs from other models through “service motivation” and is demonstrated through the intent and action of “developing and empowering people with empathy and humility” (p. 555). Transformational in nature, this model seeks collaborative community building. Furthermore, open and active listening are central to the model as the means to understand the community and to foster empathy and compassion.

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Notably, despite this emphasis on the leader as speaker, some leadership experts have factored listening into the model. Pearce (2003), for example, emphasizes *Leading Out Loud*, though he does suggest that listening does have a role: “Listening perceptively to your constituents and discovering what’s underlying their stated comments is important. But you need to respond in a way that connects with your listeners and shows them that you have truly heard them” (p. 140). Kelley (2000) stresses that transformational leadership requires the highest listening skills, and “this means knowing how to listen empathically. . . [as a] bridge in relationships” (p. 4).

Floyd (2010) characterizes this “listening bridge” as dialogic listening. He stresses the need for communicators to be willing to engage in the two-way dialogic process as central to truly achieve understanding and unity. The resulting supportive climate requires the listener to listen “authentically, inclusively, with confirmation, with presentness and in a spirit of equality” (p. 132). Urging organizational leadership to be centered on dialogic listening, Macnamara (2016) observes that “there is too much telling and selling, and too little listening” (p. 249). Dialogue, he describes, “involves each side in any interaction having a chance to speak while the other listens, with a view to achieving understanding and acceptance, or tolerance even when agreement and consensus are not possible” (p. 249).

To create such a supportive dialogic communication climate, White (1997) argues that leaders in the 21st century must be listening leaders, leaders who will identify productive areas of confusion and uncertainty, who will demonstrate that they do not have all the answers but are willing to learn, and who will be able to “act differently, think differently, and seek inspiration from different sources” (p. 2). Research by Johnson and Bechler (1997) revealed that individuals “perceived to be leading the groups were most commonly believed to be listening to the groups” (p. 57). And listening scholars Steil and Bommeljie (2004) conclude that “Effective listening and effective leadership are inseparable” (p. 1).

One significant way that leadership listening can be implemented is through listening sessions. Political leaders offer some interesting examples of agenda setting through listening (Wolvin, 2010). In 1999, Hillary Clinton began her successful Senate campaign with a listening tour of New York State. Wisconsin Senator Russell Feingold conducted listening sessions in each of the 72 counties, noting that “Listening is the most important part of my job” (Cited in Wolvin, 2005). And U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Mike Johanns used listening sessions throughout the country to shape the 2007 Farm Bill.

While public leadership has illustrated the efficacy of listening sessions, it can be useful to extend our understanding of listening sessions to academic leadership. Safir (2017) describes how Oakland (California) Technical High School co-principals listened to student, teacher, and parent voices in their school community to create a collaborative culture and transform the school. Safir offers five reasons listening leadership can be transformative:

- Listening helps us tune in to dominant narratives and shift them.
- Listening helps us keep our finger on the pulse of complex change.
- Listening helps leaders stay true to their values in the face of pressure.
- Listening helps leaders model humanity and compassion in the face of trauma.

Listening helps us reimagine data and bring stakeholder voice into the equation.

Some higher education leaders provide evidence as to how listening sessions can be useful for collaborative decision making. Daniel J. Martin, President, and Sandy Mayo, Vice President for Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, at Seattle Pacific University identified a number of recommendations from listening sessions to build a more inclusive campus culture. The listening sessions yielded an impressive number of suggestions for enhanced policies and procedures; additional training for faculty, staff, and student leaders; student resources; hiring; curriculum and instruction; and academic leadership and accountability (Mayo, 2020).

On another campus in Washington state, Highline College, President John Mosby conducted listening sessions in February and March of 2019. Six themes emerged during the listening sessions that enabled Mosby to identify four goals: (1) strengthen a culture of college-wide planning, accountability and evaluation; (2) establish a structure for improved communication; (3) redefine organizational structure and evaluate outcomes; and (4) enhance and operationalize opportunities for student success. Mosby summarizes his listening-based leadership: “Together, our collective efforts will make Highline the very best for all of us: students, staff, faculty and community” (“New Chapter at Highline College”). Other institutions such as the University of Nebraska at Omaha, the University of Mississippi, and the University of South Carolina have held listening sessions to gather input for change.

The University of Wisconsin system conducted extensive listening sessions to determine (1) What are the major issues (pro and con) facing the State of Wisconsin currently? And (2) What role should the University of Wisconsin play to help Wisconsin address its most critical challenges and opportunities? For the 13 listening sessions held across the state, participants were given questions ahead of time to allow them to prepare their answers. Each listening session involved three phases. In the first phase, participants discussed their answers at tables of up to seven participants. Facilitators were available at every table to prompt discussion of the questions. In the second phase, participants determined whether there were themes in their responses. In the third phase, each table shared any consensus it was able to reach with the other tables at the session (Listening Session Data Report, 2015).

Listening and empathy in higher education is valued in interesting ways. At multiple universities including Stanford and the University of Virginia, design thinking, a mode of innovation and problem solving is now celebrated in curriculum and student groups. At Stanford, the Design School (d.school) is specifically offering leadership courses based on design thinking in academia including programs devoted solely to university innovation. In the interview with G.K. Patter in 2005, Stanford d.school founder, David Kelley, asserts, “The d.school will provide students with design empathy in two ways: empathy for other disciplines and empathy for the person who will benefit from the product, service or environment they are designing for them” (p. 4). At the University of Virginia, the design thinking curriculum is led by Jeanne Leidtka from the Darden Business school where there is a specialization in the field. Leidtka and Ogilvie (2011) center design thinking on observation and cultivation of empathy through listening, “...Design starts with empathy, establishing a deep understanding of those we are designing for...” (p. 6).

Through the work of Leidtka, Kelley and many others in higher education, there is an emerging embrace for leaders to co-create with those they are leading. Some of these approaches are being implemented within universities to best meet the needs for large diverse communities where listening and understanding a wide range of perspectives is essential for solutions that can be successfully supported in the long run.

Kicking off his campus presidency in the summer of 2020 at the University of Maryland College Park, Darryl Pines launched a series of “Voices of Maryland” virtual listening sessions with faculty, staff and students “to continue discussions about various issues and to listen to your ideas and concerns” (Pines, 2020). The new president’s priorities included being a student-centered institution, re-unifying and healing the campus after a series of tragedies. The priorities also emphasized inclusivity and respect for all, support for vulnerable communities, and a refocusing on the academic and research rigor of the institution. This was framed as a collaborative effort and leadership would be necessary across divisions for success.

Pines notes the importance of listening leadership: “Our University of Maryland family is comprised of a strong local, state, national and global community—students, faculty and staff, and a worldwide network of almost 400,000 alumni and friends. With a diverse community working collaboratively toward shared goals, there is no obstacle that cannot be overcome. Our community is TerrapinSTRONG. Together is the way, the only way, to succeed” (Pines, 2020). Alongside Pines, several leaders at the University of Maryland including the Vice Presidents for Student Affairs (Patty Perillo), Research (Laurie Locascio) and Diversity and Inclusion (Georgina Dodge) led efforts to unify and support the diverse 50,000+ community through collaborative listening driven efforts.

A listening-driven and collaborative committee structure was established beginning in March 2020 at the university level. The model was selected in order to support multiple values of community, inclusivity, respect and transparency. In order to better understand and address problems during a constantly changing and threatening environment, numerous committees, subcommittees and working groups were created in an iterative approach. Beginning with major categories, incorporating academics, research, student affairs, human resources and finance, these committees have expanded to include hundreds of members of the overall university community including leaders, faculty, staff and students. This very robust and inclusive approach yielded various results, most of which are positive and all of which can be part of a larger conversation to inform future emergency response and resilience strategies. Indeed, many of the working groups continue with their projects.

Reflecting on the need for listening leadership, the campus vice presidents shared their views. Vice President Perillo (2020) observed:

Truth be told, listening based leadership is always essential for leadership...It is about continually exploring what is happening within you, what is happening around you, and acting from what you discover. You can only act on this discovery if you are actively listening. Listening based leadership is inclusive of multiple voices, perspectives, identities and experiences; it allows for every voice to be heard and every human to be seen. This is essential for the best path forward always includes a diversity of thought and experience, but this would not be illuminated if leadership is not listening. Without such listening, solutions would be void of broad-based thinking. Hearing multiple voices and perspectives also is a cornerstone for making decisions that work best for all/more, as these pronouncements are inclusive of a collective experience.

Vice President for Research Locasio (2020) illustrates the servant leader focus on listening as service to the organization:

...Leadership is service to the organization that you are a part of and to the people who make up that organization. And if leadership is service, then leadership must also

be partnership. Some people think that the words service and partnership are not words associated with a strong leader. But how can you lead an organization and the people who are a part of that organization if you do not genuinely want to serve? Therefore, it has always been my philosophy to be in partnership with the people I lead, and listening is the first step in that process. Without listening, I do not know who I am communicating with or how to approach the conversation based on their interests and their experiences and expectations. Without listening, the solution that I come up with might actually be a really good one, but one that will never be implemented because I haven't taken the time to understand the people that I need to rely on to partner in its implementation. This pandemic has had so many impacts on the world including the fact that it has surfaced many of our insecurities and our fears and our vulnerabilities. At this time, when we are most vulnerable, it is particularly important that we lead with compassion, and that we come up with solutions to problems that take into account these feelings. That requires us to listen to each other, listen openly, and thereby empower our community to be part of the solution.

Associate Vice President for Innovation and Entrepreneurship Chang (2021) recognizes the need to gain diverse perspectives through listening:

I personally feel listening is way undervalued and way underutilized as a means for being a much more effective and impactful leader. There's a lot to be said for wanting leaders who know just what to do and just what to say. However, when dealing with new challenges or new opportunities with many unknowns, leaders must try to learn as much and as fast as possible. Listening is the best way to do that. Design thinking has the premise that the solutions only become better by constructively adding input from diverse people with diverse perspectives and diverse experiences. But that can only happen if everyone feels valued and heard so that they feel comfortable and confident when contributing those perspectives and experiences.

And Vice President for Diversity and Inclusion Dodge notes that it is important to be a flexible listener in order to

. . . connect with underlying motivators that may not be readily apparent. For example, when students tell me they feel unsafe on campus due to their identities, I listen for clues to identify what spaces or people may be causing that feeling. . . listening with empathy provides a framework for growth. . . . listening without judgment is the gift . . . you learn from listening to gain the information necessary to develop diversity, equity, inclusion strategies.

Conclusion

Clearly, listening is an essential dimension of leadership in all sectors of an academic institution. The leader of the Council of University System Presidents, Dr. Aminta Breux, president of the system's Bowie State University, thoughtfully describes how listening is at the core of academic leadership:

One of my mentors early in my career would use a phrase to remind me to leave myself open to new ideas, perspectives and new possibilities. He would say 'Remember to

leave a window open.’ My philosophy about listening is centered around that concept that no matter how good an idea might be, and how sure you are about your opinion, listening and leaving open the possibility that someone just might have some ideas or thoughts, is an important element to one’s own growth and development.

Listening and leaving yourself open to take in new information is important for all leaders to remember. I’ve been in higher education for over 35 years and one of the thrills of being on a campus is the ability to surround yourself with people who are excited about the creation of new knowledge and are curious about the world. A good day for me on the campus is having those opportunities where you get to listen to a faculty member talk about their research, or that exchange of ideas you might have with a colleague; and, one of the highlights of my day is listening to a student share their aspirations and goals. I learn so much from listening to many on the campus whether it’s in a meeting, or on my way to the meeting.

It’s been my experience that the ability to listen is also an integral part of building teams in the workplace. Listening versus hearing is a differentiation critical to avoiding 95% of misunderstandings, miscommunications and other pitfalls that happen in every day interactions. Being in the moment and listening to another person sounds so basic, but in this era of multiple devices and multitasking, it is a skill to be practiced. Individuals have different styles of communicating and listening go hand-in-hand with leading as you are able to then understand the various styles, perspectives and strengths of your team members.

Finally, I try to listen for what isn’t said. Much can be inferred by the words or messages left out of communications. When you ask a direct question and you don’t hear a direct answer, that might be because you haven’t effectively communicated your question, or it might be an avoidance or reluctance to give you the answer.

My listening philosophy as a leader is one that has been tried and tested over the years; and still, it’s a work in progress, because I leave a window open for new perspectives to come in.

Opening the window to listen takes time and time is precious. The precious time devoted to listening as part of solution-oriented planning is time well spent. As we have learned through the various University of Maryland group examples, active listening is central to effective academic decision- making and operational decision-making at a large-scale public institution. Indeed, as higher education today must change and adapt to the health, economic, cultural, and environmental challenges the world is facing, academic institutions, more than ever, need leaders who are willing to listen.

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