Radical listening:

Less talk, more leadership



Radical listening is missing from all areas of organisations, with the problem being most serious at senior level, says Lainie Heneghan, Managing Director, JMW Worldwide UK Ltd

If you are a business leader who needs to influence a broad and diverse set of stakeholders, consider this: The way you listen is just as important as the way you speak, perhaps even more so. Listening tends to be invisible, yet it has a more powerful presence than people sometimes realise. We may not always notice when it is present, but we almost always notice when it is not.

The entire notion of listening is often misunderstood, even by accomplished individuals with the best of skills, experience, and intentions. Indeed, as a business leader, the more you gain in experience and achievement, the less likely you may be to think of listening as a key factor in your success.

But it is. At the most fundamental level, language is the medium of leadership – and leadership is about talking and listening. Generally speaking, there is no shortage of talk. Yet genuine listening is missing at all levels of organisations, with an absence that's most serious at the senior level.

Radical listening isn't the flip-side of talking – it is an act with a power all its own. If you are a leader who isn't committed to truly listening to the people managing your teams, at best, you may be perceived as knowledgeable and authoritative. At worst (which is more often the case), leaders who don't listen come across as self-important, impatient, long-winded, arrogant and even aggressive. And if you're not listening to them – chances are, they're not listening to you, either. That is why real, profound listening is a 'radical' act in the best, truest sense of the word.

Radical listening: what it is, how it works

rad·i·cal 1: "(1) of, relating to, or proceeding from a root...(2) of or relating to the origin: fundamental...(3) marked by a considerable departure from the usual or traditional..." (From Merriam-Webster Online)

By definition, the word radical means relating to the root or origin of something; being fundamental in nature – a departure from the usual. Radical listening isn't complicated, but it is disciplined: It's about very purposefully focusing on both the intent of the speaker and what's being said. And it is one of those things that is easier said than done.

For instance, observe yourself right now. As you read these words, you are listening to something, but not what's on this page. You're listening to your own thoughts about what's on the page. And if I were speaking to you in person, you would be listening the same way. You might be looking at me, perhaps nodding or disagreeing – but you would not be listening to me. You would be listening to an internal conversation that you were having with yourself, commenting on and filtering various aspects of what was being said.

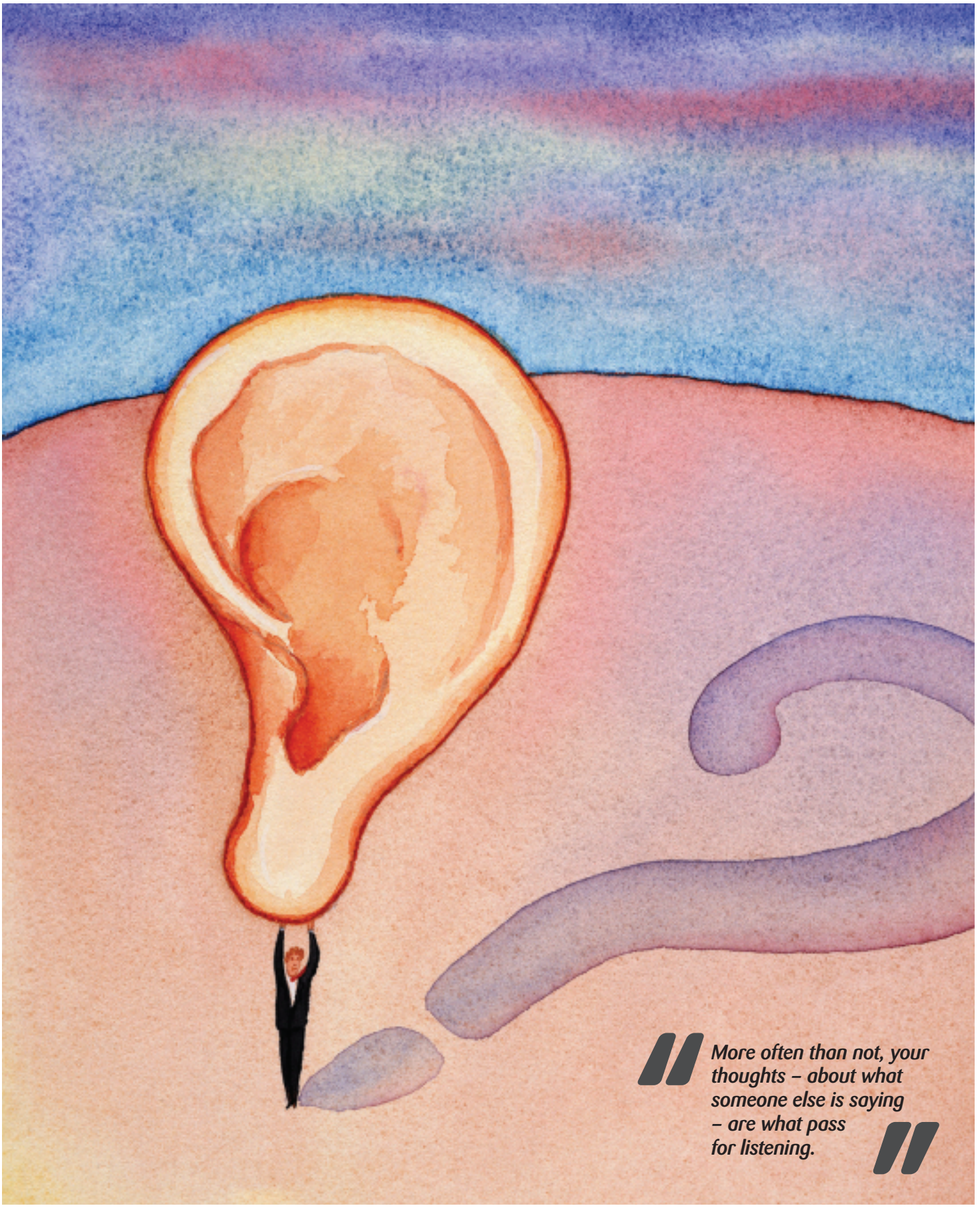
It is widely recognised that people tend to listen like this, through their own internal 'filters'. What's not widely recognised is that what people hear is their own voice – not the voice of another.

More often than not, your thoughts – about what someone else is saying – are what pass for listening. Radical listening, on the other hand, is the act of allowing the other person to express themselves completely, without interruption and without any preconceived notions on your part – with the intent to fully absorb and process what they are saying.

Consider this example from the leadership team of a worldwide pharmaceutical company. As they were about to roll out a controversial initiative, they sought help in dealing with the expected employee backlash. They knew from experience that in the face of unpopular change, employees tended to leave their concerns or objections unspoken at first – only to surface later in the form of dissention.

The guidance they were given was simple: to present the plan to a group of key managers and influencers, and to listen to what they had to say until those managers and influencers had nothing further to say. The leadership team members were advised to look at each objection as if it were a ball being thrown at them. Listening was like catching the ball. Throwing it back, or responding, represented not listening. They held the meeting and stayed true to this listening approach – and emerged with the support of all but one participant. In addition, they gained a better understanding of how they could work with their teams to improve the plan and make it work for everyone. The meeting took a little longer than the typical initiative launch – but it ultimately saved far more time, and created much greater possibilities for the initiative's success.

In this kind of dialogue where true listening is present, leaders are more likely to end up with buy-in, not defeated objections. The difference is huge: When someone has been heard, they become free to >>


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As a result of radical listening:

- When people are listened to, they have room to think and contribute more.
- When they can focus on thinking and how they can contribute to the task at hand, they don't need or expect you to give them the answers.
- If people have resistance, it dissolves.
- With more room to think and consider, people become less fixed about their objections. Organisational issues and issues of trust become more manageable to work through.
- You can gain new insights about risks, opportunities and processes that can help reshape and improve your strategic thinking and execution.

>> engage in new ideas and new ways of thinking, and they become far more capable of coming around to a position of support.

What's at stake

Most leaders would probably describe themselves as good listeners – but that doesn't mean their direct reports would agree. And when listening is absent, there is a disconnect – one that can have dramatic negative effects. Every day there are business stories in the news about the CEO who didn't heed warnings about a possible breakdown in production or labour relations...or who saw margins slipping too late in the game. Leaders who don't genuinely listen risk losing touch with the realities of their organisation, and open themselves and their organisations up to failure.

Sometimes what is at stake is strikingly clear. For example, when a telecommunications CEO led her business through the process of being acquired by a larger company several years ago, she had a humble realisation about her approach and how it was affecting her teams. "I was about to launch into a high-minded talk about how we would carry on as a world-class, high-performance organisation," she would later write, "and I realised the voice of my people was entirely missing. What I needed to do was talk to people and understand their aspirations for the team, and why achieving our new objectives was important to them." As she modified her approach and became committed to genuinely listening to the people in her organisation, the CEO was able to lead the business to their first significant contract as a subsidiary, and a new era of success.

Sometimes the costs of not listening are more subtle, and fall into the category of lost opportunities or unrealised possibilities. Consider the example of a highly-respected CEO in the pharmaceutical industry. His instincts on business decisions have consistently been on target over the years, and his organisation has consistently delivered strong results. And he has managed to do this despite the fact that he often has trouble getting his direct reports on board with his strategies and initiatives. They complain that he doesn't listen; that he routinely interrupts them and is rude and dismissive – the chief reason that turnover has been high on his senior team. His failure to listen hasn't necessarily lent itself to poor decision-making (at least not yet), but it has led to difficulty attracting and retaining top talent, and to breakdowns in alignment at the highest ranks of the organisation. This CEO's successes may continue, but for how long and at what long-term cost to the company? And what untold possibilities for even greater success will be lost along the way?

As we succeed and build track records of being 'right' about things, we can become less likely to tune in to voices other than our own. On the other hand, when we genuinely, radically listen, unprecedented things become possible.

When a newly appointed CEO in the transportation industry began his job a decade ago, he decided that he would spend the first 30 days not just talking with people around the company (not an uncommon practice), but truly listening with the utmost attention. As he visited various locations, he listened to people's concerns, their daily frustrations and larger disappointments, as well as their aspirations for themselves and the company. He told them he wouldn't try to answer their questions because he didn't know enough yet, but he wanted to know what was on their minds.

So when this CEO reached the next phase of his effort – going around to different parts of the company and talking to people about the direction he wanted to take the company – people listened. Even though he was setting seemingly impossible performance targets that more than doubled the company's past performance, he didn't meet with a tide of resistance. The people listening could tell that he understood their issues and challenges, and they knew he had heard enough to appreciate the realities of their day-to-day work. They could move beyond disbelief and skepticism and take in what he was saying, in large part because they had been truly, radically listened to.

Three tips for radical listening

"It takes two to speak the truth. One to speak and another to hear." Henry David Thoreau

All leaders want to get their 'message across', their 'workforce to commit', their 'colleagues engaged' and the 'strategy to be cascaded' through the organisation. It is important, of course, to be skillful in the way in which you articulate and express critical ideas such as vision, strategy, and key tactics. But having people connect to your words – and embrace your ideas – requires much more than speaking.

Practicing radical listening is something that can change the direction of a career, a team, or an entire organisation. So what does it take?

1. Be aware of your own inner dialogue, and listen beyond it.

While filters are widely recognised as a necessary part of how we process information, if we don't recognise them, they can have unseen impact.

For instance, confirmation is a common filter among highly trained, intelligent people. In your own internal conversation it might sound like: 'I know that. I knew that. I know that's not...'). Assessment is another filter – because we have been taught to make judgements (e.g., 'I agree. I don't agree. That's not true. That's not right. They don't know what they're talking about...'). Other frequently used filters include utility ('How can I use it? What good is it to me?') and the time-saver closure (e.g., 'Get to the point. Give me the bottom line. Cut to the chase'). In addition, there's resignation ('Been there, done that.... It will never work'). And looking good is universal. Everyone wants to look good for someone. ('This could make me look good/bad....I should have an

intelligent response....')

When the telecommunications CEO was struggling to lead her company through the acquisition process, she realised she had been listening through a filter of resignation. Her fixed view of the acquiring company was keeping her from truly listening. Yet once she adjusted her approach, progress became possible again for her organisation.

2. Listen for what you can't hear, and for what people won't normally tell you.

One way to do this is to increase your ratio of questions to assertions. Radical listening means getting back to the core of what someone is saying, and resisting any inclination to immediately categorise, recap, or offer solutions about what is being said. Getting back to the core of someone's words can require asking questions.

In addition, you can simply try paying closer attention. Failure to truly listen isn't generally rooted in a lack of intention or capability; there's just too much going on in the background for fundamental listening to take place. If you notice you are using a particular filter, try listening 'for' something – something beyond the superficial level or even the words themselves.

Why is that important? In hearing what's behind the words, what's in the 'unsaid', you find that people are willing to give up their objections and consider something new.

When the transportation industry CEO talked with the people throughout his company during his first 30 days, he listened intently. He asked a lot of questions. And he very purposefully incorporated what he heard into the strategic objectives that would later be so well-received by his teams, despite the fact that they presented unprecedented challenges.

3. Listen for possibility and commitment.

Consider that when someone is speaking, commitment to the exchange is either present or missing. If you are listening for it, and it's present, you can draw on it. In fact, it can even lead to a change – and improvement – in your thinking or approach.

There is usually a reason that people are taking the trouble to speak – especially to someone in authority. If someone is complaining, you could ask yourself, 'What's the commitment behind this complaint?' And what if you spoke to that? There's a productive alternative to empty opinion-giving and rambling discourse – which frankly, give listening a bad name. When you engage in radical listening, you can ask questions that evoke a person's commitment more clearly – or reveal the absence of it.

The pharmaceutical industry CEO has come a long way on instinct and business savvy, but when he fails to listen, he loses the opportunity to reshape or refine his thinking, and to engender strong commitment from his teams. Imagine what new levels of success would be possible for him – and his company – if his strategies reflected true listening, and his teams were galvanised around him. The result could be radically impressive.

This could be your most radical act

When you genuinely, radically listen, you not only hear what people are saying, you are focused in a way that you can appreciate their meaning and understand what's behind the words – as well as the words themselves. You are intent on catching the ball, not throwing it back.

When a leader can do this – when he or she can listen without immediately trying to say the next thing or connect the next dot – he or she is much more likely to hear the valuable core of what their employee, peer, board member, or customer is trying to say. When we can quiet the talk – on the outside and inside – true listening is much more likely to take place.

In a marketplace where the margin between mediocre and extraordinary results can be all about who's onboard in your organisation, the practice of genuine, radical listening in your organisation could make all of the difference. This is how you can end up with a workforce that is genuinely committed, and colleagues who are genuinely engaged.

With radical listening as a value and practice in your organisation, people's actions become correlated to your organisation's vision and objective, not the conversations in their heads. You can develop the capacity to find out what's really on people's minds, and bridge any gaps in information or understanding. When people have a true understanding of what the organisation is endeavouring to do, and how they fit in, they can own their actions and results in a very powerful way.

Getting back to the essence of leadership – talking and listening – as a radical listener, you balance your leadership skills set in a meaningful, powerful way. CEO

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You can tell you are radically listening if:

- People are finishing their own sentences... versus you finishing their sentences.
- People can pause or take a breath... versus you jumping in the moment they pause or take a breath.
- People can fully articulate their thoughts and clarify their ideas – versus saying part of what they have to say and being interrupted, or having you paraphrase.
- You can actually focus on the precise words they are saying... not half-listen while you prepare what you will say when they are finished speaking.
- People become willing to offer up hard truths and make efforts to genuinely communicate (as opposed to telling you what you want to hear, which can be fatal for leadership).

About the author
Lainie Heneghan is Managing Director – Europe, for JMW Worldwide (UK) Ltd. She oversees JMW's work with leaders and organisations throughout Europe, Africa and the Middle East. The focus of her work is helping individual leaders, executive teams, and companies achieve performance breakthroughs, and develop their capacity to sustain new levels of success. Lainie Heneghan can be reached at lainieh@jmw.com. For more on JMW, visit www.jmw.com

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