Who's listening?

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I just read an interesting short piece in the Harvard Business Review Blog Network about listening. The article, *Three Ways Leaders Can Listen with More Empathy*, (<http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/01/three-ways-leaders-can-listen-with-more-empathy/>), was penned by Christine Riordan, Provost and Professor of Management at the University of Kentucky and former professor at the University of Georgia in the Terry College of Business.

The article captured my attention because of the title and its reference to the almost forgotten and nearly quaint skill of listening. While listening was once considered an important competence and was emphasized in general education along with written and verbal communication skills, the art and skill of listening have declined in practice and seemingly in importance in recent years. The ascendancy of “active” learning, texting, tweeting, and asynchronous online education, along with a host of other social media and educational practices, has rendered listening as a lower-order skill. Self-expression and rapid communication tend to crowd out the careful listener. The Millennial Generation (sometimes called the “me generation”) and Generation Z increasingly rely on asynchronous communication and visual representation of ideas and emotions. Communication is dominated by platforms that elevate the visual over the auditory (well, maybe not for music) and encourage abbreviated written communication. U know? Lest I sound like a curmudgeon, however, you should know that I, too, am an occasional user of social media platforms and can see value in those forms of expressions.

Over the past two to three decades, lectures have been the focus of many reform efforts within the academy. It was not necessarily that lectures were bad, but listening is so difficult and learning passively was challenging. However, as I was reminded by Riordan's blog, listening should be active. Whether we believe classroom lectures can or should be continued, higher education institutions have clearly come down on the side of the lecture for important occasions, as we continue to invite distinguished scholars to give lectures to honor important constituents and to share cutting edge research. While the “one minute lecture” has claimed quite a few adherents, we would not ask an important lecturer to give a 15-minute speech, just so we could keep the audience interested. Maybe those who attend lectures are active listeners; and, importantly, they may have a disciplinary context for listening.

Generally, however, the inability to listen is demonstrated in small and large meetings across our campuses and in our classrooms. Also, on a daily basis, television and radio talk show hosts and participants, ranging from the politically oriented to entertainment-focused,

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demonstrate their inability or unwillingness to listen as participants interrupt, shout, and follow with one non-sequitur after another. One could say that these “discussions” are meant as entertainment, not dialogue, but who knows? Who listens at all any more? Who demonstrates the importance of listening and its foundational role in communication, in understanding?

With all of these thoughts in mind, I dug into Riordan’s article on leadership effectiveness and listening. She noted that numerous research articles show that listening is critical to effective leadership and that empathic listening, the ability to see another person’s point of view, is the most effective form of listening. She stated that many leaders lack this important skill; rather, they talk too much, multi-task while “listening”, or are thinking about what they will say next. They do not develop the skill of listening and truly understanding the other person’s point of view. Three sets of behaviors are described as foundational to empathic listening. First is the ability to recognize verbal and non-verbal cues, including facial expressions, body language, tone, and so on. The second set of behaviors is referred to as processing, i.e., the skill of keeping track of the conversation and understanding the message. The leader shows that she can summarize what has been said, point to important areas of agreement or disagreement, and can capture themes and ideas. Finally, the empathic leader will respond, either within the discussion or as a follow-up, which lets others know that listening has taken place. Responses may take many forms depending on the dialogue.

This article made me want to be a better listener. It caused me to think more so about my past behaviors in meetings, whether I was the meeting leader or not. I wondered if I had effectively role-modeled listening and responding to my graduate students. I know that I have not held substantive conversations with them or other participants in leadership development programs about this topic. In general, this research on empathic listening should interest our more accomplished students, as almost all aspire to leadership positions. Is it time for us to reintroduce the topic and practice of listening to our students? Will any slow down long enough to understand and practice the skill of listening? Do they recognize the difference between hearing and listening? If universities and colleges are truly focused on addressing the grand challenges of the world, as many now espouse, it will take more than grand schemes and interdisciplinary partnerships; it will first require that we listen. This may be painful after decades of doing otherwise.