

# What is your listening creating?

Lisa Markwick explores the art of mindful leadership as a tool for making big things happen.

**Do** most leaders bother to really listen? Be honest! When did you last feel genuinely listened to? A while ago? I bet if you can think of a time, however, it was one where you had a breakthrough in your own thinking. What passes for listening is often a small gap before we get a download of past experiences or the offer of expertise in answer to tricky questions. My suggestion is that real listening has the power to shift our biggest issues forward, that it can create space for innovation, and for genuine engagement. What could our ears create which our “talking-heads” alone will never do?

True listening is an uncommon practice. True listening involves slowing down, inquiring to understand the issue at stake, to sense what’s important. It comes from our willingness to be curious and to “not-know”. We have been so trained to provide answers and advice that we’ve forgotten the intimate art of listening.

Perhaps leaders are our worst listeners, and I can understand why. It feels good to have answers, we get a sense of personal agency and professional competence. It’s what is expected of us. We get paid to problem solve, but, what if, due to our surface level listening, we are “solving” the wrong problem? What if we are providing solutions to issues that are more symptoms than they are cause? At best all this kind of listening does is “patch things up” and maintain the status quo. It does not address an issue in such a way that has the potential to move things ahead.

Deep listening invites us to get past our own voices of judgment, of cynicism and of fear. I call this kind of listening ‘mindful listening’. It invites us to hang-out-a-while in the mess, to attend to it, to tolerate not knowing. This mindful listening is what creates the space for new ‘talking’; decent conversation even.

It is not the talking that creates the listener but vice versa. I have a friend

who somehow allows me to find brilliance and words that I did not know were there; ideas and knowledge I have but I do not know I have. I am convinced that it is his listening that creates the space for my new ‘talking’. The mindful listener is indeed the leader.

## Mindfulness

A leader’s job is to create time and spaces for reflection with others, and to ask probing questions. To access states of discernment, wisdom and innovative action we need to be free of frenzy, not tugged at by internal chatter or fear. Creating and making use of this ‘space’ takes determined action and perseverance.

One way in to this place of leadership wisdom is the practice and ‘view’ of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a systematic discipline which awakens the senses, deepens our connections, and allows for focused (yet open) curiosity. It is a particular way of paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment and non-judgmentally. Mindful leaders, I believe, are the ones who are most likely to activate breakthrough new initiatives for our organizations and communities. They know how to listen, to be curious, playful, and to take innovative action.

Mindfulness taps into and cultivates not just a skill set, but it cultivates mental and emotional capacity for compassionate ethical leadership.

I am not alone in considering mindfulness as leadership’s next wave. The very latest cross disciplinary research (as well as ancient wisdom) supports this contention. So when will mindfulness be boldly included in mainstream leadership development initiatives?

With powerful listening our conversations have the power to be rehydrated, juicy even! Without hydration our conversations lose the capacity to generate innovative new ways forward. It is critical that we learn to enrich our every day communication.

This hydrated, mindful conversation is the tipping point for change. It taps into collective intelligence rather than capturing merely the existing knowledge of a few clever people.

The hydration for conversation is mindful listening, powerful questions, attitudes of curiosity, and an embracing of “mess”. Questions have the power to identify critical issues and pathways, to peel back layers, to get to what matters through the mess. Curiosity and “not-knowing attitudes” enables conversation to be more than a download of already known expertise. Leaders, listening mindfully in conversation, open up unexpected possibility.

“Mess” is where the juice is. It is where the conflict lies, where unexplored barriers can come out of hiding. So grab hold of your curiosity and persevere in the mess long enough to truly listen for the juice. Solutions are then the easy bit.



Lisa Markwick is a consultant clinical and leadership psychologist. She teams up with mindfulness meditation teacher Stephen Archer, to guide leaders in cultivating mindful leadership presence to effectively and sustainably address our most complex issues.

The next opportunity to engage in this work is at Mana retreat centre (Coromandel) October 11-15, 2010 (see [www.mindfuladventures.co.nz](http://www.mindfuladventures.co.nz)). Lisa is also spearheading the Northland Community Innovators Fellowship ([www.CommunityInnovators.org.nz](http://www.CommunityInnovators.org.nz)).