

New Listening: Key to Organizational Transformation

Barbara J. Fittipaldi

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Bold new futures for organizations and for people who work in organizations are possible. Transformed organizations or "learning organizations" can be caused.

Then why is it so difficult to shift the current culture of an organization? What blocks innovation; what stops organizations from generating change?

There is a "super-glue" that holds an organization's culture together and has "business as usual" continue. My colleagues and I have spent the last 15 years investigating the nature of this "super-glue." There is something operating in the background of the organization that determines its fundamental culture and has it appear nearly impossible to embrace innovation and create new futures.

Numerous reports of organizational transformation clearly demonstrate that transformation is possible. But for the most part, it is argued that this transformation is a by-product of the current circumstances rather than a result of leadership's intentions.

In their book "Breakthroughs," Nayak and Ketteringham studied twelve cases of organizational breakthroughs and concluded that breakthroughs or paradigm shifts cannot be planned but are a product of the circumstances. What an organization can do, they say, is stand ready for the right circumstances and then be ready to take advantage of them.

Arden Sims, CEO of Globe Metallurgical Inc. said, following that organization's 8-year transformation, that "Globe found what worked - and what worked are the innovations that make today's cutting edge companies." He later said, "The innovations were serendipitous."

There is another possibility - that what appears to be serendipity or the product of circumstances is, in fact, accessible, but only after an organization exposes a fundamental aspect of its culture that in the ordinary course of events remains unexamined.

To bring about an organizational transformation, one must first identify and get underneath the current culture and, more importantly, uncover the "super-glue" that holds the current culture in place. Operating within this existing, unexamined culture at best results in improvement that is a continuation of the past. While improvement is worthwhile, even continuous improvement is not enough to meet the challenges that many organizations face in today's business climate.

How does an organization continue with what is working, see clearly what is not working, and break out of its unexamined culture or paradigm of operation to take new ground and reach new heights of success?

I suggest that we start by looking at where an organization is "located." By this, I do not mean that we look at the location of its offices, plants or warehouses, its papers of incorporation or the minutes of its meetings, or, for that matter its products or services. These are only artifacts that represent and symbolize the organization. I suggest that an organization is "located" in its culture and that this culture lives in conversation and, more specifically, in an aspect of conversation called "listening." It is this "listening" that forms the "super-glue" of the culture, and that is already present before anyone in the organization speaks.

Automatic Listening

Let me give you an example of what I mean by the term *listening*.

Two competitive U.S. corporations were working on a joint project. The first step was to build a team composed of engineers from both companies. They were all very committed. The project was going to be profitable for both companies (\$650 million over 2 years), and yet nothing was moving forward. It seemed that nothing could get done, and there was always a point of disagreement or argument.

When both teams were asked to think about the assumptions that they brought to their new working partnership, they started to discover the fundamental and underlying judgments, evaluations and assessments that they had about one another, such as:

They are our competitors - we can't trust them.

Our engineers are better than their engineers.

*We do things our way - the **right** way; they do things wrong.*

Whatever we do, they're going to steal.

They're going to steal some of the contracts.

We don't really want to work with them (after all we've been in bidding wars with them on other projects).

They are really the enemy.

No amount of leadership could build teamwork on top of these unspoken assessments, on top of what they already *knew*. All of this is what they had already "listened" to in their own minds.

This is what I am referring to by the term *listening* or, more accurately, *automatic listening*. Once we have listened to something, it is too late! Realizing this can be a major breakthrough for people.

The more I work in the area of organizational transformation, creating learning organizations, the more convinced I am that what is already "heard" or known, before anyone speaks or acts - what we've already listened to - will shape and determine the future far more powerfully than any action taken.

I called a client, a senior executive, and asked her for an example of "automatic listening" in her organization. She told me the following story:

The first week in my new position, a senior vice president in my organization called to welcome me to the division. She told me: 'Pat, the first six months will be hell. There is a ritual hazing that they put women through here. You just might as well know it going in. It will go away after six months; after six months it worked out for me, but you should just know it.'

I said to myself, 'Oh no, now I'm going to have an automatic listening for the ritual hazing.' Then I asked a few people about it, and one of the guys told me that it's not just women, it happens to everyone who's new. Then I realized that the woman who told me about it had an "automatic listening" that it only happened to women.

Some examples of the ritual hazing are that they will ignore you deliberately - or they'll ignore things that you say and then one of them will say it later and take credit for it. Or they'll joke about the division you worked for. From the moment she told me about ritual hazing, I watched and listened for it everywhere - my antennae were up, wondering when it would happen next.

I wonder what work would have been like if she had never told me that, if I wasn't always looking and listening for that culture of ritual hazing.

Assumptions

These unexamined assumptions form the current culture that limits innovation and new possibilities and blocks the transformation of organizations. These assumptions are there when we join the organization, and over time we become enculturated. This leaves us able to effect only change that is consistent with the culture rather than consistent with what is needed in a rapidly changing business landscape.

These unspoken and unexamined assumptions or paradigms (that we and those we work with have listened to before we start any endeavor) color and determine the future of our work far more than anything we have to say, anything we know, or anything we might do.

What is *critically* important to realize is that what we "*hear*" or listen to, determines what we *say*, which in turn determines our *actions*, which in turn determine the *results* or the *future*.

At one major corporation, an organizational myth is that "they always kill the messenger." In other words, the bearer of bad news winds up in trouble. In the last fiscal year, all departments waited until the end of the year to announce that they were running a little bit over budget. This resulted in a budget crisis, since it was too late to do anything about it. People's behavior was driven by the underlying "myth" or assumption.

Have you ever noticed that when someone starts to say something, you already have an impression of what it will be? Even when you enter a conversation intending to be open and generous and neutral, within seconds you are reacting the way you normally do. This is the mode of listening we call "automatic."

The automatic mode of listening has several dimensions, and until these dimensions are recognized, it will remain difficult to identify and get underneath the current culture so that organizations are free to invent new futures. Until then the current culture and paradigms will continue to determine the future of the organization.

Radar Metaphor

Think of these dimensions of automatic listening as if they were antennae tuned to listen in a particular way, like radar. Radar is an antenna that is very selective; it locates solid objects. What it doesn't pick up is wind, because the beam doesn't bounce off wind. Radar only picks up what it is designed to pick up.

Like radar, automatic listening only picks up what it is designed to pick up. It acts as a filter that rejects what does not "fit" the current paradigm, or shapes the input so that it does fit, thereby masking or precluding any possibility outside the matrix the listening provides. Thus, if we want to learn something new or create something new, and someone says something that doesn't fit with what we already know, it does not register on our radar.

What we are left with is an extension of what we already know, which in turn provides for improvement of what is already there rather than real innovation or breakthrough.

Let us examine these dimensions of automatic listening, this "super-glue."

1. Assessments

For the most part, we are listening for: Do we agree or disagree? Do we like it or not? Is it right or wrong? Can we use it or not? and Does it fit with and confirm what we already know?

We have an opinion, an assessment, about everything. Someone says something and everyone who is listening "votes," instantly and automatically. We are automatically assessing ourselves and others *all the time*. This is not conscious and intentional; it happens without any work or effort on our part. "Voting" is going on in the background of every conversation.

For example, a senior manager told me he was beginning to recognize the listening, his antenna for assessments, and in those moments was free to listen for "what is actually being said" or "what is here that I don't see?"

Something very powerful is possible out of that kind of listening.

He then related the following incident:

A senior vice president in my corporation issued a memo to senior management in which he said that the way we were succeeding in certain areas was accidental. As I read it my immediate reaction was that it was accusative and derogatory. Then I found myself asking, "What does he really mean by this?"

And when I looked again, I saw that he was saying that we really didn't have a clear design for what we were doing. While for the most part what we were doing was successful, some of our success was accidental. His point was to draw our attention to what was missing in our design. And I said to myself "Very worthwhile statement," and I put the memo away.

I came into work the next morning and you wouldn't have believed how upset everyone was. We must have lost at least a day of productivity from the senior people in the corporation because they were so upset about this memo - because they took it like an accusation that what they were doing was "accidental."

I realized they were already listening "through" their assessment that he was out to criticize them. Therefore they had to defend themselves and what they were doing.

I spoke to the manager who sent out the memo who apologized for leaving people with that misunderstanding. He confirmed that he was not putting anyone down or accusing anyone.

Even though everyone knew that this person often said things that were a little awkward, they got upset anyway. My biggest frustration was that I was trying to communicate the opportunity in his statement to people who were upset, and I could not get through to them.

If everyone had seen that they were doing "automatic listening," they would have realized that their assessments were not necessarily the *truth* or the *facts*. This would have left them free to listen to what was missing or really being said, rather than listening to their assessments. This questioning would have led them to new power and new possibilities. Productivity would not have skidded to a halt, people would have taken action more quickly, and this would have encouraged others to act.

As important as it is to see how our own automatic listening colors how we hear and interpret what is happening, it is also important to see that other people are also listening in this mode.

What starts to become obvious is that we are not hearing each other at all. What we are listening to is what *we* are saying *about* what they have said. We even assess that we assess too much or have an opinion that we are too opinionated. Try to stop it - and it's already too late!

And right now we are looking into the phenomenon that we are "too late" for. Our standards and assessments about everything and everyone (how it "should" be) are in the background and *silent*, yet shaping what is possible and shaping our actions.

2. Personal

It is important to note that most people think that their assessments are *personal* assessments - they are making them individually, without the influence of others.

Part of our automatic listening is that we think, feel, know our opinions, our views, are ours personally - determined or controlled by us. If that is true, if your feelings are yours personally, you can simply stop having those feelings and have different ones. You could feel good all the time, for instance, if they are personal and determined by you.

Do you believe that your opinions are really yours? Tell me where you were born, into what kind of family, what your parents did for a living, how many other children, what profession you are in and a couple of other things, and I can pretty well tell you your opinions. This is because opinions are not a matter of thinking. We do very little real thinking - a lot of *having* thoughts, but that's not thinking.

We take everything personally - if the weather is bad, we take that personally. We think we are *doing* this thing that I am calling assessing, which leaves us with an illusion of control, as if we could stop assessing or stop voting. For example, "I make my own assessments, it is something I personally do - a personal phenomenon inside me - and I control it."

In fact, those assessments are already happening automatically. They walk into work and meetings with us. We already know that we or other people are not good enough, or committed enough. We already know how people are, how the project is, how the company is.

And it appears that we are personally "doing" that assessing and should stop. If you are personally doing that, then stop. Go ahead, try it. We are no more "doing" that than we are "doing" growing new cells or "doing" determining our heart beat.

3. Already Knowing

A third dimension of our automatic listening, or a third fundamental filter that we listen through, is listening for what we already know, to have whatever is happening fit with what we already know. Better yet, to confirm what we already know. Have you ever found yourself relating to new information with thoughts such as "Oh, that's like Senge's 'Learning Organization' or that's like Prahalad's 'Strategic Intent'" - instantly referencing what you already know.

We automatically listen for and are an antenna for fit and confirmation. We agree with what fits, and we write off what does not fit. We have, at best, a two-minute window for what doesn't fit. We have almost no tolerance for not knowing, not understanding, not having the answer. We want to know: What is it? What is the definition? What is it good for? How do I do it? What can I use it for? and What will I get out of it?

Once we have these answers and explanations, we understand. We don't have to wonder or inquire into what is possible. This is now a closed case. No more possibility - we've got our answers, never noticing that it is what we already know that is suffocating us. *We will never fit new possibilities into what we already know!*

A top salesperson at a large department store was in a training program for new sales techniques. As she was listening to the trainer, she found herself saying, "This will never work. I know how to sell. You can't approach a customer like that. If you did it would take all day to wait on one customer." Despite overwhelming evidence that the technique worked, she heard herself dismissing the possibility over and over again. The good news is that each time she caught this automatic listening, she was able to hear possibility in what was being said and to listen with real power. She reported later that she was amazed at the sales increases that she had almost missed.

We pretend to listen openly, but our "listening" is not a clean slate. We approach situations like this:

I already know what sort of person I am, and I know what sort of person you are and what sort of people are on my team, and I know about this project, this field, this economy, this world - *now*, what is it you have to say?

We are conditioned to confirm what we know, and if something is said that does not fit, we will either disprove it or have it fit in some way. We don't decide to do this - it happens automatically, and our actions are determined by that. Here is what's interesting. We live like that is all inside us. But what if it is not inside us but we are inside "it" - this automatic listening we have been examining? And that automatic listening or "super-glue" determines your future; it is there before you even get there.

4. Looking Good

A fourth aspect that we listen for is: Is this safe? Am I going to look good? Is this going to promote my point of view, which I want to maintain?

We don't "think" that, and we don't consciously plan to listen that way. We don't even have to remember to listen that way - you and I are already organized to listen that way.

If you view yourself as a team player, as a leader, as open and candid, and then anything happens that is a threat to that view, that threat must be “explained” away. We see ourselves in a particular way, and we do not want that disrupted. We are organized for maintaining the continuity of our view.

I recently asked a colleague, currently a vice president at a Fortune 500 company, when he was going to be on the executive committee of his corporation. His immediate response was, “Not me! I could never do that.” He was upset and annoyed - this did not fit with his view of himself.

Avoiding any disruption in our view of ourselves is not something that we consciously do; it is automatic. Yet this mode of listening determines our behavior. People would rather say nothing than risk saying the wrong thing. We are deeply concerned about being “right” and looking good. And we are committed to eliminating, avoiding or explaining away anything that threatens our point of view. Given that no new possibilities will get through the filter, our career, our work life, and the future of our organization are seen against a background of resignation about the future. We don't have the freedom to create a new future. We are left with only a limited range of options, which are consistent with the past and, at best, an improvement over the past. That is not a future based in possibility; it is a future based in the past. In other words, no real possibility; only limited options.

5. Description

Our background listening says, “Work is a certain way, you are a certain way, the team, the project, the company, the field are a certain way.” And we use language to talk about or describe it and label it “the way that it *already* is.”

This is a fundamental paradigm: language is merely for labeling things that are already there; and therefore, there is no power in talking, except to label things accurately or inaccurately. Work occurs as subject/object; there's you and other stuff that is already a certain way, which language represents. So we can *talk about* or describe work, the future, or a project, and we can talk about it correctly or incorrectly. We can put the right labels or the wrong labels on them, but there's no real possibility, no new thinking. Our work is set against a background of being deeply resigned regarding any real possibility.

All of this is designed to minimize risk. Our background listening is organized to already know and understand everything. It is designed to maintain conformity (including conforming by being a non-conformist). It is all already there, and it appears to us as fact, as truth.

This is an automatic mode of listening - we are not “thinking” this, it is “thinking” us - and it's not a personal problem. There is no real authentic stepping out into the unknown.

6. Resignation

We go into work as if today were just another version of yesterday and what will happen today were already known. We do not recognize this as resignation - we see it as being realistic, or worldly, or appropriately cynical.

We don't open our mouths and speak as if our speaking and listening would alter the project or the future. We open our mouths and talk, and others talk, but we are not expecting much to happen.

When I interview senior executives in a major company, I always know that I will find some men and women completely resigned about new possibilities for the future. These are good people, working hard, who really want to empower the vision and strategic intent of the corporation, but they are all working against a background of resignation. They have little belief that their speaking and listening can open up a whole new possibility for their company's future, the work being done, and the people doing the work. Rather, while they may be working hard, wanting great things to happen, they already know that “business as usual” will continue, and they adapt to and settle for that, resigned that there will be no new possibilities or breakthroughs.

It is important to begin to see that if you are resigned to the fact that work *is* a certain way and you *are* a certain way and other people *are* a certain way and your organization and division *are* a certain way, then all that's left is to adapt to “the way that it is around here.” All that is left is to settle for what is already so and listen for tips and techniques to improve it. It is even more important to see that we are resigned. That is what is given.

We are not an empty vessel, listening for what is actually happening, for what someone is saying, or for what is possible. We don't listen to conversation as it is; we hear selectively. Something is going on already, and we pretend that it isn't there. It is this mode of listening that acts as "super-glue" and keeps an organization's culture locked in place.

When we are unaware of something, it controls us. Once we are aware, we have a say in the matter. The real power in this whole insight is to go beyond simply being aware of this and to "actively" catch yourself listening this way.

Here's the good news: if we have accomplished as much success and as many results as we have unaware of this "super-glue," there is no telling what might be possible out of the freedom given by recognizing it, including stepping beyond it.

Are you willing to take a chance on a real possibility? Are you willing to challenge the "given?" Are you willing to take on the possibility that you don't know how next week is going to go? Are you willing to sacrifice who you *know* you are for who you *could* be? If you are, then we could have a conversation that would determine how next week, next month, and next year are going to go. That is our invitation to the organizations and executives that we work with. Rather than finding the best adaptation to "business as usual," we ask, "What's possible? What's outside the predictable? What new future can we invent?"

The first step in generating a new future or creating a transformed organization is gaining the freedom to think in new ways. If we can see the design of the "super-glue," and get it out into the light of day, the result will be an enormous freedom to hear what is actually being said, to listen in a new way, to recognize and identify the current culture or paradigm that is limiting us. This will give us the power to see, generate and fulfill new possibilities, which will result in new futures.