



# Leadership Development

*Anywhere, Anytime*

Practical Tips for School Leaders – #45

September 30, 2020

## Developing the Essential Leadership Skill of Listening

Nelson Mandela when asked, told people he learned to be a good listener by watching his father lead tribal meetings. The tribal elders sat in a circle facing each other as much as possible. As the conversation evolved his father would inquire, listen intently and never offer his comments until everyone else had spoken. His father included the remarks of the elders in his responses. Nelson Mandela said that a good listener pays attention to the voices of others, contemplating and reflecting on the words, the tone, the context and the non-verbal cues.

Today I read a publication from Interaction Associates “Conscious Communication in a Virtual World”, by Michael J. Reidy, which prompted me, once again, to think about listening as a powerful leadership skill. Effective communication is at the center of all of our work. Communication needs a dispatcher and a receiver. Reidy discusses the two components of communication: pushing out and pulling in. “Pushing out” is the action of speaking our ideas, perceptions, and point of view. “Pushing out” is required to begin the conversation around a particular topic. However, to foster rich, deep conversations, the act of “pulling in” must also be utilized.

“Pulling in” is an invitation for another person to share their thoughts. It requires that the leader inviting the conversation recognize that they do not have all the answers or ideas. “Pulling in” involves being curious about other perspectives, recognizing your own biases, and being open to ideas that may be different from your own.” “Pulling in” requires humility, respect, vulnerability, courage, and a belief that together the process of a shared talk will yield rich results.

*“Yes, ‘n how many ears must one man have before he can hear people cry?”*

*Bob Dylan*

How does a person develop the skill of “pulling in?” Reidy says that improvisational actors are advised to “Be altered by what is said.” To be altered requires a person to be affected by the words of another. Our thoughts can be altered by considering the body language of the speaker and the tone of the message.

As you listen, be altered by the person who is speaking. What are the experiences they come from? What are their values? What is their cultural background? Do they have needs which are different from yours?

As you listen, be aware of the context. What is happening for them? What is driving the thinking and comments? Reidy shares that in a recent virtual session he conducted one participant remarked: "If I begin to listen with the intention of being altered by what I hear, then I may change my thinking, and I may change my perspective and I will change myself!" This made me think of the lesson from Nelson Mandel -- waiting to speak allows the listener to be altered by the comments of another person.

Everyone wants to be heard (push) as we believe what we have to say is important. If we wish to engage in conversations, we need to invite (pull) sharing. As we listen, we must try to allow ourselves to be altered by the words, the tone, the context, and the feelings expressed by the speaker. Do you reflect on how you use the skills of "pushing out" and "pulling in" when you are having a conversation with another person or a team? Are you altered by what others say and share?

**Reflective practice:**

During an upcoming meeting think about what is being said. Are the perspectives different than your own? How can the differences alter your thinking? Reflect on comments made that resonate with you.

Think about how the speaker said what they said, what was their tone of voice? Could you hear their emotions? Did the words they used convey wisdom?

What experiences, education and culture does the speaker bring to the conversation? Are those different from yours? How might the values and ideas they convey alter your thinking?

What is the context that the speaker is speaking from? What is their role in the school? Does their role impact your thinking? Does a person with positional power invite you into conversations? Do they intend to be altered by what you have to say?

To Be Continued...