

Listening Leadership: Hillary Clinton's Listening Tour

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Abstract

Public leadership has been conceptualized as the leader who has the ability to shape a vision and to articulate that vision. Before the leader can shape a vision, however, he/she needs to listen to constituents to know how that vision should be best framed and best implemented. This study offers an analysis of the concept of listening leadership utilizing Hillary Clinton's 1999 Listening Tour, which kicked off her successful run for U. S. Senate from New York as a case study.

An important dimension of communication in the 21st century is the role of leadership. Human interaction is dependent on leader/follower behaviors. Someone in a relationship, whether one-to-one or in a group, has to "take charge" at some point, or the relationship, either intimate or task, will not be very satisfying or even very productive. But "taking charge" is complicated. To be a leader, the person must have the communication abilities in whatever personal and/or work goals define the relationship.

Leadership

To communicate effectively, the leader first must work with the individual or individuals to identify just what those goals ought to be. A familiar distinction of what defines a leader today is that the leader is the one who articulates a vision and gets others to follow him/her with that vision. Bennis and Thomas (2003) propose a model of leadership competencies: adaptive capacity; engaging others by creating shared meaning; voice; and integrity. These leadership attributes, they suggest, "sustain and define leaders, not just in our digital age, but in every era, every public arena, every business and boardroom" (p. 15).

The traditional understanding of leadership stems from research on leadership style. White and Lippitt (1968) characterized three types of leaders. Authoritarian leaders dominate and direct according to their own personal goals and objectives regardless of how consistent these goals and objectives may be with their followers. Democratic leaders facilitate according to the goals of the others, permitting them to come to their own conclusions and make their own decisions. The laissez-faire leaders are nondirective, empowering the others in the group to chart their own course. Research on leadership style (Fiedler, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1988) demonstrates how important it is for the person in the leadership role to adapt his or her style to the personal and task needs of the relationship/organization.

Experts who study leadership have identified some interesting ways that leaders lead. The typical leadership style is considered to be transactional leadership. Transactional leadership is identified as the exchange approach to communication. The leader offers a reward for compliance with what he/she needs or wants to have done. Or, inversely, the leader metes out punishment if it is not carried out. Rosener (1990) suggests that this is the typical male model of leadership in organizations. Supervisors, managers, and executives tie promotions, raises, bonuses as exchanges for good performance. They operate from a command and control approach to getting the job done. While such familiar transactions may result in getting the job done, in organizations, this type of leadership is not very visionary. It offers little inspiration for doing anything that might be more creative.

Leadership guru James MacGregor Burns argues that we need to get away from the transactional model of leadership to a focus on transformational leadership. The transformational leader is a transforming agent who can change the outlook and the behavior of his/her followers. Rather than forcing his/her own will on the individual follower(s), the commonly-shared interests and goals of the group are used to bring about a transformation of the personal or work relationship. In this way, everyone has a sense of commitment to accomplishing the goals. And in the process, the entire organization is transformed to a very different, energized culture. Transformational leaders, it has been said, "must develop a strong sense of vision to clarify and communicate organizational objectives and create a working environment that fosters motivation, commitment, and continuous improvement" (Tracey & Hinken, 1994, p. 19). Relational skills are central to transformational leadership, concludes Kelley (2000), "and of all the skills you need to build relationships, effective listening is the most important" (p. 1).

The impact of transformational leadership on the followers can be considerable, because it is based on starting where the organization and the people in it presently are. Burns (1978), in his seminal work on transformational leadership, explained: "Leadership, unlike naked power-wielding, is thus inseparable from followers' needs and goals. The essence of the leader-follower relation is the interaction of persons with different levels of motivations and of power potential in pursuit of a common or at least joint purpose" (p. 19).

Recognizing the need to involve everyone, Manz and Sims have proposed a "superleadership" style. In this model, people are led to lead themselves. The "leader" creates a climate so that each person's self-leadership energy is released. Manz and Sims use a poem by Lao-tzu, a sixth-century Chinese philosopher, to describe the super leader (who "talks little"):

A leader is best
When people barely know he exists,
Not so good when people obey and acclaim him.
Worse when they despise him.
But of a good leader, who talks little,
When his work is done, his aim fulfilled,
They will say:
We did it ourselves. (p. 227)

Leaders as Listeners

Clearly, the leader "who talks little" should be a good listener. The research on leadership offers some insight into the concept of the leader as communicator. Witherspoon (1997) argues that "leadership is to a great extent a communication process" (p. x). The leader who transacts what needs to be done with followers, who transforms the organization, and who empowers followers to be their own self-leaders must be a masterful communicator. Johnson and Bechler (1998) determined that individuals who emerge as leaders in small leaderless groups exhibit more effective listening skills than do the other participants in such groups.

"Outstanding leaders use communication as a tool to reach their ends," suggests Hackman and Johnson (2000, p. 26). And to do that, they "know what they want to accomplish, what communication skills are needed to reach their goals, and how to put those behaviors into action" (p. 26). Stech (1983) one of the early scholars on leadership communication, has suggested that the person-centered leader is characterized by person-centered communication. This communicating leader:

- communicates frequently and enjoys it
- prefers oral communication in face-to-face settings
- exhibits attending and responding behaviors when listening to others
- makes requests, not demands, and communicates agreement and praise
- includes feelings and morale as important content in his or her communication
- concentrates on communication via informal networks

It is significant to observe that Stech's profile of the communicating leader rests on good listening. The listening leader communicates with his/her followers in order to understand their needs, motivations, and issues. These understandings serve as the foundation for solid decision-making to further the relationship/organization to its goals. "Good leaders are good listeners," note Engleberg and Wynn (1997, p. 127). Leaders who are good listeners, they suggest, "do not fake attention, pretend to comprehend, or ignore members. Instead, they work as hard as they can to better understand what members are saying and how those comments affect the group and its goals" (p. 127).

Harvard leadership expert Ronald Heifetz expands the model of the listening leader: "Good listening is fueled by curiosity and empathy. . . It's hard to be a great listener if you're not interested in other people" (Taylor, n.d., p. 2). He also suggests that "Great listeners know how to listen musically as well as analytically. . . to get underneath and behind the surface to ask, 'What's the real argument that we're having?'" (Taylor, p. 3).

Stressing that the effective leader is the leader who listens to subordinates, Manske (1987) offers advice on how to be an effective listening leader:

- Interpret the surface conversation of the speaker in order to understand his true thoughts and feelings
- Be an active listener by being attentive, taking notes, and asking questions.
- Wait until you understand before you reply; hear the person out.
- Avoid any discourteous nonverbal behaviors.
- Control your desire to talk.
- Maintain a supportive attitude.
- Listen to everyone.

Lee Iacocca (1984), the high profile CEO who is credited with saving the Chrysler Corporation from bankruptcy, describes how important it is to be a listening leader:

You have to be able to listen well if you're going to motivate the people who work for you. Right there, that's the difference between a mediocre company and a great company. The most fulfilling thing for me as a manager is to watch someone the system has labeled as just average or mediocre really come into his own, all because someone has listened to his problems and helped him solve them (p. 58).

Heifetz (1994) centers listening in his model of leadership, focusing on the importance of a leader to listen to him/herself. "To interpret events, a person who leads needs to understand his own ways of processing and distorting what he hears," Heifetz argues, in order to "learn about their own filters and biases and factor them into their interpretations" (pp. 271-272).

Beyond one's self listening, Kelley (2000) stresses that transformational leadership "requires the highest listening skills, and this means knowing how to listen empathically" (p. 4). Empathy, she suggests, "is a bridge in relationships. It means to understand, to respect another" (p. 4). To listen with empathy, "you must suspend

your preoccupation with yourself—your needs, your image, your opinions, your expertise—and enter the experience, mind and emotions of another person. You must be silent and not interrupt, argue or give advice” (p. 5). Supporting this point, Orick (2001), in a study of leaders’ listening practices, discovered that empathy was second only to memory (followed by respect, attention, and open mindedness) on a listening practices scale. Empathy also is integral to Bennis and Thomas’ (2003) leadership model of engaging others by creating shared meaning. But it should be recognized that empathic listening is not an easy model. We are conditioned, indeed expected, to be leaders who freely express opinions and give advice. Sadly, to be silent too frequently is perceived to be passive, complacent.

White (1997) stresses that effective leaders in the 21st century must be listening leaders, leaders who will identify productive areas of confusion and uncertainty, who will demonstrate that they do not have all the answers but are willing to learn, and who will be able to “act differently, think differently, and seek inspiration from different sources” (p. 2) from leaders of the past. And it has been noted that listening leaders create listening environments by modeling good listening behaviors: “Followers tend to listen more effectively to the listening leader” (Swanson, 1997, p. 15). “With the ability to listen effectively,” concludes Jackson, “leaders will be successful in managing conflicts, developing their employees, and tapping into the key issues that drive others” (Jackson, 2003, p. 1).

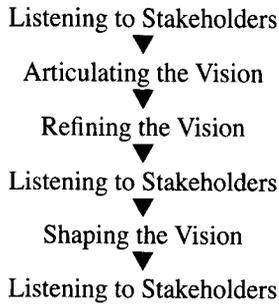
Reviewing the research on listening leaders, Young concludes that “leaders who listen effectively satisfy employees’ needs, improve individual employee performance, and increase overall organizational effectiveness” (Young, 1997, p. 4). Joseph Neubauer, ARAMARK’s CEO, appreciates the value of listening to employees and customers: “By listening to them and earning their commitment,” he recognizes, “we identified opportunities, reshaped our culture to embrace innovation and pursue growth, and got back on track” (“ARAMARK’S Neubauer Listens. . .”, 2003, p. 1).

It is clear, then, that there is a need to include listening in the model of leadership. To be a truly transformational leader, as Burns (1978) argues, an individual would have to listen to and know who are the stakeholders (i.e. employees, customers, clients, stockholders, voters, citizens) and what do they perceive they need in order to transform the organizational entity’s culture.

A listening stage is the first step in accomplishing a transformation, and it requires commitment to listening on the part of the leader and the followers alike. If the followers are unwilling to accept the leader as a listener, the traditional leadership model—shaping and articulating a vision—will prevail. And that vision will not be as informed and resonant with the stakeholders’ needs and perceptions as it could be if the leader had been able to ground that vision through listening to those needs and perceptions.

Additionally, listening is a critical third stage in the leadership model. After the leader has established the vision, it is essential to check that agenda with key stakeholders before finalizing the communication of the plan to all of the stakeholders. This second-stage listening process can be a useful step to then, as the fifth stage, fine tune, revise, retool, or even change the vision to make it more resonant with the stakeholders.

Further, listening also must be established as the sixth stage in the transformational leadership model. Once the vision has been refined and articulated, it is important for the leader again to listen to the stakeholders to determine how effectively the message has been received and how resonant it will be to accomplish the transformation. The leader has to be in touch with the various constituencies in order to know if and how his or her vision will be brought to fruition.



*Figure 1.
Listening in Leadership*

Indeed, as the leadership listening model in Figure 1 illustrates, listening can be seen to be integral to (and throughout) the entire process of transformational leadership.

The challenge to the transformational leader is to find ways to listen effectively. Centuries of advice are available to speakers and writers on how to craft and articulate visionary messages. Less is understood, however, about how to communicate that one is listening, particularly in a public arena. As a result, leaders who do care about listening, and who do make the effort to project a listening posture, find the process to be challenging. Ironically, because American culture forces listening into a passive role, people can grow impatient with someone who listens but then seems to be lacking a clear agenda. To position oneself as a listener, the leader almost needs a good sense of timing, to know at what point the constituents need their leader to move from listening to speaking. And the leader who listens has to be a risk taker, someone who is willing to embrace listening, despite public perceptions of listening as passive, as essential to transformation.

Listening in Public Leadership

While we can recognize the crucial role that listening must play in leadership, it is not surprising that most efforts at public leadership focus on communicating the message. “Effective public leadership shapes public opinion,” suggest Hackman and Johnson (2000), “through public relations activities, public speaking, and persuasive campaigns” (p. 266). Indeed, the headline of an op-ed piece about President George W. Bush’s leadership in response to the terrorist acts of September 11, 2001, reflects this focus: “Defining a Leader First by His Words” (Clymer, 2001, p. WK12).

And public leadership is profoundly affected by media, though mediated channels may not be a leader’s strongest communication format. Noting that good leadership demands clarity of vision, Bicak (2001) argues that “Visionary leadership is corrupted by television. . . as it encourages vagueness by reducing position statements to sound bites” (p. 19).

But public leadership in the 21st century may require more than well-articulated messages and sound bites. Maazoleni (2000) notes that “personalized leadership” (p. 326) is important. The successful leader must communicate the “character (or charisma) of his or her personality to the entire process” (p. 326) in order to mobilize crowds and persuade voters. And communicating that personalization requires public listening as well as public speaking.

Hillary Clinton's Listening Tour

Hillary Clinton understood the value of public listening when she undertook her state-wide listening tour in her run for U.S. Senate in New York. On July 7, 1999, she began her campaign by stating: "I think I have some real work to do to get out and listen and learn from the people of New York and demonstrate that what I'm for is maybe as important, if not more important, than where I'm from" ("Hillary Begins Listening Tour," 1999). "I'm eagerly looking forward to listening to New Yorkers and hearing directly what's on their minds about the issues affecting their families," she said.

Adopting a listening stance was not without precedent in the Clinton political playbook. After winning the presidency in November 1992, President-Elect Bill Clinton staged an economic forum in Little Rock so he could listen to experts on the state of the American economy. "I just think it would be a very good thing for me and for the country to have two or three days where we really just focus on the economy to give some people a chance to have their say to me directly," he said as he prepared to listen (Weisskopf, 1992, p. A3). As president, Mr. Clinton continued to impress people that he was a willing and eager listener, leading James Brosnan of *The Memphis Commercial-Appeal* to observe that "Bill Clinton was a great listener" (NewsHour, 1999).

The idea for the listening tour is generally attributed to Clinton's pollster, Mark Penn. He and Mandy Grunwald, the campaign's media consultant, suggested that Clinton visit New York in a getting-to-know-you format to best learn what New Yorkers were concerned about and to overcome that perception that she was a carpetbagger intruding where she didn't belong. Clinton instantly took to the idea of the listening tour (Penn, 2004), though she (2003) "knew that any campaign would be a baptism by fire" (p. 506). So "I focused on getting to know my prospective constituents," she noted. "I planned a 'listening tour' that would take me around New York in July and August and allow me to hear from citizens and local leaders about their concerns and aspirations for their families and communities" (p. 506). "She could feel by the kinds of questions people were asking that it was the right thing to do," one of the campaign staffers observed (Harpaz, 2001, p. 39.)

The listening tour took Clinton and her campaign entourage to all 62 New York counties in an effort to meet with New Yorkers and to hear their issues. She visited many upstate New York communities including Oneonta, Cooperstown, Utica, Syracuse, and Albany in an effort to meet with New Yorkers throughout the state. Clinton listened to health care professionals talk about the economic problems. "It was an incredible exchange of ideas. She's so attentive to people, and she's so knowledgeable about the issues," nurse Rosemary Bassett told the *Washington Post* (hillary2000). At Westchester Community College, parents, principals and students talked about the future of education, and former welfare recipients talked about their training to move into the work force. In Elmira, Clinton engaged in conversations on the economic climate and on gun control. "There are no stump speeches, just listening," Howard Wolfson, Clinton's campaign spokesman, told the press (Scherer, 1999, p. 2) Indeed, "the listening is the message," he said (Grunwald, 1999, p. A3).

Widely publicized, the listening tour was met with mixed reactions. Celestine Sibley (1999, p. 31) of the *Atlanta Constitution* thought a listening tour was "a wonderfully practical device for finding out what the electorate is thinking. Listening. Imagine. I'm not sure politicians know how it's done anymore" (p. 1M). "...there is something undeniably powerful about the sessions themselves. . .and. . .she was born to run these events" observed Michael Grunwald (1999, p. A3) of *The Washington Post*. Indeed, the listening tour worked best in upstate New York in communities such as Oneonta,

Cooperstown, Utica, Syracuse, and Albany, communities where people had felt “underlistened to” (Penn, 2004).*

Not all of the press was as supportive of Clinton’s listening role. “Hillary Rodham Clinton’s recent listening tour through New York may have helped enhance her image among likely voters, but apparently did little to close the gap with New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani in a potential Senate race, according to a Zogby New York poll,” observed the *National Journal* (“Listening Tour Has Little Impact,” 1999). The Nassau and Suffolk edition of *Newsday* noted that as her listening tour entered its fourth month, “several New York Democrats are telling her that it’s time to stop listening and start running” (Douglas and Plevin, 1999, p. A4). Sheryl McCarthy (1999) of *Newsday* grew impatient: “‘Listening’ may be a sensible, thoughtful, civilized strategy, but it’s also boring” (p. A44). Andrew Ferguson was the most unimpressed. Taking on Wolfson’s point that “the listening is the message,” Ferguson objected: “What matters, in other words, isn’t the listening. What matters is that people see you pretend to listen. This is not the good-faith tactic of a candidate in a democracy” (p. 8).

The pundits’ complaints illustrate how difficult it is for a leader to position himself/herself as a listener, especially in the public arena. How do you communicate that you’re listening? *Time Magazine*’s “Notebook” asked for “expert” response. Psychologist Joyce Brothers suggested that she “Try not to keep saying ‘Uh-huh,’ which implies ‘Get on with it!’ Instead, try ‘Mmm-hmm,’ with a nod, which says ‘I’m taking this in.’” John Gray, author of *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus* said “Hillary is a very good listener, but she has the tendency to jump in with an answer too soon.” And linguist Deborah Tannen advised that “Good listeners always remember to keep their eyes on the person they’re talking to without trying to see if there’s someone more interesting standing behind” (August, Derrow, Gray, Levy, Lofaro & Spitz, 1999, p. 19).

By September, 1999, Clinton’s listening tour had become less exploratory and more expressive as a campaign: “No longer confining herself to a ‘listening tour’ around the Empire State. . . on issues local and national, she is beginning to speak out. . .” (Chen, 1999, p. A16). And on February 7, 2000, the listening tour came to an end and the “talking tour” began with her official announcement of her candidacy (Penn 2004) on the campus of SUNY-Purchase in suburban Westchester County. “I may be new to the neighborhood,” she said, “but I’m not new to your concerns” (“It’s official, 2000). The listening tour helped Clinton establish her political agenda, however. Through it, she and her staff were able to accumulate the stories and understand the problems that New Yorkers had. The accumulated information and stories were filed and cataloged to be used in speeches throughout the campaign (Penn, 2004).

The public attention to Clinton’s listening tour led other politicians to follow suit. Governor George Allen of Virginia launched a three-week listening tour of Virginia, reprising an earlier gubernatorial campaign strategy (Fisher, 2000, p. B1). The Minnesota Planning Director conducted a state-wide listening tour to learn more about the challenges facing rural communities (Fedor, 2000, p. 2D). In Arkansas, Bruce Harris approached voters in his “New Leadership Express” tour: “I believe that good representation relies on listening” (Veterans to Watch, 2000, 59R). Even New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg campaigned in a listening tour of the five boroughs (Bumiller, 2001, B1). And coinciding with Clinton’s tour, Queen Elizabeth embarked on a “Meet the People” tour of Britain (Ferguson, 1999, p. 8).

Clearly, listening has become a popular political campaign strategy. And the listening campaigners do win their campaigns. The listening tour was a critical campaign strategy for Clinton. As she began her Senate race, she was a complete outsider. Only by convincing New Yorkers that she could understand their needs and be responsive

to their issues would she have been able to overcome the liability of being perceived as an interloper. Hillary Clinton, pitted against popular New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani until he withdrew for health reasons and then running against lesser-known Republican congressman Rick Lazio, is now a U.S. Senator. "You came out and said that issues and ideals matter," Clinton told the New York supporters to whom she had listened (From first lady to senator, 2000, p. 1).

Indeed, it could be argued that the listening tour was a brilliant political decision. By positioning herself as a listener, Clinton was able to gain the trust of New Yorkers and to demonstrate that she was sincere in wanting to respond to and advocate for their best interests.

Yet not everyone is convinced. Arianna Huffington (1999) huffs: "If you are planning to run for high office, you need to listen up. . . literally. Today's hottest political trend is lending an ear—not in order to lead but to avoid leading" (p. 1). Clearly, too, the model of leader as listener is not yet understood or accepted by all of the political press. And thus Senator Clinton may be transformed from listener to speaker in her public persona. "For Mrs. Clinton, Listening Subsidies and Talk is Louder," screams *The New York Times* (Hernandez, 2003) three years later. Mark Penn (2004), the architect of the listening tour, is convinced, however, that "listening is important for people who are new to politics and new to an area...to spend time listening before talking."

Projecting Listening Leadership

Senator Hillary Clinton is a transformational leader who used her Listening Tour to understand her constituents and their needs and who continues to use listening to reshape and refine her vision and the articulation of that vision. She very much exemplifies the leadership listening model—the leader who listens at stages 1 and 4 of the process (see Figure 1). In the time she has been in the U.S. Senate, she has gained substantial recognition and respect for her public leadership and for her growth as a politician—to the point that she is widely perceived to be the front-runner Democratic presidential candidate in 2008. Senator Clinton leads by listening.

Interestingly, in an earlier attempt at projecting a listening image, George McGovern, as the 1972 Democratic presidential candidate, was portrayed as a listener in a television commercial by producer Charles Guggenheim. After a brief airing, however, the spot was pulled because "We didn't make him look presidential enough," recalls Guggenheim (2001).

Today's Democratic presidential aspirants reflect some sense that projecting themselves as listeners should be part of their campaign strategy book. In the 2003 Iowa caucus, John Edwards told his listeners that ". . . the people of Iowa have been extraordinary. . . I have been listening to them over the course of the last year" (Edwards, 2003). John Kerry used a similar theme in Iowa: "When December turns to January and the caucus draws near, it sometimes seems that ears on politicians have become about as rare as ears on corn. So I spent the day doing more listening than talking" (Kerry, 2004). Indeed, one correspondent suggests that Kerry won the Iowa caucus by listening: "His communication skills peaked in Iowa last month, when his presidential hopes appeared doomed. He saved himself by listening patiently to voters for hours on end and answering every question they asked" (Lawrence, 2004).

Clearly, leaders and aspiring leaders in the 21st century have got to be willing and able listeners. Public leadership, suggests John Lewis Gaddis (2001), requires people who can and will listen: ". . . the only way to maintain an empire these days is to run it democratically, in such a way as to combine leadership with listening" (p. 7). Clinton's colleague, Senator Russell Feingold of Wisconsin, understands this

better than most. "When I first ran for the U.S. Senate in 1992, I made a promise to hold open meetings in each of the state's 72 counties every year to listen to people's concerns and answer their questions," he notes (Feingold, 2004). "I have kept that promise, meeting with more than 37,000 Wisconsinites at these sessions since I was first elected."

In an ironic postscript to listening leadership, Gordana Comic, the deputy speaker of Serbia's parliament, shared lessons of her country's experience with Washington power leaders at the height of the Iraqi invasion: "My only advice is to listen to the people, always. Decision makers always want to have the final word, but you should listen to the desire of the people. . ." (Boustany, 2003, A24)

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