

'RADICAL LISTENING' IS THE WAY TO RADICAL CHANGE



By Karin Woodley

In our Listening to Each Other cell, we've been exploring the importance of listening, particularly to those least heard, as a means of finding out what's not working and discovering what will. Karin Woodley, our thought leader for this cell, has been making the case for a practice of 'radical listening', as she explains here.

I've come to realise that we're in a state of cognitive dissonance because we champion equality and social justice while clinging to a social change model that is largely philanthropic and rooted in paternalism. Our model is driven by social benevolence, funding availability and ballot box short-termism rather than respect for and the protection of people's fundamental human rights. As a result, it neither tackles the root causes of structural inequity nor gets to the crux of historic and systemic neglect.

Systems-disrupting change requires the collective humility and bravery to accept that there is a stark fault line in the knowledge we use to formulate policy and configure services. The pandemic has shone a spotlight on our failures and rising inflation, on-going Brexit uncertainties, global warming and the war in the Ukraine mean that more and more people are experiencing deteriorating living conditions

and inter-related social and economic disparities across multiple aspects of their lives. The need to transform is urgent!

While we fail to reach people who feel their voices are unheard, fail to create the conditions needed for them to meaningfully participate, and continue to filter what we hear from them with supposition, stereotypes and judgments, we cannot drive transformational social change. Only once we accept that our traditional knowledge collection methods are insufficient and partisan will we be able to recalibrate, reach beyond reaction to symptoms, and formulate concrete shared-power strategies that can successfully address the underlying causes of social inequity.

'Learning to listen' and 'listening to understand' are fundamental and radical components of this change path because

they help us understand how the way we work and our structures and systems enhance the status quo. It's imperative that we fill our knowledge gap by generating the experiential knowledge needed to tackle entrenched material and relational inequality.

Radical listening is a powerful tool on this journey because it nurtures relational social change. It is nuanced, empathetic, intentional and non-judgemental and focuses on building equitable and trusting relationships. By emphasising learning and flexibility, and enabling people to tell their real stories, share their real experiences and formulate their own solutions, radical listening captures the spirit and energy of the people our social structures exclude.

As a professional skill, radical listening pushes us to confront the way conceptually and pragmatically we communicate so that we can reposition ownership of the conversation to those we are listening to. It builds our capacity to tackle the listening bias created by embedded power imbalances between us and our philanthropically described 'beneficiaries'. We develop a new kind of attentiveness and self-control and build our capacity to listen for the content, meaning, and feeling in what people have to say.

Embracing this new skill is difficult (i.e. saying less) and extremely disciplined (i.e. being silent), but it can reap enormous rewards by improving the internal performance of our organisations through better trust, openness, decision-making, conflict resolution and problem-solving. It also helps us to be less defensive about the 'way we've always done things'. Cultivating curiosity and creating safe

and inclusive environments for exploring new ideas are tenets of good leadership and team working. Leaders and teams who are skilled at radical listening will be more human-centred in their interactions with each other and the people with whom they work. They will be more successful.

Nurturing relational change driven by people most affected by social inequity poses several significant challenges. We frequently talk about being 'mistrusted' – which in itself is victim blaming – but we have failed to tackle the institutional practices that have systematically prevented the recruitment and advancement of leaders and staff from diverse backgrounds and with diverse lived experiences without them being treated as a token minority. This failure means that we have allowed our organisations to replicate the power imbalances within society and create barriers between us and the people we need to 'hear', ignoring the benefits of shared experience for social perception, credibility, empathy and confidence.

Our ability to create safe and welcoming environments for radical listening activity will always be undermined by this lack of diversity. So, while we tackle this problem, we need to develop partnerships that ensure the people we need to listen to can be heard by others who share aspects of their culture and experiences. Radical listening is an intensely human interaction and as such the ability to ask sensitive questions that elicit and uncover unmet concerns is paramount.

We have a fairly rich arsenal of engagement, consultation and research formats including citizen assemblies, focus groups and participatory research that can provide

the frameworks for building trust, organic conversations and radical listening – provided we remember that we are not the centre of the activity and we are not defensive.

Fully embracing the fact that the people we need to hear are the experts, not us, is another challenge. We're not used to listening without trying to get to what we perceive to be important, without jumping to conclusions, without interrupting and interjecting with our own opinions, and without steering conversations so that they respond to questions raised by our funders. Yet when we hand over control, our categorisation of people's experience according to historic service definitions and silos becomes redundant. Most people share their needs, challenges and goals through a more holistic, complex and interrelated lens – people simply do not define themselves in the way we do.

In the end, we have to unlearn our current ways of working and embrace relational social change driven by experiential knowledge. As Stephen Hawking said, 'The greatest enemy of knowledge is not ignorance, it is the illusion of knowledge'. It's time to shed the illusion of knowledge and the shackles of benevolence and paternalism. It's time to ditch the failing social protection mechanisms and safe and repetitive formulae we've spent such a long time designing and re-designing.

It's time for us to listen, reflect, bear witness and absorb.

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