

Five fundamental communication skills—intention, receptivity, courage, deep inquiry, and deep listening—can transform an organization’s culture and aid in achieving its vision.

# Fostering a Culture of Deep Inquiry and Listening

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Most, if not all, of the issues and challenges facing leaders and organizations point to the need for a culture of integrity, leadership, adaptability, creativity, engagement, respect, and camaraderie. Each of these, in turn, relies upon a foundation of skillful communication.

For many executives, issues such as building a culture of ethics, social responsibility, and sustainability are paramount, along with traditional priorities of financial health, quality, productivity, and furthering of the company’s vision and values. The realization of any and all of these issues relies upon a different level of attention to deliberate, strategic, and skillful communication.

The degree to which leaders and transformation-agents embody, communicate, foster, and require

such skillfulness will define the degree of success the organization will have in meeting its greatest challenges and aligning action with the vision and values of the organization. By leading into a culture of deep inquiry and skillful listening, leaders can strengthen the foundation from which all else stems.

To do so requires shifting the culture, which, as most of us know, is much easier said than done. The entrenched culture is strong and stubborn, and—as if a form of artificial intelligence made up of pre-existing systems, structures, beliefs, expectations, and old stories (history)—seems to fight back against attempts to change it, and more often than not, stifles or prevents attempts at change.

Conscious transformation to a culture of deep inquiry and listening requires us to step outside our assumptions and dearly held processes of change, which can become yet one more agent or symptom of dysfunction. As Albert Einstein said, we can't resolve our problems by using the same ways of thinking and acting that got us where we are.

How do we begin, then? By taking an honest and penetrating look at how dysfunction shows up within us, our group, and our organizational culture and then seeking nontraditional sources of insight about system evolution.

### **Evidence of Dysfunction That Needs Transformation**

Evidence of dysfunction in need of conscious transformation is found in organizations large and small, for-profit and nonprofit. In order to envision and consciously move toward the ideal, we must first have a clear idea of how dysfunction is manifested in and affects the organization.

Indicative scenarios of dysfunction include the following:

- Members of a communication/human resources/organization development department know that communication and culture are vital to the organization's success because lapses have caused the company millions of dollars, yet department members feel excluded from the leadership table and are reduced to technicians rather than strategic advisor status.
- Two departments compete instead of collaborate, resulting in millions of dollars in losses due to inefficiency, redundancy, mistakes, and missed deadlines.
- Project team members rush from one meeting to the next, feeling perpetually disorganized and late. They routinely find themselves bogged down in miscommunication and mistakes that stem from being too distracted or too entrenched in routine to listen.
- A project management group is always at the center of controversy because of missed deadlines, blown budgets, errors, and a poor reputation with client-departments, yet feels powerless to shift the situation because it adheres to a particularly faulty project management process favored by an executive.

- A company emphasizes its "customer care" and "world-class service," yet customer satisfaction rates are low, and complaints and defection rates are high.
- A culture of fear and cut-throat competitiveness fosters major ethical violations, resulting in substantial financial losses, lawsuits, and damaged reputation.
- In a culture of disempowerment, leaders and managers hoard information, resulting in low morale, high turnover, sluggish momentum, and no creativity.
- A large-scale corporate initiative spins out of control because employees don't feel free to question leaders and thus don't raise issues crucial to the initiative's success.

These are just a few scenarios that are common in many organizations; indeed, these are real-world examples. At the center of these issues is dysfunction in the organizational culture; at the root of the dysfunction is habitual and systemic dysfunctional communication.

### **Returning to the Fundamentals**

Healthy companies and robust, positive transformation don't stem from clever project charters, attractive values statements gracing the company lobby, or the number of days spent in meetings and retreats. They start from within the organization's leaders and influencers, are catalyzed in each employee, and radiate outward to influence how individuals, groups, and the company as a whole operate and interact.

By revisiting five fundamentals, an organization can consciously reorient and create the culture of deep inquiry and listening that will allow alignment between the values of integrity (ethics), creativity, respect, effectiveness, and efficiency.

### **Intention**

Any conscious transformation starts with a clear, shared vision and intention to refine mastery and take steps toward true excellence and alignment with espoused organizational values. Although it's optimal if the leadership team intends and embodies the change to a culture of deep inquiry and listening, the change can also be adopted and modeled by any individual, small group, or department. In fact, individuals and small groups are more able to adopt

such initiatives rather than trying to make it a top-down, organization-wide initiative. Thus, working in microscale “pods of mastery” that can, in turn, affect a critical mass is optimal.

### Receptivity

Once the individual or group intends to move toward greater facility for a culture of deep inquiry and listening, they need to explore what needs to shift in individual or group habits (particularly unskillful habits) to allow the cultivation of more skillful inquiry and listening. This may include small group, experiential training; refreshers; or open space (reflection, meditation, etc.) that creates the calm mind necessary for deeper communication skillfulness.

### Courage

Engaging in a deeper level of inquiry can seem daunting in an organizational culture-default of noninquiry and frenzied activity. Champions of the culture of deep inquiry and listening must have both the courage of their convictions and the confidence to integrate deeper inquiry into the daily activities of the organization. Courage, confidence, and stamina are founded upon the shared intention, supporting practices, and ideally by the absolute commitment of the organization’s leaders. But most of all, following through on deep inquiry and listening requires clarity about the individual’s vision of why and how greater skillfulness and mastery matter to him or her, the group, the organization, and those affected by it.

### Deep Inquiry

Deep inquiry isn’t just about asking questions; it’s about asking the right questions, at the right time, in a skillful manner, until one has the complete picture and understanding needed to take the right next step, which leads to more optimal outcomes. Deep inquiry goes well beyond the basic “nodding, and parroting back” technique in Listening 101 classes because it bridges a higher concept (vision, values, goal) and right action or result. It leaves “what’s known” or “how it’s always been done,” and opens up an exploration into best possibilities and potentials. Deep inquiry can also uncover the secrets and “sacred cows” that lurk in the shadows, which can be threatening at first. As such, the practice requires presence, attention, and patience, rather than a frenzied, preoccupation attachment to pre-existing answers.

### Deep Listening

Just as deep inquiry goes beyond the superficial and habitual, deep listening is receptive both to what is truly said, as well as to what’s not expressed and what needs to be shared or understood. Deep listening requires a calm, receptive state of mind, rather than a frantic, hurried, preoccupied one. From the former, clarity and precise understanding are possible; from the latter, habitual routine, assumptions, and miscommunications often result. Deep listening mastery may require not just a greater skillfulness of the techniques, but also supportive practices to help cultivate receptivity and intuition.

How might these five fundamentals “show up” within the everyday life of the organization, fostering a higher level of effectiveness and values-action alignment? A facility for skillful inquiry and listening can be useful for more deeply exploring both high-level and action-oriented meanings for values, ethics, creativity, excellence, and collaboration. Such exploration unpacks unaligned assumptions about what such themes mean, and consciously defines and connects jargon to meaningful action.

The sidebar, “Application Case Study,” provides a series of questions that could be used by the members of the previously described communications/human resources/organizational development department to become more valued to their organization.

### Living Into New Culture

There is much talk of “social capital,” “cultural capital,” “viral marketing,” and other such trendy buzz-phrases, and it’s easy for these to become yet another initiative whose primary points and intentions get overpowered by the pre-existing system and culture—the way things have been done.

Although the temptation is to make this yet another corporate initiative and kick the existing machinery and process into gear to “charter, launch, and execute” it, contemporary leaders would do well to learn from several unorthodox (noncorporate) examples of how more organic, dynamic, evolutionary, and “under the radar” movements have ultimately shifted large, entrenched, and intractable systems. Look to *The Power of the Powerless*, by Vaclav Havel (the fall of communism); A.T. Ariyaratne’s Sarvodaya movement; nontraditional but powerful concepts of change found in indigenous and mystical thought; and some of the accounts shared by Malcolm Gladwell

## Application Case Study

Members of a communications/human resources/organizational development department want to elevate the status of their function to one that is more valued by leadership. The group has been operating and reacting from a long-established set of assumptions and needs to become more adept at exploring these assumptions and exploring them through deep inquiry.

For example, if the group wants to be “in the inner-circle” or “at the table” but perceive that they’re excluded, team members may want to ask the following questions:

- Is this true?
- Why do we think this?
- How are we perceived and what is the function by the senior leadership team?
- How do we know this?

The same would be the case for the assumption that the top leaders “don’t buy into” communication and HR/OD beyond “a necessary evil,” and/or any assumptions that senior leaders need to be more adept at communication and HR/OD issues, need to do things differently, etc.

The group in dialogue asks the questions below:

- Is this true?
- Why do we think this?
- Why is this tactic/approach/scenario necessary in the first place?
- Is that true?
- What is the purpose here?
- How else could we meet that purpose?

Other questions that the group members should ask themselves about their feeling that “we’re invisible, top leaders don’t listen to us” include the following:

- In what ways am I/are we addicted to being in this assumption and dynamic?

- In what ways are we perpetuating or contributing to this perception?
- How do we want senior/top leaders to perceive us?
- How do the respected advisors of top leaders communicate/perform/interact that makes them valued?
- How are we skillful or underskilled in these areas?

Ultimately, it’s not a question of “How can we get the leader to do x,y,z?” or “Why doesn’t the leader value us?” These are passive, victim-oriented positions. Would a leader value a top advisor who resided in a passive, victim orientation? Probably not, so the questions listed below are more effective:

- What is the leader’s top concern(s)?
- What priorities and challenges make up his/her typical day or week, etc.?
- What is his or her style? What potential communication and HR/OD strengths are inherent?
- How can the offerings from our group/department make the leader’s (and his or her top leadership team) more effective, easier, etc.?
- How can communication and HR/OD – skillfully strategize and adeptly implement – directly support success or effectiveness in the areas of top priority?
- How do I/we know this? What are our data?
- How can we synthesize this into an issue brief for the leader?
- What are our next steps and how are we going to be accountable for them?

The above gives an example of how checking assumptions and becoming more adept at deeper inquiry can result in a higher quality of information and perception, which would lead to results that are more likely to yield substantive results and gain the appreciation of top leaders.

in *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference*.

Ultimately, this sort of qualitative transformation, or evolution, begins within a small group of strongly committed individuals – both independently and in “pods of mastery” – and ripples out organically, strongly intended but loosely managed, influencing subtle shifts that create a powerful wave.



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