

Listen - Please Listen

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Over recent years I have been fortunate to be able to travel widely for work, and everywhere I go I find time to visit places of worship and sit quietly or attend services – in mosques, churches, synagogues and temples. I listen, either to the silence, to my thoughts, or to the ritual. Recently I have begun to attend Catholic mass in a church near my home in Berlin, Germany, although I am not a Catholic. I have been struck by the authenticity of the priest's demeanour, words, and voice.

A few Sundays ago, there was a reading from the Gospel of St. Mark, Chapter 10, 42-45, where Jesus tells the disciples that their leadership will not be the exercise of lordship or authority, but service and ministry. In his sermon the priest reflected on leadership and guidance not as a dialectic of dominance and submission, but as listening.

The theme of servant leadership has been around in management theory for a while, and readers of this blog, acquainted with mediation or as mediators themselves, will be very aware of how resonant the listening ear can and must be.

This sermon struck a deep chord in me, as it seemed to summarise much of what I have learned through my work as a mediator. Most of my mediation is inside organisations, and it often involves leadership (or management) and staff not seeing eye to eye – or not listening ear to ear. The mediations, which can be long and complex processes aiming to establish better communication, are often triggered by some kind of staff disquiet that seems to take management by surprise.

There is one recurrent theme in these mediations, which I have heard repeatedly in many forms in many different organisations. Staff wish that their leaders would listen more, that they would involve them more, that they would ask before making decisions. Mediation has become necessary because this is not happening. Conflicts arise and harden because it is not happening. And escalation is often a plea: please listen to me.

In most cases, it works the other way around too – leaders wish to be listened to, to be seen as just as human as their staff wish they would be seen by their bosses. They feel unappreciated, they feel that staff do not want to try to understand why they make certain decisions, or to give them the benefit of the doubt, and they are unable to offer much appreciation in return. They want to be accepted in their roles as leaders. Staff able to listen to the other side of the story will make such a difference to relations within organisations.

Once matters have escalated, and trust has been eroded, listening is not easy. Perhaps it is never easy, as most of us are not taught how to do it and what it entails and means. But it could be so simple – if listening were learned in families and taught in schools. If I were in primary or secondary education, and had some kind of political influence, I would be campaigning for this. Instead I work in tertiary education, and I have introduced mediation training at my university – not because I think students there will all become mediators, but because I believe they can be better listeners and better guides through difficult conversations in their future positions of management and leadership.

Why is there so little listening? I guess that it is because listening is equated with accepting that the other side is right and with giving in to what they want, which is certainly not the case. Listening is not acquiescing. Is it down to an education system that prioritises advocating your own story over all other forms of dialogue? And a social and political system and climate that ostentatiously display self-advocacy as a virtue? Democracy as we know it pays plenty of lip service to listening, but its public image right now says that it seems to be rewarding those who are shouting the loudest.

Where I come from and grew up, in the education system in the UK and in Germany, which I will here boldly equate with something called "the West," schools teach students to voice their own points of view, to critically engage with the world, and to defend their arguments. We had a great debating society in my English grammar school, and I learned a lot there about how to structure my own arguments and how to debunk the views of others. This is a discipline that I would not wish to abandon, but learning it too often means internalising it, and that the even more important counterpart – listening, understanding, empathy – is neglected. No: is not just neglected, it never makes it onto the agenda.

For me, it was through mediation training and practice, over twenty years after I had graduated from school and university, that I came to better understand that humanity is about so much more than fighting your corner and getting what you want or think is right. That workplaces, families, and organisations all need listeners. That leaders who cannot listen will get what they want and fail in their relationships with staff – or worse, that they will contribute to making people's lives less happy.

And the reason I have begun to attend places of worship? That is another story, so here I will only say that I am sure it too is connected to my experience as a mediator, and to listening.