Listening to each other: the heart of mediation and dialogue
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I believe we can change the world if we start listening to one another again.
Margaret J Wheatley (Wheatley, 2002:3)

Abstract
Listening is indisputably a significant aspect of mediation, yet its role has been largely unexamined in the literature in the field. Neither has it been widely examined in other fields. Instead the literature on listening has focused on the development of skills, models and taxonomies. Rather than focusing on altering behaviours or classifying the mode of listening, it is suggested that deepening the mediator's capacity for listening may support people in conflict to express themselves more openly, relate to each other more deeply and enter into dialogue. For mediators, finding the way to deeper listening may involve developing an awareness of their own concerns, prejudices and assumptions and setting them aside in order to create a deeply receptive space open to the dynamics of conflictual dialogue.

Mediators, facilitators, and experts in conflict resolution may possess a capacity for listening which is more finely tuned than that of others. Our professional role often requires us to foster a deeply receptive capacity, and our work is made easier if we can create an atmosphere of listening in which the people with whom we are working are encouraged to attend, not just to us, but to each other (Boulle, 2005:217). In fact, if openness and recognition of each others’ stories can begin through listening for people in conflict, then the hope of collaboration and a shared perspective is nurtured (Bush & Folger, 2005:111).

Listening as a deeply receptive capacity
In mediation training, the importance of listening is usually addressed and skills which may enhance listening are frequently taught (Sourdin, 2005:43-48). In such training, listening is often presented as a spectrum of behaviours, skills or techniques which a mediator may acquire. Rather than the acquisition of a toolkit of behavioural skills, it is suggested that the activity of being a listener requires an attitude of receptivity. Although this attitude may be approached through learning skills, its achievement involves more than ticking off a checklist. Significantly the capacity for deep reflection is a first step. From deep reflection, we begin to recognise our own assumptions, prejudices, beliefs, values and directive impulses. Once these are acknowledged, then according to dialogic theory, the receptive space may become available for the story of the speaker (Bohm, 1996:39).

Developing a deeply receptive capacity may also require the kind of emptiness or inner silence which allows unexpected perspectives to reveal themselves. If the parties’ perspectives can begin to be seen as aspects of the whole rather than as exclusive and divisive unities in themselves, then
mediation and dialogue may achieve their goals of producing more effective relationships, shared agreements and new understanding.

Despite the apparent significance of listening as a capacity which facilitates mediation and dialogue, there is little research which examines the role of listening in mediation. In this article we will explore the literature in hearing and listening, acknowledge some of the research in listening from other fields and propose the consideration of deeply receptive listening as a fundamental capacity for a mediator or facilitator.

**Ideology and philosophy**

*Who speaks sows, who listens reaps.*

Argentine proverb

According to the Argentine proverb, listening is lauded as a capacity which allows us to ‘reap’ rather than to sow. A contemporary Italian philosopher (Corradi Fiumara, 1990) explores expression and returns to the Greek word for ‘speech’ or ‘word’, logos, which in its active form, legein, includes the sense of gathering and storing. The word dialogue comes from the Greek dia, meaning ‘through’ or ‘between’, and logos, interpreted as ‘word’ or ‘meaning’, although the most ancient meaning, as suggested also by Corradi Fiumara, is ‘to gather together’. Whilst dialogue is often mistakenly associated with ‘two-ness’, the etymology suggests “a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us” (Bohm, 1996:6).

Corradi Fiumara suggests that although our culture has focused on speech and expression, which are also grounded in the etymology of logos, we have granted less attention to the vital aspect of gathering and receiving (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:3). She laments the dimming of the receptive capacity:

> If we were apprentices of listening rather than masters of discourse we might perhaps promote a different sort of coexistence among humans: not so much in the form of a utopian ideal but rather as an incipient philosophical solidarity capable of envisaging the common destiny of the species. (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:57)

Such receptivity to the otherness of our interlocutor connected with exploration of what is common to humanity is the basis of a relational perspective. Researchers and theorists who view the human being as fundamentally relational include philosophers, psychologists, social constructionists, and feminists (Buber, 1970; Levinas, 1998; Sampson, 1993). The founders of transformative mediation describe the ‘relational’ worldview as the ideology underpinning their theory and approach (Bush & Folger, 2005).
A relational stance may seem intrinsic to some forms of mediation, especially those described by Boulle as facilitative or transformative (although he uses the latter term in a broader fashion than the authors of the model described as transformative mediation) (Boulle, 2005). These approaches usually involve the possibility of sharing and opening to different stories of the same events, rather than simply solving the problem of the conflict or providing a suitable solution. Mediators may not aspire to a relational world view to inform their practice yet may want to achieve more effective communication for instrumental reasons. We do not assume that all mediators hold a relational orientation (Della Noce, 1999). Certainly, the clients with whom we practice our craft are unlikely to consider the world in such terms. Our prevailing Western societal view is usually not relational. It is more often individualistic, focussing on rights, entitlements and fairness, and although those of us who hold a relational concern are convinced of the value of this type of approach, we must be mindful that we frequently work within an individualistic or rights-based framework. This may necessitate the relationally inclined mediator to listen intently to the true desires of the parties in the knowledge that the mediator’s inclination may shape the unfolding of the mediation process (Della Noce, 1999:272).

To listen well
Listening, as a deeply receptive faculty, is not simply focused outward. It requires the willingness to listen within, and to acknowledge and step aside from our own prejudices to enable us to enter the thoughts of another. If we are to truly relate to each other, then as Corradi Fiumara states:

The message from the other will not attain its expressive potential except in the context of a relationship through which the listening interlocutor actually becomes a participant in the nascent thought of the person who is talking. But a listener can only ‘enter’ in a way which is at once paradoxical and committing; ‘by taking leave’, by standing aside and making room (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:144)

Taking leave or ‘becoming empty’ is a theme to which we will return.

**Listening: Physiology reflects the phenomenon**

The sense of hearing is always present. In fact unless hearing is impaired “you cannot stop yourself from hearing without external aid” (Isaacs, 1999:85) Aspects of the auditory process present a physiology focused on receiving through all the elements in the human body, supporting LeBaron’s view that to develop true receptivity we need to learn to listen with our whole bodies. (LeBaron, 2003:187-188). Listening at a physiological level involves transmission by air, the subtle mechanics of the auditory system, the fluid
chambers of the cochlea, the fire of nerve action and the mystery of cortical activity (Seikel, King, & Drumright, 2005; Whitaker, 1971; Zemlin, 1988).

The process of sending and receiving the phonetic elements of speech as sound is relatively well understood at least as far as the excitation of the auditory nerves. There is some understanding of the pathway to the cerebral cortex and cortical areas which are involved in the reception of speech sounds. Beyond the auditory nerve, much of the activity of creating meaning from what is heard is understood at a preliminary or hypothetical level and -- like much of our understanding of cognitive processes -- suggests that the higher human capacities are mysterious and profound.

‘Doing’ listening: Listening models, styles and profiles

Much theory and research in listening practice, particularly in the 1980s and 1990s, assessed and categorised listening and explored a listener’s style. Rather than reflecting on the capacity of listening as a complex phenomenon, various typologies and models addressed practical aspects of listening. These profiles are not supported by rigorous research or theoretical findings and offer scant assistance to listeners aspiring to deepen their receptive capacity. They are included in this study to indicate the way in which listening has been approached in recent decades and to support Corradi Fiumara’s claim that research of the expressive aspect of communication far outweighs the emphasis on the receptive capacity (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:89).

Brownell’s HURIER model fragmented listening into a range of skills: hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating and responding (Brownell, 2002). In a text developed to enhance listening skills, Brownell suggests (Brownell, 2002:16) that this model derived from her research in organisations regarding employee dissatisfaction with management listening skills (Brownell, 1990). The published research focused on the rating by subordinates of their managers’ skills related to her exploration of how listening is perceived.

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Wolvin and Coakley’s behavioural model defines listening as ‘the process of receiving, attending to and assigning meaning to aural and visual stimuli’. They further delineate a taxonomy as follows (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996:152-154):

- Discriminative: distinguishing auditory and visual stimuli
- Comprehensive: understand in order to retain, recall and use information

The two types above form the roots and trunk of their ‘listening tree’ and describe a possible cognitive model that may relate to sub-conscious auditory processing. That is, they may be described as the functions of perceiving and conceptualising the auditory information. The three types below form the ‘branches’ of the listening tree and seem to correspond to individual preference or to the kind of listening required by a particular situation.

- Therapeutic: provide support, help and empathy
- Critical: evaluate the merits of the message
- Appreciative: process message with some type of appreciative response.

A similar taxonomy based on listening style or preference is described by Wolf, Marsnik, Tacey & Nichols 1983. The authors distinguish four different listening styles and suggest situations in which it may be useful to adopt each of these styles:

- Discriminative: in lectures, training sessions, meetings when listening to learn (page 47)
- Evaluative: when listening to a persuasive speaker (page 51)
- Appreciative: for informal or ‘leisure’ listening (page 59)
- Empathic: to gain information, feelings, understanding (page 63).

Either of these models may be useful to observe our own preference for a particular style. As with many other inventories -- such as Rahim’s conflict styles: integrating, obliging, compromising, dominating and avoiding (Rahim, 2001:28-30) -- our particular preference will often be situation-specific. We may always listen to a particular politician with a critical style whilst we usually listen appreciatively to the opposition perspective. With certain friends, or in a professional situation, we may naturally assume more ‘therapeutic’ or empathic listening which we find impossible in other situations. Of the styles described above perhaps the empathic style described in Wolff’s typology most closely describes the deeply receptive capacity which is open to all the aspects of the speaker’s story.

Another pragmatic approach to assessing listening is used in a listening profile which reveals whether the listener is ‘people, action, content or time’ oriented. This model, developed by Watson, Barker and Weaver(1995), suggested that individuals have differing goal-preferences and purpose-preferences for listening. They propose that we listen from one preference out
of habit and may not explore using an alternative style even when it could ‘enhance the reception and recall of information’. The focus on the instrumental use of listening as an information-gathering tool, where shifting your preference from time orientation to content orientation may achieve greater success -- for example, in a lecture rather than in a conversation with a friend -- may have some uses. In mediation, we may frequently choose a ‘people’ orientation over a preference for ‘time’.

More helpful to our thesis that self awareness is an essential first step in achieving a deeply receptive capacity is research on barriers to effective listening. Golen investigated a range of ‘barriers’ experienced by business-college students. The 25 barriers included common listening experiences such as lack of interest, daydreaming, distractions, concentrating on a speaker’s mannerisms, and detouring (Golen, 1990). Based on the statistical analysis he reduced these barriers to six dimensions, expressed, in rather pejorative terms, as:

- laziness
- closed minded
- opinionated
- insincere
- bored
- unattentive.

The term ‘barriers’ offers a helpful analogy. In those moments when we become more aware of the speaker’s mannerisms than the content of their speech, or when we feel ourselves disengaged in the conversation because we have formed an opinion about the solution, then, with a great enough degree of consciousness to realise we are disengaged, we can choose to ‘suspend’ (Isaacs, 1999:134) our opinions or our distractedness in order to re-engage in listening.

These typologies may have some value in initial training in mediation to develop an awareness of preferences or styles. For example, it may be useful to acknowledge that we are generally a discriminative listener (using Wolvin and Coakley’s typology) so that we enter a mediation able to observe when this tendency arises and suspend it in order to listen more receptively.

**Active listening: towards deeper listening**

The term ‘active listening’ has been popularised in many fields. Carl Rogers developed this concept to inform the practices of humanistic psychology (Rogers, 1961). The concept of active listening moves us away from the styles and models described above, and more closely approaches a deep receptivity. Rogers describes being attentive to the ‘inner world’ of the speaker as
involving listening for the total meaning, responding to the speaker’s feelings and non-verbal cues.

Many legal practitioners are aware of the importance of listening to achieve ‘a shared understanding of their [clients’] concerns’ (Chay & Smith, 1996). Lawyers are often trained in more critical listening. To encourage teachers at New York Law School to develop more active and open listening, researchers have developed a refreshing set of exercises entitled ‘Experiments in Listening’. These practical ‘experiments’ were designed to encourage legal teachers to explore their ‘unique concerns and goals’ for listening. They describe the practice of listening from ‘pure belief’ as opposed to the more evaluative ‘pure doubt’ which is common in the legal field (Weisberg & Peters, 2004). These insightful exercises are recommended for mediators as well as the intended legal academic audience as their aim is to deepen the awareness of our listening habits.

A Japanese study aimed to clarify the direct effects of active listening by assessing the training of middle managers in person-centred attitude (Kubota, Mishima, Ikemi, & Nagata, 1997). This two-day training involved so-called ‘mental health’ practices -- including lectures on stress, techniques of relaxation and significantly, also the experiential practice of Active Listening and sharing personal communication in the workplace (Kubota et al., 1997). The researchers stress the importance of inventive experiential training (IEL) to achieve the experience of listening (Kubota et al., 2004:61). That is, the training method is strongly elicitive, requiring full participation of the trainees in the process to the extent of allowing the content to arise from the findings of participants in their inventive activity. The researchers suggest that this method achieves more effective results than demonstration and role play. Their use of an experiential program was effective in teaching listening ‘skills’ by teaching listening ‘attitude’ (Kubota et al., 2004:65), with significant increases in noticeable listening attitude and skills measured one and three months after training. Qualitative information also supported the success of this training with 96% of participants describing the training as ‘meaningful’ or ‘very meaningful’ and 95% indicating that they believed they would be able to fully utilise active listening in the workplace.

In the field of mediation, Moore’s use of the term ‘active listening’ could more accurately be described as ‘diagnostic’ or ‘evaluative’ listening (Moore, 2003). He suggests that mediators can use active listening to determine whether the expression of emotions is a ‘negotiation tactic’, ‘posturing’ for the other parties, or if indeed the feelings are genuine. However, it is questionable whether listening which serves the purpose of diagnosis or evaluation plumbs the depths of a receptive capacity.
Listening in mediation and dialogue

Although listening may be an essential capacity for mediation specialists, the focus on listening in leading mediation texts is sparse and research on listening is difficult to locate.

Mayer emphasises that ‘meta-communications’ or non-verbal signals are also significant, so that listening goes beyond what we can ‘hear’ and may include visual and auditory cues beyond speech itself. If we consider what we are describing as the deeply receptive capacity of listening as one pole of the communication loop, then ensuring the status of listening is essential to building a healthy communication loop, which Mayer advises is a primary way to make a difference in disputes. The deeply receptive stance may include more than what we receive through hearing, reflecting LeBaron’s view that to develop true receptivity we need to learn to listen with our whole bodies. This is different from understanding body language, which is frequently interpreted incorrectly (LeBaron, 2003:187-188).

Mayer suggests that listening can be divided into two styles: ‘integrative listening’ and ‘distributive listening’ (Mayer, 2000:127) although he later refers to these styles as two dimensions of conflict (Mayer, 2004:195). Integrative listening creates connections of thoughts, emotions and actions, and may approximate the type of listening which would facilitate what Bohm would describe as dialogue, whilst distributive listening aims to apportion blame and ascertain information which can be used to create what Bohm would call discussion (Bohm, 1996:6). Mayer cautions that these distinctions are somewhat artificial and that the two kinds of listening are usually present together. He suggests that the urge to distribute or integrate through listening will change rapidly and often in our conversations, suggesting the kind of situation-specific listening which we alluded to in the discussion on taxonomies above.

Fundamentally, dialogue is an experience of relatedness within a conversation, a conversation that might occur with two people or within a group. Isaacs claims the capacity to listen is at the heart of dialogue (Isaacs, 1999). Dialogue is not specifically a mediation approach; however, when parties in mediation enter into dialogue it is likely to provide a powerful and empowering experience. One way in which dialogue is defined is as a view of human nature which speaks of the need for “integrating the human experience of separateness and connection” (Bush & Folger, 2005:60). Margaret Wheatley writes: “Listening moves us closer, it helps us become more whole, more healthy, more holy” (Wheatley, 2002:90). Wheatley contends that much suffering in society is a result of not listening, and what is
needed is the offering of “attentive silence” (Wheatley, 2002:91) -- another way of describing deeply receptive listening.

Towards a deeper receptivity

It seems that deeply receptive listening has a special or esoteric quality that goes beyond the everyday instrumental view of a skill or a type of behaviour. Such listening seems to hold enormous power, although not in the way we often regard power. “In listening… a force is released that cannot be transformed into power without itself vanishing” (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:61) suggesting it may not be possible for deeply receptive listening to be coercive or manipulative. For example, many people, especially mediators and others of the so called “helping professions” are oriented towards helping, advice-giving and wanting to fix problems. Wheatley’s example of a black South African woman telling her story “of true horror” feeling the circle of listeners “closing in” and putting up her hands “as if to push back their desire to help” is persuasive. The woman told them she didn’t need them to fix her, she just needed them to listen (Wheatley, 2002:88 - 89). If we listen with the thought of giving advice or offering help, our listening has a motive and is not truly open, receptive, and empty.

Most people can recall a time when they experienced being truly heard, or listened to, and through reflecting on such an experience can compare it with their experiences when deep listening was not present. The difference is stark. Experiences of being profoundly listened to, or indeed, of profoundly and deeply listening to another, may seem random. On reflection, people often wonder how one might capture -- or even cause -- that magical quality. According to Isaacs, hearing has no on and off switch (Isaacs, 1999:85), unless we become self-aware we may have no way of ‘switching on’ deeply receptive listening.

Whilst the listening taxonomies explored above might provide ways of listening more effectively, they seem unlikely to provide a way into a deeply receptive listening space. Although Isaacs speaks of learning to “listen not only to others but also to ourselves” (Isaacs, 1999:83), it may be that even listening to ourselves creates a barrier to the “special state of chemistry” that Levine calls “listening with spirit” (Levine, 1994).

The insistent question lingers: how may we attain this special state, this particular way of being that allows open, non-judgemental, full-hearted listening? Levine calls it a quality of “detached, selfless listening” [original italics] (Levine, 1994) whilst Isaacs says that “what is actually required is a kind of disciplined self-forgetting” (Isaacs, 1999:84). We began this article speaking of inner listening, but perhaps what we need to accomplish is to
listen from within, and at the same time quite outside ourselves, at least, that seems to be where the attention should be focused. Corradi Fiumara cites Sciacca who says “the force of silence is as deep as the ‘infinite’ of our inner world” (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:97) and “As long as we remain firmly attached to our capacity for creating silence the ‘external world’ will not be able to completely reabsorb us…” (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:97). The more consciously we are able to create this inner silence, the more we may be able to hold on to the silence when the outer world contrives to draw us back.

For example, when I am mediating a conflict or dispute, I may arrive at the mediation-room preoccupied by concerns. I might be concerned that one side will withdraw from the mediation before we get started whilst I know that the other side very much wants the mediation to be helpful. Carrying this concern I probably listen less openly in this circumstance than if I am confident and unconcerned. It is as though my listening is filtered through my anxiety. The outer world, to some extent, ‘reabsorbs’ me. Unless I give conscious attention to creating silence within myself, my capacity to listen outside myself “in spite of the din” will be limited (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:95).

Being a listener: a relational capacity
It seems that the ability to hear (with which human beings are born) and the capacity to listen are not the same. Reflecting Fiumara, Yankelovich (Yankelovich, 1999:135) suggests that people in conflict are skilled at finding words and phrases to express their feelings, but the capacity to listen and empathise with the feelings of others is rare. It may be understandable that parties engaged in conflict have a reduced capacity to listen and empathise. This may explain the impact of an effectively listening third party who, by their very presence, shapes both the conflict interaction, and also any outcome (Winslade & Monk, 2001:47).

Although various practitioners identify a range of behaviours to bring about dialogue -- for example respecting, suspending and voicing (Isaacs, 1999) -- listening appears to be the key, and the ‘way in’ to dialogue. Isaacs takes listening further, saying that “in dialogue one discovers a further dimension of listening; the ability not only to listen, but to listen together as part of a larger whole” (Isaacs, 1999). This implies that listening itself may hold a relational quality, reflecting the words of Wheatley (cited above, page 6, para 4). Ultimately “a group of people listens (individually) with selfless receptivity to each other’s ideas, thereby emptying themselves to create a common vessel which... receives and contains a collective spirit” (Levine, 1994). The image of “emptying oneself or creating a vessel for receiving” is one which reoccurs in dialogue literature (Isaacs, 1999; Levine, 1994).
If I achieve such a receptive attitude, and if, for example, the Maori mother of a party in mediation asks, through streaming tears, if she might say a karakia (prayer) to begin, naturally, I say ‘of course’. Then if she says she will go now, and leaves the room, I just receive this. It might be a matter of trusting listening and truly letting go, allowing our intuitive knowledge and skill to guide us: “Listening,… faces all difficulties unarmed and lets unfold what must happen” (Corradi Fiumara, 1990:61).

Listening seems to have an energetic presence. In that state, it is not so much about what we express as what we contribute to the atmosphere. Buber says that it is not necessary for everyone present to speak for dialogue to be genuine, but, he says, “no one can be there as a mere observer…dialogue can thus either be spoken or silent” (Friedman, 1976). Rather than a skill that is learned or taught through prescriptive models or systems, deeply receptive listening seems to be concerned with a way of being: that is, being present in a state of self-awareness, and simultaneously a state of unselfconsciousness, or freedom from concerns. It seems to involve being intently tuned in.

Developing presence; which has the capacity to “bring peace into the room” (Bowling, 2003) and which “connects self and whole” (Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004:98) may, as its foundation, call on us to develop an ability to listen openly and intentionally. It may require that at the same time as identifying our filters, our limitations and assumptions, our opinions and judgements, and our listening styles, we may also be bold enough to let these go! It may compel us to allow ourselves to experience genuine silence within ourselves; for in deep and open silence, true listening can occur and then we might become like an empty container in which there is space, or capacity to hear and absorb more (Isaacs, 1999:244). Within this vessel, the stories, experiences, emotions and understanding of people in conflict may be more fully expressed, understood and worked through.

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1 As a trainee mediator, I was privileged to observe the work of an experienced colleague. At the conclusion of a mediation in which I had sat at the back of the room silently ‘observing’, the parties turned and thanked me. A.E.
References


