

Governance as listening

What is your company known for? That is not a rhetorical question or a hook for an argument. Can you write down what your company is known for? For most companies that is the start of a learning process not an end, because to answer it you need to ask others about you and the organization. I can hear the frustration already growing like “I haven’t got time for this kind of navel gazing too many rabbit holes to get lost down”. Whilst we are at it, I wonder why rabbit holes get such a bad press. For the rabbit, they are places of safety, nurture and community. Far from places where you lose the trail they are the end of the trail; the physical end but also the purpose of being a rabbit. Of course, the most famous rabbit, the white one in Alice in Wonderland, has quite lost any sense of purpose. He is caught up in a loop of deadlines and never quite has time [. . .] for anything, “Oh dear! Oh dear! I shall be too late!” He intuitively understands this [. . .]. “The hurrier I go, the behinder I get” [. . .] but does not know how to get out of it.

So maybe, unlike the white rabbit in Alice, organizations should take time to think about what they are known for. Of course, “known for” means “valued for”. This is what reputation is. And this is an important starting point, because unless we hear about what we are actually known for, we cannot know if this is the same as what we want to be known for.

So, who are we going to ask about this? [MacNamara \(2015\)](#) suggests that this has to be all stakeholders, inside and outside the organization and that to achieve this requires an “architecture of listening”. He suggests that listening involves: recognition of others’ rights and views; acknowledgement; paying attention; interpreting what is said to gain understanding of others’ views; giving consideration to what is said; and an appropriate response (2015, p. 7). This involves the practice of listening skills and [Rogers \(2003\)](#) in the context of therapy suggests that underlying that is the trinity of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard.

All three of the “counselling skills” are needed for any effective listening. Empathy recognizes the shared human experience of the other. Congruence is about matching and balancing our responses not least body language and verbal language. This indicates how we really feel about the other and what he or she is saying. And we all know the listener who says “I am listening” but actually signals that they do not have the time for it. Unconditional positive regard can be summed up as equal respect. All this points to careful listening, without which it is hard to know what we are “known for”. Without this kind of feedback, it is all too easy to paint an image of our organization that bears no relation to reality – at which point we become known for being “two-faced” – inside and outside the organization.

MacNamara’s research suggests that many leaders believe they communicate through listening and dialogue, but that the vast majority of communication in organizations is in fact one-way transmission. You have got to ask why you might think that you communicate through dialogue and yet do not actually do that. One explanation is that we simply have not worked out what listening is. There is nothing odd about that. Ask your spouse, child or parent, and the answer will be “he/she never listens—always on the I pad, always meeting a deadline, always [. . .] [. . .]”. Active listening involves checking out what the other has said like “so you are saying [. . .]”. That is a critical moment because it means sharing how you have heard what has been said. At that point, there is a rich possible dynamic. It could be that you have it exactly right, and this helps the other to trust your willingness to listen. If it is not quite right then at least it shows that you are willing to share what you think you have



heard and that too can be the basis of trust. It also sets up the basis for mutuality. If the statement does not exactly mirror the meaning of the other, it asks questions of both parties such as “Was I listening carefully?”, “Did I really communicate what I meant to communicate?” and so on. At this point, listening moves into mutual learning and a willingness to take responsibility for how we craft words and for the meaning of those words. The next step is to reframe the words, to reach out to the listener by clarifying what we mean. None of this is simple because it can reveal dissonance, and this can be uncomfortable. It is easy to experience different perceptions of what we say as being a threat to our self-esteem, both personally and as leader. This means that active listening involves developing a sense of identity over time.

The suggestion then is that one of the key aspects of reputation management and, more broadly, governance is effectively listening, both to understand the organization and its relationship to society better and to present a congruent face to the work force and beyond. So, how can it be developed in your organization? There needs to be a culture of listening, which raises the expectation of being “listened to”. That sounds like hard work but is surprisingly easy. It demands the development of clear anchor points in the Web of the organization and beyond, such as:

- Board meetings and annual meetings that give space to dialogue, hearing the different stakeholder narratives. Most annual meetings focus on the party line and focusing communication on what has been carefully rehearsed.
- Biennial reviews of the values and vision of the organization. Here, the different voices within the organization can be heard. Do the different groups accept the board’s views? Do they see these ideas actually being carried put in practice and so on? There is great benefit to bringing stakeholders from different perspectives and interests together in one place, so that the listening becomes part of ongoing dialogue. This is where the attention of the leadership can actually be tested and real trust is developed (cf. O’Neil, 2002).
- Working with other groups such as universities or the IOD to build dialogue platforms with external stakeholders around the issues of the region.

Effective listening needs such anchor points where the dialogue is unrehearsed. Three things make this unrehearsed quality important. Rehearsed dialogue means no surprises and no genuine listening. Unrehearsed dialogue is a mark of authenticity; the leader does not have to refer back to a text. It is focused on openness to personal encounter not simply to rationality or ideas. The Germans have a great word for this, *Zwischenmenschliche* (genuinely interpersonal), suggesting that such dialogue does not attempt to change or control the other. Finally, unrehearsed dialogue genuinely holds the parties involved to account and so helps to develop trust.

Governance then begins with listening. It begins with valuing questions not just about what we are known for but about what we want to be known for. This means that governance, which is an aspect of leadership, is not solely about procedures or codes but about people and how people communicate. The articles in this edition all reflect something of this. The first focuses on sustainability buying behaviour in India. The idea of behaviour implies value agency and some commitment to consumption that takes the person beyond simply economic exchange. The second examines one way thinking about the emotional intelligence of health workers. This looks to take seriously a holistic view of members of an organization. The third picks up the synergy between enterprise and creativity in contributing to the sustainability of the organization and the environment. The fourth article

looks at how the firm gives an account, a key part of dialogue. Next year the journal aims to have an assessment of the governance approach of Mervyn King, enshrined in the four King reports. These involve integrated reporting, which in turn relies on the practice of integrated thinking, which demands dialogue.

The final article reminds us that sustainability management cannot simply be a matter setting in place processes. There will always be tensions in the practice of sustainability management. If the organization is to take responsibility for this, it always has to be in the light of relationships which never stay the same, and these lead to ongoing relational tensions. Any organizational practice reflects something about the people in that organization and how they create value. And this sets up a debate which another special edition will aim to engage between theory, value and practice. Sufficient to say for now that without all three little sense can be made.

Simon Robinson

Leeds Business School, Leeds Beckett University, Leeds, UK

References

- MacNamara, J. (2015), "The architecture of listening", available at: <https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Organizational-Listening-Research-Report-16-1.pdf> (accessed 12 March 2018).
- O'Neil, O. (2002), *A Question of Trust: The Reith Lectures*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.
- Rogers, C. (2003), *Client Centred Therapy*, Constable and Robinson, London.