

THE LISTENING ORGANIZATION

Take a moment to recall a few times recently when you have listened selectively or defensively. Imagine, then, how challenging it is for a whole organization, especially a large one, to listen fully and openly?

When I facilitated Vermont Adult Learning's (VAL) annual retreat, I right away saw its inclination to listen: the board and executive staff invited several key stakeholders to join the conversation about organizational priorities. When VAL later embarked on strategic planning, the leaders asked, "how can we follow a strategic planning process that involves broad input, is cost-effective and can be done quickly?"

We decided to invite every employee to address seven questions about what the organization needed and where it was headed. Patterns gleaned from this survey, as well as information from VAL partners like the Department of Education, informed the broad-based planning committee's creation of an updated mission and a vision statement draft. Members of the planning committee took these drafts back to regional office meetings to hear staff and student reactions. As committee members facilitated meetings in the field, they followed a uniform process so feedback was easy to interpret. After each of the two additional planning stages, the planning team went to the field to present their work and listen.

This "accordion" decision-making process affirmed leadership responsiveness, proved that broad input can be efficient, put board members directly in touch with field offices and produced a product that had broad ownership from the outset.

Similarly, the Vermont Department of Education (DOE), complex because of its size, multiple responsibilities and need to pay constant attention to external constituents, wanted to refresh its ways of listening to staff. Like all mature organizations, DOE has filters built into its ongoing ways of listening, so the challenge was to listen in a different way. The first step involved designing a process that got accurate feedback, promised what the organization could deliver, was efficient and cost-effective. We agreed that I would conduct interviews with folks at every level and in every division. Out of these "qualitative research" narratives emerged the patterns of a rich tapestry. The next step in the listening endeavor, which the organization handled internally, involved designing a process for people in the organization to discuss this tapestry and ways to implement recommendations.

A third opportunity to set up new organizational listening capabilities arose in a diversity program at Vermont's Agency of Human Services. In all eighty workshops my colleagues Susan Sussman, David Wagner and I facilitated, participants made lists of what they saw as the Agency's real diversity issues. The patterns that emerged may give the Agency direction for focusing future work. In order to sustain and deepen diversity work, the Agency also asked us to design and teach a course for employees who wanted to become diversity facilitators. The Agency now has its own internal team who will be listening with tuned-up ears to employee and citizen concerns and organizational challenges.

Ways to Do Organizational Listening

- Focus groups
- Employee surveys
- Study circles
- Facilitated meetings with intact teams or groups
- Interviews, conducted anonymously by neutral outsiders
- Whole systems meetings, such as "town meetings" for all employees to have a say
- Communication, team building or conflict management workshops in which participants brainstorm real issues in the organization

Some Criteria for Planning a Listening Project

- Tie the project to strategic goals, for example, the organization's strategic plan
- Carefully focus what you want to know
- Decide how to commit organizational resources to take on the challenges you learn about
- Identify key people to involve in planning
- Identify key people who may resist such a project
- Create a communication plan: when and how will you announce the project and findings?