

A story about collective story harvest—a tool for group listening

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Setting the scene: a national nonprofit organization

Marc Should I start?

Hanna Yeah.

Marc We had a call from a national nonprofit that works with cruelty to animals of various kinds. In particular a group that works with urban wildlife. So people have deer or raccoons or possums or whatever in the yard. And they tend to either be mean to them, shoot them, poison them, or over-love them, collect them, get them all living in their basement or something.

And so, this group operates really like an ad agency. So they do these campaigns. For ten years they'd done these advertising campaigns. Which basically were, "Hey, stop that. Shame on you." Yeah. And the theory of change was, "If we educate them, they'll stop doing it. Or if we make them feel bad, they'll stop doing it."

And they had done some kind of assessment and realized it wasn't working. Well, they talked to us about learning something about design and having some different experience. And we asked, "Well, how long since you talked to people who are mean to animals?" And they kind of got quiet, you know, cause the answer is they had never had done that.

And so we worked with them and they actually convened different people in the room from senior people down to graphic designers. And then here's someone who'd had a whole career of being mean to animals in the horse racing industry, and somebody who over-likes them, and the guy who gets the call in the city when something bad happens.

And so, here's these people... can I just keep going with this?

Hanna Yeah, yeah.

Marc Okay. Well, clearly there's judgment present in the room, right? Presuppositions about who these folks are and why they're doing what they're doing, because they're bad people.

There's a method we use called collective story harvest. You have the actual people in the room and you give them a good long time to tell their story. From the time they were little. And the people from the non-profit all get what's called a listening lens. So they get a job to do. Your job to listen for all the relationships in the story and write it down on the sheet of paper. You listen to all the decisions and the inner life. And you listen for emotions. So they all have a job. So it's hard for your judgment to get a word in edgeways, cause you're busy doing your job. Yeah. So you listened to these stories. Four stories.

Listening is hard

Hanna So, listening is really hard. It's not a skill that we're good at. And if you think back at Otto Scharmer's levels, there's a lot that gets in the way. You can't listen with curiosity when your mind is filled with judgment or your to-do list. You can't listen empathetically when you actually feel a lot of anger or when your emotions are clouded. You can't listen from the emerging future if there's not a stillness

3:00 to attend to that emerging future. So I think it's just really important to center that listening is really hard. And a lot of time we mistake passivity for listening. Listening is an active, engaged thing.

Practicing: a primer in listening

So after some creative activities to help people relate and have a little bit fun and be more joyful, we spend some time practicing, active listening. Someone practicing telling a story and someone else practicing being a sponge. Suspending judgment. Opening your heart. Listening with openness and just record the story and say back. So there are some groundwork that needs to be done, I find in a lot of organizations because we just don't know how to genuinely listen.

Marc We lost basic skills or, or were never given them.

Capturing assumptions before listening

Hanna Yeah, exactly. So we did this as a primer. And then we said, okay, if you bring to mind the person who abuses animals, for instance, what are your assumptions? What is your mental map about this person? And we use an empathy map from the world of design. What are their relationships like? What is expected of them? What support do they have? What's top of mind and emotions?

Marc What do they fear? What rewards do they seek?

Hanna So people just dump their assumptions of that person onto a map. And then,...

The storytellers

Marc And then the storytellers come. I'm sitting at a table with someone who I know has done all the things I've been campaigning for ten years to try to stop. And he starting from when he was twelve years old.

Hanna Five! Five years old, walking in the woods with his grandpa and cousins...

Marc ...and carrying a gun. And Grandpa says, "There's a..." I'm going to say it's a turkey. I don't remember what it was.

Hanna We don't have to tell their stories.

Marc Yeah. Okay. But it was a moment. His first experience of, of cultural pressure to...

Hanna ...be a man.

Marc ...to be a man. By killing something. And getting praised for it. Yeah. And then that night. In bed, feeling awful, feeling terrible about himself, you know? And then he goes on and tells the rest of the story. But here's the people around the table listening for relationship, listening for emotion, you know, listening for decision point.

Updating assumptions: what did we learn?

At some point after they heard these stories, and before they drew conclusions, we did two things. One was to go back to those big sheets. Those templates, the empathy map, where they captured their assumptions. And then they got out a new color for new things they had learned that they had not assumed. And a marker to cross out the assumptions that had been proven wrong.

6:00

So this is another kind of openness: willingness to be changed by what you hear. And there's something about documenting that in a group together, they're all doing it together, that helps that sink in.

And then another thing they did was they made a timeline. And they I think, tend to think of just the events, what do people do. But then they put who else was there. What's the web of relationships? Relationships, and the pressures and so on. All this invisible stuff. Yeah. And the emotional arc. Right. Together they visualized the story.

Hanna And the institutional layer. Yeah. Yeah.

Reflection. Sit with it. Then, a key moment.

Marc And then, I think the next thing was “take a walk.”

Hanna Yeah, I think we had the listening lenses talk to each other. What are the themes that we are hearing? We had updated the assumptions. And then we just,... I think something that's really important about listening is sometimes just to sit with it. Just like to be with what you've witnessed and experienced and have a rummage around in your insides.

So we said, go out for an hour. Go walk. Go be with what you've heard. And then we came back and we had a kind of a circle where people could speak.

And a moment that really struck me from that circle was someone saying, “You know what? If I look back at that person's journey, the moment when they were most cruel to animals and felt a sense of shame, whether it was conscious or more unconscious, we were right there shaming them.”

A new creative brief, a new source for strategy

And then the group started asking for who do we want to become?

Marc Right. They wound up with what people in that world would call a new creative brief. 'Cause it had been educate, advocate, influence. That was the job of their program. And they made new words: support, connect, provide alternatives. There was actually a much longer list. And that they were excited about because it represented--not only maybe this will be more effective, but also it felt like an authentic response to who they had met and what they had lived.

Hanna Yeah. And being on your side and seeing your goodness.

People need process, and process is alive

Marc So I think my wrap up is that people need a process. But processes have a life, you know, it's not just dryly following the process. But people need it, and we have found that this story harvest of bringing people together face-to-face to hear the real story, and a little both skilling and structure for setting aside judgment and opening, and then moving from listening to, “so what, now what” has been powerful.

Listening is transformational; without it we believe our old thoughts

9:00 I find it hopeful because even in some pretty stuck situations something opens. It's not that it resolves, but listening is transformational.

Hanna Yeah. I think one of the big problems that we have as humans, if I can call it a problem, is that we believe our thoughts. Our thoughts are approximations of reality, but we believe that they are reality. Therefore, I have a belief about you that can be completely wrong.

And so when we're operating with defective worldviews, our actions aren't going to be very effective. So I feel that listening is an incredibly calibrating way of getting into alignment with what's really going on, and getting out of the story I got married to in my head about what life is like. And that story is from the individual to the system, right? This organization was living in a story that was not accurate.

So we can't touch reality. We can't shift reality. So how do we get our fingers on the hands of what is really happening?

Listening is an act of power and love

Marc Yeah. We heard in the power and love thing that one definition of love is “the drive to unite what has been separated.” And I feel like that's work that listening can do. And, you know, you could do worse as someone who wants to engage with societal healing and pattern shifting, than just do the work of helping people listen. I mean, in some situations it gets you pretty far.

The importance of listening to ourselves; what conditions do we need?

Hanna Yeah. And on that point, I want to center what Father Paul talked about keeps him going is an inner stillness. Felicia Savage Friedman is a teacher of mine. And one of the first things we did when we entered her eight-month long trauma-informed anti-oppressive yoga teacher training was, she was centering the importance of listening to ourselves. It's like unless you listen to yourself, unless you feel listened to, how do you keep doing the work of listening to other people?

So a question that I keep asking myself is what is the conditions that need to be in place in my life so that I feel seen and heard and listened to as a baseline to do this work of holding space for other people?

Marc Yeah. Lovely. Thank you team.

Hanna Thank you team.

