

# Why Resonant Listening Is Essential to Thoughtful Leadership

BY ANNE E. COLLIER

**DURING THESE TIMES OF ANGST**, leaders might wonder how to up their game. Many might feel like explorers apprehensive about sailing off the edge of a flat world. Undoubtedly, the world today has many unknowns. Leaders might need to think differently and pay attention to information that heretofore seemed unimportant. It's possible that they need to engage more deeply by resonant listening. What is resonant listening? "Resonant" means deep, clear and continuing to sound or ring. "Listening" means to give one's attention to a sound. When the two words are combined, the term "resonant listening" describes much more than a mechanical act. To listen resonantly is to listen for the deeper meaning and to think based on that deeper meaning. Stated another way, unless you are listening resonantly you are missing information critical to your thinking. Resonant listening requires discerning signal from noise. Signal is what's important. Noise is what gets in the way of understanding.

"Noise" can originate with the speaker or the listener. If the former, it's often the unartful articulation of concern or a goal or even a request obscured by fear. The speaker's fears manifest in reactive behaviors such as impatience, blaming, venting, worrying, obsessing, anxiety, pessimism and criticism. It's your job as a thoughtful leader to distinguish between this noise—the reactivity born of fear—and the signal so that you can take in the information, analyze it and move forward. If you listen resonantly, you are able to think deeply about the signal and filter the noise, giving the noise its rightful place as a register of fear or stress.

Effective leaders do not allow themselves to be unintentionally duped into thinking that their colleagues' messages are irrelevant. To dismiss a message as only noise is to discard information and insight that is likely relevant. And, in an age when lawyers are concerned about the pandemic's adverse effect on firm culture, dismissing a colleague's concerns hastens the decline into the abyss of disconnection. Thus, leaders must engage in resonant listening regardless of whether doing so

is annoying or seems unproductive in that moment. Simply stated, leaders who don't listen resonantly don't know what they are missing.

The best leaders think strategically and make decisions based on all the information available. The best leaders are thoughtful, patient, curious and interested in colleagues' ideas and concerns. The best leaders are not impatient, reactive or paralyzed by indecision. While the best leaders care about all stakeholders, they do not succumb to pressures to make everyone happy, which often results in mediocrity that satisfies no one. Instead, the best leaders tenaciously work with their colleagues to solve problems. They have generative conversations, acting only after listening resonantly and therefore thinking deeply, creatively and with purpose. The best leaders are not defensive and understand they cannot possibly have all the answers. The best leaders have the confidence to try new strategies, to be patient and to take the risks necessary to resolve issues through innovation. The best leaders figure out how to navigate a world that is round without knowing whether it is round or flat.

To listen resonantly is to listen for meaning, and it is to think. Stated another way, unless you are listening resonantly, you can't think about the real issue. You are impatiently reacting in an attempt to drive results. That drive is uninformed; your leadership GPS is seeing a flat world. You are worried about falling off the edge. Without resonant listening and clear thinking, your fear of catastrophic results impairs your judgment and decisions.

## FIVE STEPS FOR UPPING YOUR LEADERSHIP GAME THROUGH RESONANT LISTENING

You can up your leadership game by cultivating your ability to listen resonantly, thereby reducing any inclination to succumb to your fears. Here's how:

- 1. Objectively assess your mindset.** When reacting out of fear, you intensely, but falsely, believe that you are doing exactly what is necessary to ensure optimal results and avoid disaster.



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or solicit input, you are not thinking at your best. You are alienating the very people you are trying to help and on whom you must rely to solve the problem. Recognize feelings of impatience and urgency as a signal that you are acting out of fear.

**4. Amplify confidence with resonant listening.** True leadership is to achieve heightened confidence and clarity in the face of uncertainty. Confidence is not evidenced by tactics that signal fear of catastrophic results. Confidence is evidenced by resonantly listening, which instills in colleagues the confidence that the deep thinking necessary to solve the problem is occurring and that together you will succeed.

**5. Focus on signal.** Coming full circle, resonant listening requires you to distinguish between signal and noise. Listen to your colleagues. Ask yourself: What is the real concern? Are they consumed by fears that are creating the noise? If so, help them get over the fear—to dissipate the noise—through reassurance of success. Then thoughtfully consider the signal, and what the noise is a register of, so that you achieve that success.

Given the year we've had, expect to see colleagues' hazard lights signaling that they are in fear of falling off the edge of the world. The job of the leader is to prevent this reactive thinking and behavior from causing the very thing they fear. Your colleagues need the support of a thoughtful leader. Be that thoughtful leader by resonant listening. **LP**

Slow down, recognize the fear and set it aside. Listen carefully, make an objective analysis and reflect on your own thinking before taking any action.

- 2. Rely on your own personal “hazard lights” to signal danger.** Personal “hazard lights” are what you notice about yourself when you are fear driven. If you are forcing an outcome rather than creatively solving the problem, you are fear driven. If you are impatient, intimidating, blunt or dismissive of others' input, you are fear driven. If you find yourself, instead of listening for understanding, mechanically listening while you are struggling to form your response, correcting the person's perceptions or altogether ignoring colleagues by talking over them or terminating the conversation, you are fear driven. You know yourself; identify your patterns and what triggers your fears. Recognize and manage your fears so that your fears don't manage you.
- 3. Notice when you don't have time.** If you tell yourself that you don't have time to listen, share information with others



**Anne E. Collier, MPP, JD, PCC**, is the CEO of Arudia, a firm dedicated to improving culture, collaboration and communication. Collier is an expert leadership coach steadfast in her commitment to excellence and her clients' goals. She coaches and delivers programming designed to help individuals, teams and organizations amplify accomplishments, improve financial stability and achieve greater self-actualization. They perform well because they are confident, deliberate and resilient. **anne@arudia.com**