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LIGHTS - Leadership

The L word or the key to empathetic leadership On how to renew trust within companies

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Abstract

While AI and the current geopolitics reshuffle the cards, trust is being challenged. At the office, leaders and their teams, and teams themselves, face difficulties in making sure trust is not damaged, and if it is, in trying to regenerate it. Can we renew trust? Shall we reinvent leadership? In that context, one element is key to regaining trust, yet largely overlooked, I mean listening. Listening indeed sounds basic and surely not new. However, rare are leaders who take the time to listen truly. Using singing as a case to demonstrate the power of listening, to oneself and others, this paper shows that genuine listening helps to grow empathy and that empathetic leadership is what is needed to renew trust within companies.

Keywords: empathy, leadership, listening, self-awareness, singing, trust

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The L word or the key to empathetic leadership

On how to renew trust within companies

Can you guess the L word?

What may be the missing part of communication, and I shall argue here, the crucial missing part of leadership? In this essay, I will not address leadership as what some still consider an authoritative top-down approach; leadership here will refer to the act of service to one's team, inspiring them to embrace the best version of themselves. How can one lead if not trusted nor trusting? How can one be trusted and trusting in the first place?

Trust is challenged by a changing world order with old allies reshuffling the cards of the so-called West; trust is challenged by a rising number of artificial intelligence assistants and robotised voices; so people and actors in companies at large are increasingly isolated. In addition, in the post-Covid context of generalised flex office practice, people find themselves increasingly isolated indeed. With emails and vocal messages being automated and redrafted by AI – though to originally improve the latter – and with photos of colleagues and peers redrawn by AI too, the issue of isolation now bandwagons with that of a feeling of 'fakeness'. What are the consequences of such a challenging context of dehumanisation on leadership? How could leaders review their approach to renew trust within their team(s)?

In today's context, including both a turmoil in world geopolitics and a tech challenge with AI, people and thus companies face all-time high burnout rates¹ and a leadership crisis. They ought to turn – revert – to more humanness. People are eager of more genuine personal relationships. In this paper, I shall argue that leadership needs to rethink itself into empathetic leadership. Some national/company cultures already function with empathetic leadership; yet many are those, who still consider leadership as a trust-devoid top-down approach, whichever part of the company they may operate in.

Listen to lead better

How can one renew trust in companies' leadership? How could leaders show more of their humanness? This is where the magic of empathy comes in. Yet how can we best approach empathy? As a musician, who worked most her life in international institutions facing intercultural communication challenges, I have come to argue that listening is the notorious L word; listening triggers a chain reaction, which enables empathetic leadership to renew trust within teams.

Listening seems easy and yet appears largely overlooked. Can one enhance one's listening skills? Can one listen to one's team without first listening to oneself? Could discovering one's voice lead to enhanced self-awareness, thus paving the way for enhanced listening skills and renewed/new empathy within the team, and ultimately regenerating trust in leadership?

¹ *The Burnout Report*, annual publication by Mental Health UK, sheds light on stress and burnout levels across the UK. *The Burnout Report 2025* (Bernadette Dancy) 'shows that stress levels are on the rise compared to 2024, with a staggering 91 per cent of respondents reporting that they have been experiencing high or extreme levels of stress in the past year.'

In 2013 while conducting research to show links between choral conducting and team management, following ten years of communication work within EU institutions, during which colleagues asked me to tell them why 'people listened when I spoke', I came to realise that indeed, being an opera singer may have something to do with it all. Encouraged by French radio journalists, I drafted *Sing to Better Communicate*. I named my first chapter, the L Word. To me, listening was the missing part of communication. Thirteen years later, I go further and argue: listen to lead better. I will show here that listening is key to generating trust. Thus, it is not only what is missing from communication, but what is missing from leadership. Listening will grow empathetic leadership and allow for renewed trust within teams.

The Chain Reaction

Many of us fast forward through vocal messages on social platforms. Many of us are multitasking while supposedly listening to a friend. How many of us still leave a phone on the table during a conversation? Listening cannot be rushed. Listening requires full attention. Once you try listening 100 per cent to someone without already structuring your answer, once you devote your full attention to the other person, you are flirting with empathy, not sympathy. You are not preparing an answer to compare with your own experience, you make time and space for the feeling the other person is sharing with you. Once you truly listen, you must be ready for the boomerang effect.

Genuine listening has become so rare that the person benefiting from it may be surprised, touched, and inevitably grateful, immediately developing an interest in you. The person you have listened to will immediately start trusting you or better, their trust in you will reach another level. You will have triggered the chain reaction that genuine listening generates. In other words, the person you cared for by showing your undivided attention will, in return, act the same towards you. That is how you start a fruitful trust relationship. Trust is indeed a two-way street. And the way to generate trust in others is to first trust oneself. Only then can it boomerang. The circle of trust starts with self-confidence and then, the generous act of caring for the individuals whose trust we need.

How can one indeed make space to listen to someone without first dealing with one's emotions and thoughts? While we intend to truly listen to someone else, one has to listen to oneself first. Trust being intrinsically linked to listening, listening to oneself helps grow self-confidence. Self-confidence is the sine qua non condition to inspire confidence from others. After all, how could anyone trust us if we do not trust ourselves first? We may listen carefully to a team member and yet not grow any trust relationship, simply because our own lack of self-confidence will instil a subconscious feeling of doubt within our interlocutor.

Love yourself to be able to love others may be echoed in listen to yourself to be able to (make space to) listen to others. Trust yourself first so others may trust you. Focus on the self first to be able to focus on others. Always start by what may feel illogical. For ten years, part of the conclusion of my signature seminar on empathetic leadership has borrowed from Paul Arden's words, 'Whatever you think, think the opposite'². Imagine you are building a house. Do you start building vertically towards the top like we all do when drawing as kids, or do you first start digging? That is a vertical movement but going downwards first. Building up requires first digging down. Listening may first be a journey to the centre of the self. Exactly like a singer, to project the highest notes, you need to breathe as low as possible. The energy projecting the voice will be vibrant when the

² Paul Arden was the Executive Creative Director of the advertising agency Saatchi & Saatchi.

breathing has been deep and restful. Exactly like the nicest fountains hide the strongest engines under ground. This may sound counterintuitive; it is however essential.

Sing to listen better

How can one improve one's listening skills? What about keeping things simple with something fun? While Canada is avant-garde in prescribing choral singing³ to patients suffering from lung pathologies or mental health issues, I would not wait for health challenges to appear to build on the magical effect of listening on daily well-being. So what about singing?

Everything in the act of singing represents what we discussed above. Some may say it is OK to just play music. I will argue that playing the *vocal instrument requires an extra set of skills, which is about dealing with your own body. Singers indeed need to go through the most humbling experience, i.e. blindly trusting someone other than themselves to produce the best sounds. Singers cannot hear their own voice. When singing, we hear a mix of internal and external perceptions. Hence the need to have an external listener guiding us, and this means trusting someone external with our most intimate self.

Because a singer cannot hear her voice, a voice student has therefore no choice but to totally trust her voice teacher or choral conductor. She is our ears. We listen to every single indication and guidance advice to produce the sound, which sounds good to the audience, and not necessarily to ourselves, for once again as singer, we hear a mix of internal and external sound perceptions. For instance, what sounds good to us as singers usually is not what sounds good to the audience. Singers who 'sing for themselves' usually do not properly project their voice, they miss their audience, and their career fails. Hence singers, even the most experienced, never stop taking voice lessons and coaching throughout their career. Personally, following the guidance of my voice teachers, I have felt utterly naked. Projecting what intrinsically represents the vibration of one's body is intimate; it feels like a genuine act of bravery. This is why nothing can truly work until a singer fully trusts her voice teacher. It is like an act of faith. Singing requires trusting someone else more than oneself. This is a rather humbling experience. This is why I feel singing lessons are also lessons in humility before one's art, and a lesson of 'lâcher prise'. The voice teacher, or the choral conductor, leads you to produce the best sound and to discover what you yourself did not know you could manage. She reveals us to ourselves.

This is maieutic, i.e. being born to oneself via an external agent. Someone other than yourself leads you to bloom and realise your full potential, express the sense of who you are, your true self. And what is a leader, if not such an agent? What is leadership if not serving those you lead to allow them to reach their full potential, a potential they may not yet be aware of themselves? Leadership is about revealing the team to themselves. Your team will achieve things they did not know nor expect they were capable of. The best leaders lead their team to bloom quite literally.

Now on the part of the voice teacher, or that of the choral conductor, such a mission requires genuine listening too. This is why I have argued for over 20 years that music practice serves communication and leadership.

³ You may research *SingWell Project*, an example of a Canadian research and social initiative founded in 2021 by researchers studying the impacts of singing on stress, wellbeing and communication. <https://www.singwell.ca>

Communication and leadership indeed only succeed within the context of genuine listening. And I often dare say 'Listen with your eyes, and observe with your ears.' Indeed, listening is a caring act of fine observation. I mention observation because posture too is key. Posture influences not only the sound we produce and project (singer/speaker), but also sadly something too often overlooked, the way our audience/team will instinctively trust us, or not.

More specifically in the case of choral conducting, choral conductors deal with 'instruments', which are physical bodies. Giving directions to singers can thus be rather delicate. Having worked in foreign affairs myself, I often thought choral conducting was the best school of diplomacy.

Conducting and leadership have a common etymology; I chose that metaphorical parallel to show that music practice is key to developing listening skills, and in turn listening skills are key to developing trust, which is the sine qua non condition to not simply lead your team, but to have your team follow you, and eventually bloom. When individuals start blooming, so will the team. This is what leadership is all about: serving one's team members towards the best version of themselves, a version they may have never expected they could embrace.

Tune in to each other

To awaken, renew, or strengthen trust in your team and with your team, you may consider discovering your voice. Your voice hides your intrinsic potential; it may have gone unnoticed for years. Choral singing may be a first step.

Vocal practice starts with breathing, which serves as efficient stress-management, thus a useful tool to not project one's stress. And singing together leads to breathing together, and tuning in to each other. The latter elements show how trust works as a two-way street indeed. It may not be easy to share one's vulnerability but that however is the strongest proof and act of trust, therefore generating the chain reaction of other team members daring to confide, daring to share, and ultimately daring to unleash their potential.

In fine, a good way to start this magic chain reaction regenerating trust within the team, is to find a fun activity requiring listening. A few years ago, we spoke a lot about choirs within companies. Within the context of the chaotic geopolitics we navigate both personally and professionally, it may be clever to consider such musical activities within the company. While allowing a breath of fresh air and fun, choir singers would tune in to each other. Not only would they tune in to each other musically regarding pitch, they would most interestingly tune in to each other in terms of their emotions, thereby using a fun activity to learn how to listen to each other at work. And because as we saw, listening is the magical key to enhance trust, there you have a team within which the dynamics is positive, thereby creating a safe space, in turn allowing the team to deliver its full potential, and more.

So once again, we may be looking at things the wrong way. In the same way we discovered we had to first dig down to better build up, in times of difficulties, the answer may lie in a light fun activity, here singing. Why not first have fun to then achieve serious success?

Listening is all the more crucial to leaders as they ought to feel and know what their team needs, even before the team themselves can phrase it. An activity such as choir singing helps decipher one's team needs. Here not only will the leader listen in terms of pitch, she

will listen to her team's emotions and needs. Singing allows us to witness each other's vulnerability and each other's support. What is leadership if not allowing for the team to feel both vulnerable and supported?

Be more human, not less

In conclusion, we have discussed that trust requires genuine listening. I mentioned earlier that empathy required time and space. Listening takes time; listening takes space, time and space being the most scarce resources of our times. So once again, what we truly need is the opposite of what the world is pushing us towards, i.e. faster, smaller. And most interestingly today, giving time and space is giving what is most precious to us to someone else; it is an act of utmost generosity. Listening boils down to an act of love.⁴

If listening were easy, it would not be so absent from our contemporary society, at work and at home. So how come a skill which is so hard to achieve yet essential to generate trust could ever be labelled a 'soft skill'?

Here we are left with a list of wrongly infamous four-letter words, such as team, time, feel, care, give, love, safe, free: lead for people to feel safe, thus free, and live to their full potential. Simon Sinek⁵ frequently recalls that leadership is an act of service. I have argued, however, that this can only deliver within a dynamics of genuine listening. In other words, lead with empathy.

Besides helping people discover their voice for over ten years, I lately added equine-assisted coaching⁶. Working with horses is another, and complementary, option to choral singing when trying to address leadership challenges. Because animals will not accept any lies, one finds oneself facing one's deep and often hidden emotions, exactly like a voice student whose voice reveals her genuine self. Be it singing or interacting with horses, those activities help us reconnect. As paradoxical as it may seem here again, working with animals forces reconnection to our humanness⁷.

Interestingly, when encouraging colleagues towards genuine listening, they ask me about how to improve feedback, and feedback mechanisms. You can offer different options, one-to-one and group feedbacks. What proves more genuine and efficient may be group feedback with the person concerned being out of the circle⁸. The group builds up their feedback without pressure, and a rapporteur tells the person diplomatically. Truth be told, I used to not understand their question about feedback. Indeed, this paper is more about listening in day-to-day activity and actions, holding the door for your staff, having coffee, sharing a non-work-related brief chat, while opening your ears, eyes – and heart.

The essence of empathetic leadership is connection with yourself and with others. It is a return to being more human, not less.

⁴ *Love or Generosity*, steel and bronze sculpture by Nicole Eisenman, Zuid, The Netherlands, 2020.

⁵ American author and speaker on business leadership.

⁶ Increasingly referred to as equi-coaching.

⁷ Humanness refers to the qualities and characteristics that make us human, such as our emotions, thoughts, and behaviours. Humanity, on the other hand, refers to the collective qualities and characteristics of human beings as a whole, such as compassion, kindness, and empathy. Source: The Content Authority

⁸ *Inter alia* interview with Valentin Vassort, Senior Marketing Manager, Samsung.

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