# Deep Listening

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Illustration by JooHee Yoon

*Developing active listening techniques is essential to creating understanding and the authentic relationships necessary for social change.*

**M**ost leaders in the social sector aspire to work collaboratively with the people they serve. To drive systems change, nonprofits and funders need to understand people who are different from them and include the perspectives of a diverse set of stakeholders in their decision-making processes. Such an approach can help leaders make sense of the world through understanding relationships and the complexity of systems. Those who invest in listening and participatory efforts tend to create more equitable practices, research suggests, including a stronger commitment to inclusion and a positive impact on participants and community members, who become more empowered to self-advocate or hold officials accountable.

In 2020, the global COVID-19 pandemic and civil rights protests against racism created a greater awareness of the intersecting inequalities and power disparities between social-change leaders and their beneficiaries, philanthropists and the NGOs they support, and white people and people of color working within organizations. Traditionally, philanthropy and social entrepreneurship have operated from a top-down approach. Leaders across sectors have acknowledged that they need to learn to listen more effectively to connect with stakeholders and understand their needs.

"We know that the communities most proximate to the problems possess unique insight into the solutions," Ford Foundation President Darren Walker said in his 2019 vision statement for philanthropy. "That is why ... we ought to ensure that the people affected by our work are guaranteed a voice in its design and implementation."

Deep listening is foundational to understanding stakeholder and community needs. The approach—also referred to as active listening, reflective listening, or radical listening—is characterized by *how* the listener enters and engages in a conversation. Their curiosity, empathy, respect for the speaker, and self-awareness about their own beliefs and biases all influence their ability to listen deeply and connect authentically with the speaker, such that they can intuit the speaker's emotions and true meaning of their words.
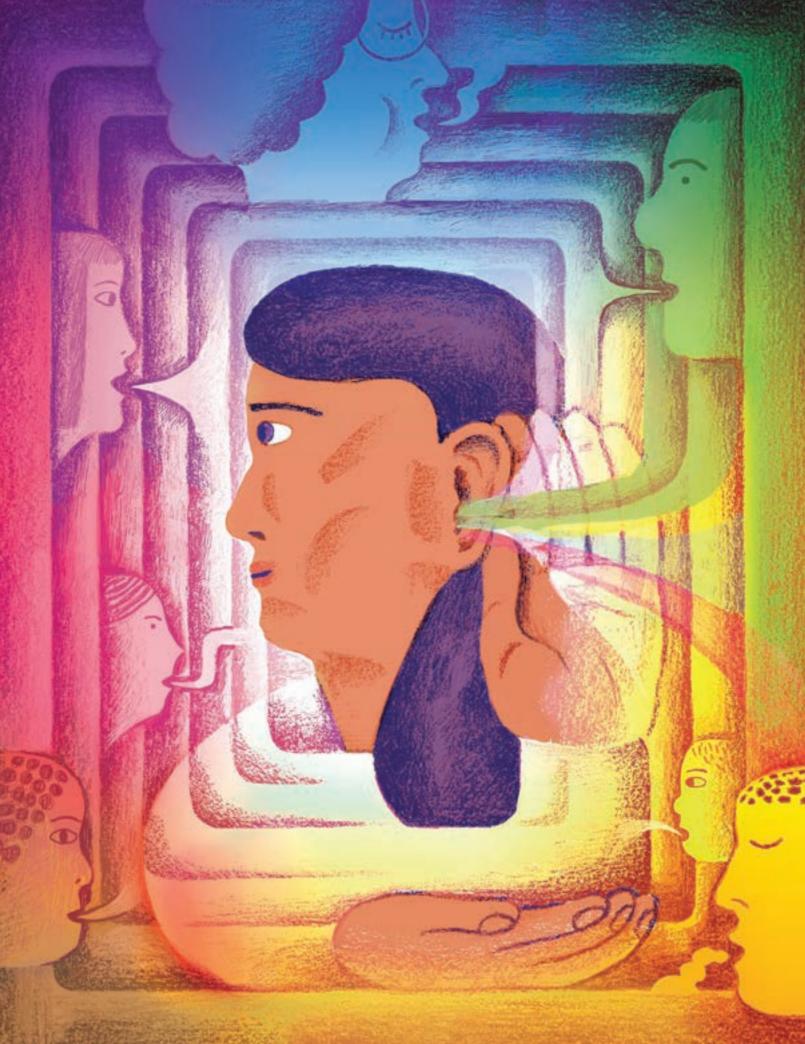
In this article, I explain the deep listening approach and consider the challenges of its practice. Drawing upon the experience of social entrepreneurs and philanthropists, as well as my own research and practice, the parameters of this article encompass one-to-one listening. However, some of its methods can also be applied organizationally, in practices involving multiple people and parties. More insights into the field of organizational listening have been shared by public communications professor Jim Macnamara, at the University of Technology Sydney, whose pioneering work has identified the 10 common failures in organizational listening and their correctives.

While deep listening is not necessary for every conversation, readers may find that they want to incorporate its elements into a wide range of discussions—with partners, beneficiaries, colleagues, and even their own families. The practice does not require the listener to agree with the speaker's message; rather, they need only acknowledge and understand the speaker's perspective. The approach is therefore a potent tool in situations where the speaker and listener stand on opposite sides of an issue and when an uneven power dynamic exists.

## Attention and Intention

The foundational component of the deep listening approach is how the listener shows up to the discussion—in terms of both their intention and the kind of attention they give to the speaker. Entering into conversations with humility is a simple yet potentially transformational way to help create more profound encounters.

In order to set their intention and attention, the listener needs to begin with internal work. Deep listening is a cultivated practice that does not come naturally to most people. Cognitive neuroscience researchers have explained that our brains are wired to extract coarse, essential information and speedily evaluate a new person we meet by drawing on our past experiences. Before a person even speaks, the listener has already made judgments about them. These prejudgments are likely to be more extreme if they assume that the

speaker is different from them—that the speaker looks different or comes from a different background.

These cognitive shortcuts hamper the listener's ability to enter into an exchange fully open to listening, especially when they feel strongly about what's being discussed and, according to psychologists Akiva Liberman and Shelly Chaiken, register only information that supports their beliefs. To navigate these challenges, listeners need to put themselves, in the words of communications and mindfulness coach Martin Vogel, in a place of "unknowing"—of suspending expectations about what the speaker might say.

The academic and broader literature on listening often enjoins the listener to be nonjudgmental toward the speaker. However, Gary Friedman, a conflict mediator and veteran trainer in deep listening, has argued that this instruction is not effective because judgments are the mechanisms that we use to make sense of the world. Instead, he advocates that the listener turn inward and try to become aware of any prejudices and/or strong feelings that may be triggered by what they hear. This internal assessment allows the listener to acknowledge, accept, and release the hold that judgments have on their perceptions and to be open to another person's story.

This preliminary internal work helps to prepare the space for an authentic conversation. "When you are in alignment and not fighting with yourself, that sort of internal feeling—centered and calm and present to really listen—helps everyone else feel heard and welcome and ready to express themselves," says Kinari Webb, CEO of the environmental nonprofit Health In Harmony, who uses deep listening with Indigenous communities in areas of significant deforestation. Listening expert Avraham Kluger also asserts that projecting honest vulnerability helps create a sense of safety: "I've learned that if I am brave enough to share a weakness, it demonstrates on some level that I have accepted myself, that I can accept others, no matter how strange they are to me, as I'm willing to accept my own strangeness."

Deep listening needs to be practiced intentionally, as the listener needs to override the brain's preferred way of functioning through cognitive shortcuts and biases based in past experiences. Instead, the listener needs to demonstrate a genuine curiosity and can take the following six steps to cultivate their intention and attention:

**Take time** | Give yourself time to become conscious of your intentions before an encounter—whether you seek to influence the conversation, glean information, or establish rapport. You may want to take control of the conversation to discover what you, the listener, believe you need to know. Practicing deep listening requires temporarily surrendering your agenda in order to be open to the speaker and what they consider important.

**Eliminate distractions** | Become aware of anything that might distract you, such as your mobile phone or other electronic devices. Put these items on silent mode and out of sight so that you can give your full attention to the speaker.

**Assess your mental state** | Become aware of your current attention level. Are you feeling distracted? Irritated? Excited? Notice where these feelings show up in your physical body, and then breathe deeply, allowing them to leave your body as you exhale.

**Check your defenses** | Remind yourself that it is safe to lay down your psychological armor—there is no need to defend yourself or be defensive in a conversation. Acknowledge to yourself that you may be changed by your encounter in ways that you cannot predict or control.

**Sense surrounding space** | Feel the openness of the space in front of you; around you; through your peripheral vision; behind you; above you; and on the ground beneath your feet. Feel ready to welcome the whole being of the other person in a space that you will create together.

**Trust yourself** | Trust yourself to be able to truly understand the other person—not through your intellectual prowess, but through being open and, in some sense, vulnerable.

Psychologist Monisha Pasupathi has conducted experiments that demonstrate the effects of attention on the speaker's narrative. In one experiment, the listener is distracted with another task, such as counting the speaker's words that begin with the letters "th." When people listen attentively without being distracted, Pasupathi's evidence suggests, they convey to the speaker that they support what the speaker expresses. This perception of attention, in turn, can enable speakers to share more coherent stories, as well as more details about their stories, and to share them for a longer period of time.

Listening is not a passive exercise. Research by psychologist Janet Bavelas, for example, has demonstrated that real-time listening is an active process in which the listener cocreates the narrative with the speaker. This cocreation happens through a back channel of responses, both verbal and nonverbal.

## Nonverbal Tools

The deep listening approach requires the listener to examine both their own behavior and how the speaker perceives it. Facial expressions, such as smiles or frowns, can affect the speaker's word choice and how, if at all, they decide to continue their story. In an experiment conducted by social psychologist Camiel Beukeboom, participants discussing a film clip with smiling listeners were more likely to offer their own interpretation because the positive facial expression encouraged them to feel accepted and understood. By contrast, participants speaking to frowning listeners limited what they shared to the film's functional message—the factual elements and synopsis—because they felt less safe and thus less willing to share more personal perspectives.

Our bodies indicate both to ourselves and to our interlocutor whether we are deeply listening. We may attend with bated breath, eager to interject, or with deeper, slower breaths indicating that we are calm, patient, and receptive. The listener can lean forward to show interest, have an open posture that conveys receptivity, or

adopt a closed stance through crossed arms to show defensiveness. Furthermore, maintaining eye contact with the speaker not only enables the listener to pick up signals in the speaker's gestures, such as biting a lower lip or shifty eye movements, but also communicates attentiveness and respect.

Silence is a powerful nonverbal tool that allows the speaker to be comfortable and to reflect, because it reduces physiological arousal that interferes with reflexive thinking. Empathetic listening means making space for silence after the speaker has finished talking; that, in turn, creates the conditions for both the speaker and the listener to formulate more thoughtful responses. New research in the *Journal of Applied Psychology* by social psychologist Jared R. Curhan and organizational behavior scholars Jennifer R. Overbeck, Yeri Cho, Teng Zhang, and Yu Yang finds that instructing one or both people in bilateral negotiations to use extended silence fosters a shift from default, zero-sum fixed thinking to generating more creative solutions. This research also shows that people overestimate the number of seconds they are silent, suggesting that listeners may need to count the seconds of silence before they respond.

Silence, however, is not always a constructive tool. It can also be used to intimidate, ignore, or indicate disagreement. When those listening do not want to hear or discuss what the speaker is saying, they can tune out or willfully ignore the speaker. A nonresponsive listener can also communicate that they are uninterested, effectively silencing the speaker. The following six tips for practicing deep listening nonverbally are based on internal work and self-perception:

**Notice judgments** | Become aware of any judgments you may have about the person speaking and what they are saying. Notice if you have a desire to change the other person, and then let these thoughts go.

**Center yourself** | Become aware of the tone of your voice, and notice what happens when you allow yourself to draw upon the stillness within you.

**Observe your body** | Take time to think about your body, to become aware of it. How are you communicating with your body, with your breath, with your shoulders and hands?

**Maintain eye contact** | Looking at the listener shows them that you are interested in what they are saying. When conversations take place virtually, eye contact is more challenging, because if you are looking at the camera, you cannot also look at the speaker and observe their body language.

**Practice silence** | Count to 10 after the speaker has finished their thought before you respond to what they have said.

**Embody supportive silence** | Try to embody a patient, supportive silence, rather than a critical or disinterested one.

## Reflecting Back

Nonverbal cues are important but not sufficient. The listener can further demonstrate that they have heard what the speaker has said by summarizing the speaker's message and reflecting back that meaning to them to confirm a mutual understanding. This technique gives the speaker an opportunity to clarify their ideas, build on what they've said, and reach a deeper understanding that they can then share with the listener.

This practice requires the listener to use all their senses and their ability to reason and empathize to fully comprehend what the speaker is saying. Next, the listener must determine the most salient points of the speaker's story and then communicate their interpretation to the speaker to check whether they have correctly understood them. Reflecting back the core meaning of the speaker's words includes focusing on and repeating words that are spoken with energy, as well as emotionally charged words. The listener should give particular attention to the speaker's use of figurative language, such as metaphor and hyperbole, and superlatives—all of which indicate that the meaning of these words holds significance for the speaker.

A conversation affords the listener multiple chances to reflect back the meaning to the speaker. Reflections can be met with the speaker's affirmation of the listener's understanding, or their correction or elaboration. A dialogue aimed at clarifying meaning to create a shared understanding is successful when the speaker affirms what is reflected back to them. The listener can then follow up with questions—such as "Is there anything I've missed?" or "Can you tell me more?"—to demonstrate interest in the speaker, as well as to encourage them to elaborate and go more deeply into their storytelling. Checking in with the speaker through summarizing what the listener has heard enables the speaker to express their story in a different way or to understand it differently as a kind of spiraling process, weaving different nuances and perspectives into each iteration, creating a richer picture for both the speaker and the listener.

In the process of deep listening, the listener should reflect back not only the meaning of the content but also their understanding of the speaker's emotions. This type of reflection requires surmising the speaker's feelings through evaluating their facial expressions, tone, pace of speech, and energy level. If the listener fails to reflect back the speaker's emotional state—even if they capture the meaning perfectly—the speaker is less likely to feel truly heard, explains psychoanalyst Donnel Stern: "We need to feel that the other in whose mind we exist is emotionally responsive to us, that he or she cares about what we experience and how we feel about it." Reflecting back emotion, in other words, demonstrates empathy.

Reflecting back does not require the listener to agree with the speaker. Instead, this conveys respect to the speaker and a desire to understand their message and intention. For example, when, in my reporting for the BBC, I spoke with dairy farmers on the English-Welsh border who were skeptical about climate change, I was aware that I disagreed with their perspective. But I was able to use this awareness to drive my curiosity to understand their beliefs. I demonstrated a sense of respect by setting aside my judgments and presenting an open posture. I attempted to convey the compassion that, according to psychologists Carl Rogers and Richard Farson in their essay, "Active Listening," is essential for effective communication—an attitude that expresses, "I respect your thoughts, and even if I don't agree with them, I know that they are valid for you."

Here are six specific tips for reflecting back:

**Listen for clues** | Listen deeply to what the speaker is saying. Listen for what seems to matter most to the speaker using clues: metaphors and superlatives, words with energy behind them, and emotionally charged words.

**Sense the core** | When the speaker has finished speaking, take some time to sense the core message of what you've heard. Examine what you felt while they were speaking and what you interpret to be the meaning behind the words.

**Crystalize the core** | Crystalize what you think is the essence of what the speaker has shared with you. Include emotions that they may have expressed nonverbally.

**Reflect back** | Offer with humility your summation of meaning and emotions.

**Check in** | Check in with the speaker to ensure that you fully understand them. If the speaker says no or tentatively offers a yes, ask them what you've missed or gotten wrong.

**Repeat** | Continue to reflect back until you get a resounding affirmation from the speaker. You can then ask additional questions to deepen your understanding of their story—ask, "What more?" rather than, "What else?"

## Bridging Divides

Deep listening can be especially effective when the speaker and listener stand on opposite sides of an issue. It is a powerful tool for those working in conflict resolution and for bridging ideological or social divides.

Being listened to significantly decreases social anxiety and invites speakers to engage in deeper introspection and increased self-awareness, which can lead to less extreme attitudes, according to research by organizational behavior scholars Guy Itzchakov, Avraham Kluger, and Dotan Castro. In an experiment, they read an article about a controversial subject to a group of undergraduates. Half the students were then paired with a listener who used a deep listening approach, while the other half were matched with an inexperienced listener. The researchers found that deep listening made the students less extreme in their attitudes, more able to understand both sides of an argument, and more aware of their own inner contradictions—regardless of whether the subject was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, taxing junk food, or euthanasia.

At the culmination of a deep listening virtual training that I delivered to 150 people in Lebanon in 2021, each participant had an opportunity to practice the approach with another participant who held an opposing view about a contentious issue. One participant, Loulou, shared how the process of reflecting back helped to lessen the ideological divide between her and her interlocutor. "I realized that whenever we paraphrased what the other was saying, we'd come to realize that what they're saying is not completely wrong and shocking," she said. "This [experience] will definitely make me less stubborn in future debates."

To deeply listen across divides, we need to navigate the interplay between our analytical capacity and our emotions. In *Strangers in Their Own Land*, sociologist Arlie R. Hochschild explains that "empathy walls" are "an obstacle to deep understanding of another person, one that can make us feel indifferent or even hostile to those who have different beliefs or whose childhood is rooted in different circumstances." To cross this bridge, each person needs to understand how other people experience the world. For example, in her effort to understand Tea Party supporters in Louisiana, Hochschild describes a relationship she built with a white single mother, Sharon, who allowed Hochschild to shadow her at her job selling medical insurance. Hochschild gained Sharon's trust through the way she listened to Sharon's stories and experiences. "It occurred to me that the kind of connection that Sharon offered was more precious than I first imagined. It built the scaffolding of an empathy bridge," she explains.

"We, on both sides, wrongly imagine that empathy with the other side brings an end to clearheaded analysis, when, in truth, it's on the other side of that bridge that the most important analysis can begin."

There are, of course, significant challenges to listening deeply to people with opposing views and beliefs, such as the discomfort we feel when we hear information that conflicts with what we know or believe. Sitting with this discomfort and establishing empathy for the speaker carry the potential—and, to some, the risk—of changing us, of changing who we are and what we believe. "It takes a great deal of inner security and courage to be able to risk one's self in understanding another," Rogers and Farson say.

## Barriers to Bridging Divides

Social-sector leaders invested in social and systems change must deeply listen to those who have been traditionally excluded from power. This imperative is especially true in US philanthropy, where 92 percent of US foundation presidents are white, 83 percent of other full-time executive staff are white, and 68 percent of program officers are white. Given the scale of exclusion and the challenges of securing funding for people of color, deep listening is essential to effectively serve beneficiaries and understand their needs.

However, challenges exist in listening across power divides. When the listener is in the more powerful position—for example, that of a social entrepreneur or philanthropist who provides funds or services to a person speaking on behalf of their community—the listener may try to avoid hearing uncomfortable truths. They may ask closed, leading questions and leave little time for response to avoid revealing undesirable facts and/or needs that they can't deliver on. In "Listening to Those Who Matter Most, the Beneficiaries," effective philanthropy experts Fay Twersky, Phil Buchanan, and Valerie Threlfall suggest that funders are "fearful of what [beneficiaries] might say—that without the benefit of 'expertise' they might be misinformed or wrong. Perhaps [funders are] scared that we will learn something that calls our approach into question."

Conversely, beneficiaries—or those in the position of less power and/or money—may be skeptical of the listener's intention and attention. They may not believe that the listener really wants to hear their authentic perspective, so they might edit or silence themselves. Or they may feel compelled to share only positive feedback so that they can secure or maintain their funding or services.

How can these challenges be addressed in practice? Monica Nirmala, now a government advisor for Indonesia's COVID-19 response, spent years practicing deep listening as the executive director of Health In Harmony's Indonesian branch. "In Indonesia, the hierarchy is very strong," she says. "When people talk to government officials, they tend to tell the good things and the nice things and don't open up about real problems." Nirmala overcame this power divide by being "intentional in listening," she says. "Showing them that they know better than I do, that their lived experience is valuable, helps people to be frank about what the real problems are."

Although being more aware of preconceptions and biases helps us manage how we listen and respond, it is easier to establish trust if the speaker and listener share a background, culture, and/or language. Meg Bostrom, the cofounder of the research-based communications firm Topos, says that for projects about racial equity, her team matches

the racial identity of the listener and the speaker. For other projects, Topos will send a pair of listeners—one with an insider perspective, the other with an outsider perspective—to conduct the research. To learn why Indigenous communities are cutting down the forests, Health In Harmony sends a pair of listeners: a local person who speaks the same language as the Indigenous community in question, and a person from a different culture. The two perspectives help build understanding together—the insider knows local idioms and has cultural knowledge, which helps establish trust, while the outsider can prompt the speakers to explain things left unsaid.

Ethical concerns exist in all instances of deep listening but especially where there is a significant power divide between the speaker and the listener, and particularly when the listener has set up the conversation. Accordingly, the listener should become aware of their responsibility for having created a trusting environment in which the speaker is vulnerable, psychologist Alex Gillespie says. The listener can accomplish this goal by ensuring that the speaker has a measure of control over the conversation and that the listener genuinely reflects back the speaker's perspective. Such safeguarding can be achieved by visiting people on multiple occasions, giving them time to mull over the issues and reflect on what they have shared before approving it.

## Uncovering Deeper Narratives

The power of deep listening lies also in its ability to access what's beyond the convenient, superficial nuggets of information that are most often given as automatic responses to generic questioning. Deep listening can uncover the buried narratives—about institutional history and knowledge, for example—necessary to understanding complex systems, because these narratives are what create and organize identities.

Understanding the deeper narratives of underrepresented communities is an important step in tackling multiple systemic challenges. For example, in order to find solutions to rising greenhouse gas emissions, we need to understand the reasoning of climate-change skeptics and deniers. When I listened to the dairy farmers, I was able to report a story about the "faceless men in dark corridors" looking for a scapegoat and seizing on who the farmers perceived as the usual suspects. Some of those farmers shared anger and frustration with their lack of agency and a distrust of scientific authority. They understood climate change as the latest excuse to blame them, since they had been blamed in the past for creating a range of societal ills, from causing cancer to spreading bovine tuberculosis.

Time is a critical factor in listening deeply. When we listen to someone, we most often have a question to answer or a specific area in which we want to gather more information. While repeated conversations over time with multiple people in a community are more likely to elicit richer and more authentic narratives, this intensive work is not always practical. Regardless of the time you have, be transparent with the people you talk to, share with them the broader question that you seek to answer, and then give them the opportunity to shape their responses.

## Practicing the Approach

For deep listening to create systemic change, people need to learn how to practice this approach, individually and collectively. According to

Kluger, "what is essential in the process of training people in how to deeply listen is giving them the experience of being deeply listened to." Reflecting upon and integrating the embodied experience of feeling heard enables the listener to really understand the power of deep listening so that they can practice it themselves.

Deep listening training can be conducted in a range of contexts, including one in which a nonprofit or business trains its teams to understand its clients or customers better. Proximity Design is a Myanmar-based social business that designs products to help rural farmers boost their incomes and trains those farmers on techniques from seed selection to solar-powered water pumps. To understand what the rural farmers need, its sales team attends a three-week training program that includes listening practice and role playing. The program emphasizes the deep listening skills of reflecting back, pausing before responding, and learning to be comfortable with other people sharing their feelings. "We have reframed our relationship with small farmers by treating them as entrepreneurial, savvy customers who want choice and dignity and who need focus and attention," founder Debbie Aung Din says. "It is critical that people feel heard."

Even a limited amount of deep listening training can create a difference. I trained 200 people from diverse communities in deep listening for a few hours at the BBC Crossing Divides Festival in Manchester, United Kingdom, in early 2020. After the training, 73 percent of participants felt more confident to talk to people they disagreed with, and 76 percent felt more empathy toward them. Since most listening practitioners advocate spreading this training over time so that participants can reflect and practice between sessions, I lengthened the duration of the course to three weeks when I delivered the virtual deep listening training to residents in Lebanon this year. Facilitators who observed and helped with breakout-room conversations noticed significant progress. In the first session, participants were "making comments," "interrupting," and "neglecting" the techniques, but by the last session, they were more keen to reflect back to the speaker to discern whether they had understood them correctly. Participants also became more open to hearing different viewpoints. Prior to the training, 21 percent of the participants strongly agreed that they were able to listen to someone with different opinions and not interrupt. After the three training sessions, 58 percent strongly agreed with this statement.

How long does it take for deep listening training to become effective? "Could we train someone in 10 minutes? Yes. Would 10 years be better? Definitely," conflict mediator Catherine Conner says. "When we train people, we see it as more of an introduction with some initial practice."

Deep listening embodies a way of being, one that we can realize daily with other people, based on a fundamental recognition of their humanity and dignity. It is an approach that social-impact leaders can draw upon to realize their ambitions to create systems change, and that journalists can use to better understand traditionally underrepresented communities. Practicing deep listening is especially valuable in a context where citizens fear greater political divisions and where extreme views have become more dominant. The deep listening approach can foster more honest and authentic conversations so that we understand each other better—a necessary first step toward creating a more cohesive and resilient society. ∎