Sophia Liang

TACKLING OUR LISTENING MINDSET

Listening is a muscle we must continuously and intentionally develop. Where we choose to focus our listening critically impacts our choices at the wall.

Visual Listening



TACKLING OUR LISTENING MINDSET

With great power comes great responsibility. Marks made on a page by the visual practitioner can directly impact the direction of the group. We don't enter the room in a vacuum. Each of us comes to the wall colored by our personal and work experiences, which have a direct impact on our choices and habits—consciously and unconsciously. Too often, we listen on autopilot and miss an opportunity to serve the group. This chapter will help reveal our habits and refresh our approach to listening. It will prepare us to walk into the room ready to shape the conversation from the wall.

> *"Listening is a choice and a competency."*
>
> —Anthony Weeks

Most often, we talk about listening as an interpersonal skill. There are workshops and bodies of research designed to teach us how to listen. But those are focused on how one person listens to another. As visual practitioners, we are witnesses in the room. We are listening to a group of individuals, each bringing in their own experiences, perspectives, and opinions. It's a different dynamic. In order to best serve the group we must do all of the above and be even more attuned to the choices we make—both consciously and unconsciously—as professional listeners.



BREAKING OUR LISTENING HABITS

> *"Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act . . . It is against the auditive background that listening occurs, as if it were the exercise of a function of intelligence, i.e., of selection. . . . To listen is to adopt an attitude of decoding what is obscure, blurred, or mute, in order to make available to consciousness the 'underside' of meaning."*
>
> —Roland Barthes

How do we break our listening habits? How do we decide where our listening focus should be? That's the tough part—as every situation, every client, every conversation is unique. With practice, we can identify our listening defaults, and begin to develop stronger listening muscles in lesser-developed areas. Ultimately, where we choose to focus our listening critically impacts our choices at the wall.

I approach our work through three listening filters—fact, empathy, and relationship—and no single filter is more important than another, nor are they mutually exclusive.

We dial up or down our listening filters depending on where we put our focus. We must exercise due diligence when getting to know our client, their objectives, and the agenda in order to understand how our work will impact the group.

It's crucial to note that this model isn't meant to be prescriptive. It's a way to frame up and shape your awareness about listening as a practice, an artform, and a profession.

The more you use the model, the more robust it will become as you start to discover your own patterns of listening and drawing over time.

This model challenges us to:

- **Develop awareness of our listening biases and filters**
- **Explore our existing habits and patterns**
- **Practice the model as a graphic recorder, process designer, and graphic facilitator**
- **Facilitate conversations with sponsors to identify where/how our listening would best serve the goals and desired outcomes of the session**
- **Reflect on changes in our listening patterns over time**



LISTENING MINDSET—FOCUS YOUR LISTENING AT THE INTERSECTIONS OF FACT, EMPATHY, AND RELATIONSHIP.

- Our **fact filter focuses on objective information** versus opinion
- **Our empathy filter focuses on the vantage points** of all stakeholders (including events, feelings, and beliefs)
- **Our relationship filter focuses on connections** between ideas, people, or objects



We begin to tackle our listening mindsets at the *intersections* of fact, empathy, and relationship.

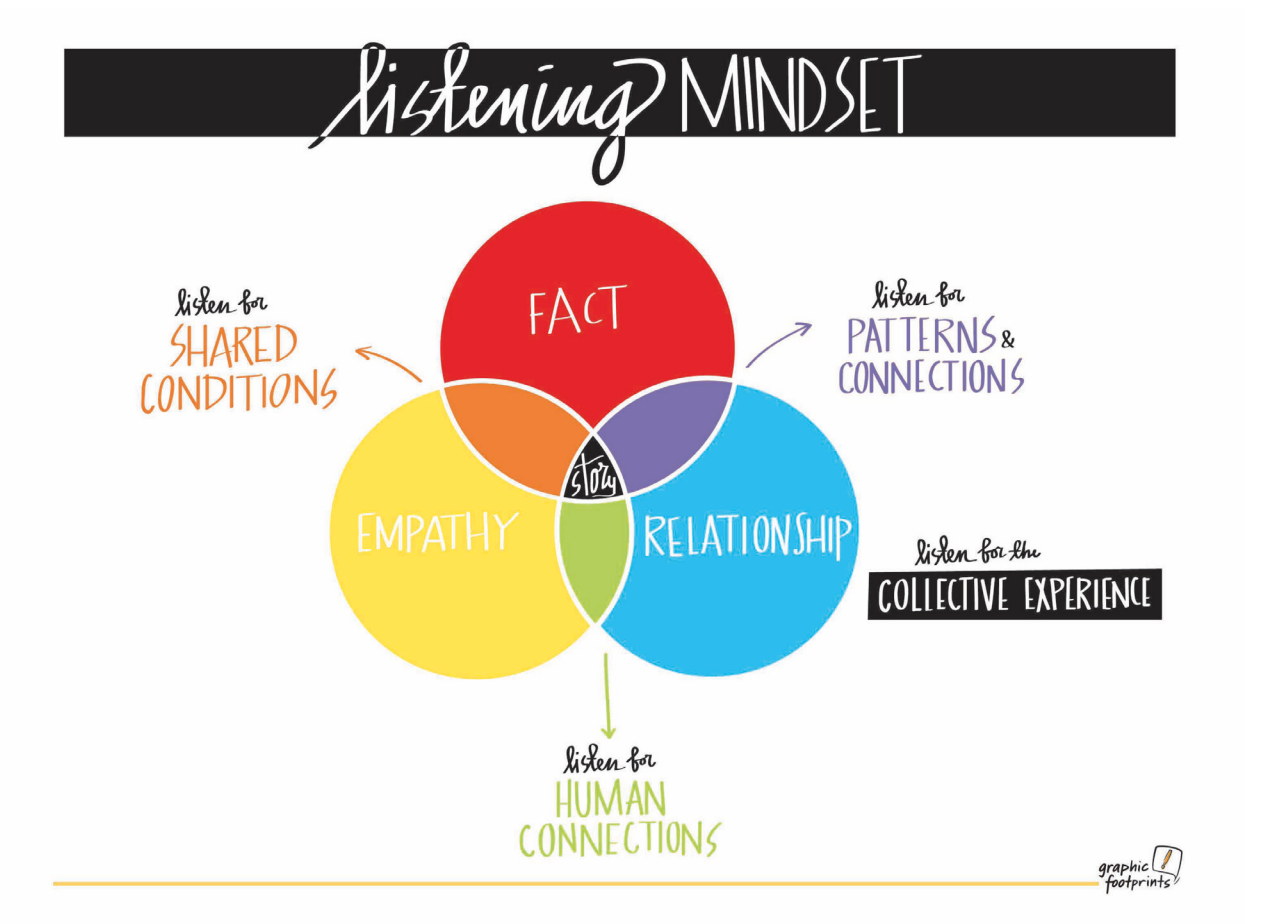
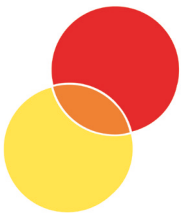


Figure 1: Listening Mindset: Focus your listening at the intersections of fact, empathy, and relationship.

FACTS + EMPATHY = LISTENING FOR SHARED CONDITIONS

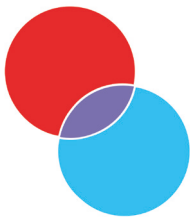


What is our shared truth?

Often we are in rooms where there are multiple perspectives, varied experiences, and myriad personalities. The words differ, but they are interpretations of the same set of conditions. The challenge is to work toward a shared understanding by surfacing misunderstanding, aligning language, and building trust. When we listen at this intersection, we listen for accuracy to help groups move to clarity.

At a recent executive leadership retreat, I worked with the CEO (sponsor) to design a two and half day agenda to redefine the organization's purpose and to start building trust and alignment amongst a newly-formed team. The organization was highly siloed and had faced tough challenges with ineffective leadership over the last two years. We needed to rebuild relationships and find team alignment to create a stronger foundation for the executive team. Bringing together a panel of former well-loved leaders, we walked through a timeline of the organization's history. But this timeline was different: rather than focusing on organizational milestones, I focused my listening for facts + empathy. We needed to capture not only the historical milestones over the last thirty years but the heart and passion of the people who came before the current team. The power of the dialogue was not about how the organization grew as a business, but how people showed up, took on tough challenges, anchored to mission, and persevered. It was a story about family and survival. The leadership team used this history timeline as a launchpad to rediscover and redefine the organization's purpose.

FACTS + RELATIONSHIPS = LISTENING FOR PATTERNS AND CONNECTIONS

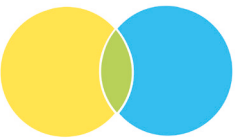


What connections and patterns are emerging?

Brainstorming, clustering, sharing ideas, and reaching a consensus can be daunting tasks for any group. As we move from divergence to convergence, we must work through misunderstandings, impatience, and confusion. At the intersection of facts and relationships, our role is to surface similarities and differences to discover connections and patterns. We must also challenge ourselves to go beyond the obvious and listen for the gems that break the patterns in interesting ways.

I worked with a small team in a large pharmaceutical company to simplify their story of a new medicine that could change the way we treat heart failure. Participants included clinicians, marketers, researchers, business development experts, and medical illustrators. Conversations ranged from the physiological effects to the interactions at the molecular level. How would I bring such diverse perspectives together? Designing an agenda with this diversity in mind, we led conversations that helped the group reach a consensus regarding their target audience, and the level of messaging required to reach that audience. Then the hard work began. Each small group worked on messaging for a particular audience; we then drew a visual to support that message. As they shared ideas, I focused on listening for commonalities—the critical elements of their story. I listened for the bigger system as it emerged, drew that on the wall, and added blank boxes for layers of content. The group then worked to fill in the blanks together.

EMPATHY + RELATIONSHIPS = LISTENING FOR HUMAN CONNECTION

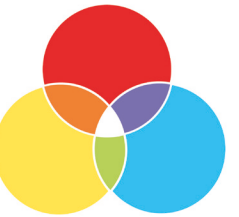


What is the blurry, emerging, messy, unsaid?

The world becomes more volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous every day. We communicate more and more through the screen—email, web conferences, text messages, and social media—and across blurring geographic boundaries. Conversations are becoming louder, messier, and more heated. The better we know our clients, the more adeptly we can find solutions to the complex challenges we face. At this intersection, listen for the reveal—the revealing of who we are and our life experiences. Listen for moments that build trust and relationship. Listen for stories that reveal our universal motivations. Listen between the lines.

The Kauffman Foundation invited the Value Web to design and facilitate an interactive space and workshop for the Global Entrepreneurship Summit. In the center of a Johannesburg exhibit space, we met entrepreneurs—both novice and experienced—and asked them to share the tools and services they loved. We collected lists, names, and ideas, but we were missing the spark that ignited a shift into action and progress. To encourage context we drew this question on the wall: "What happened, when, and who were you at the time?" Engaging participants at this level encouraged storytelling, and the context and human connections were revealed.

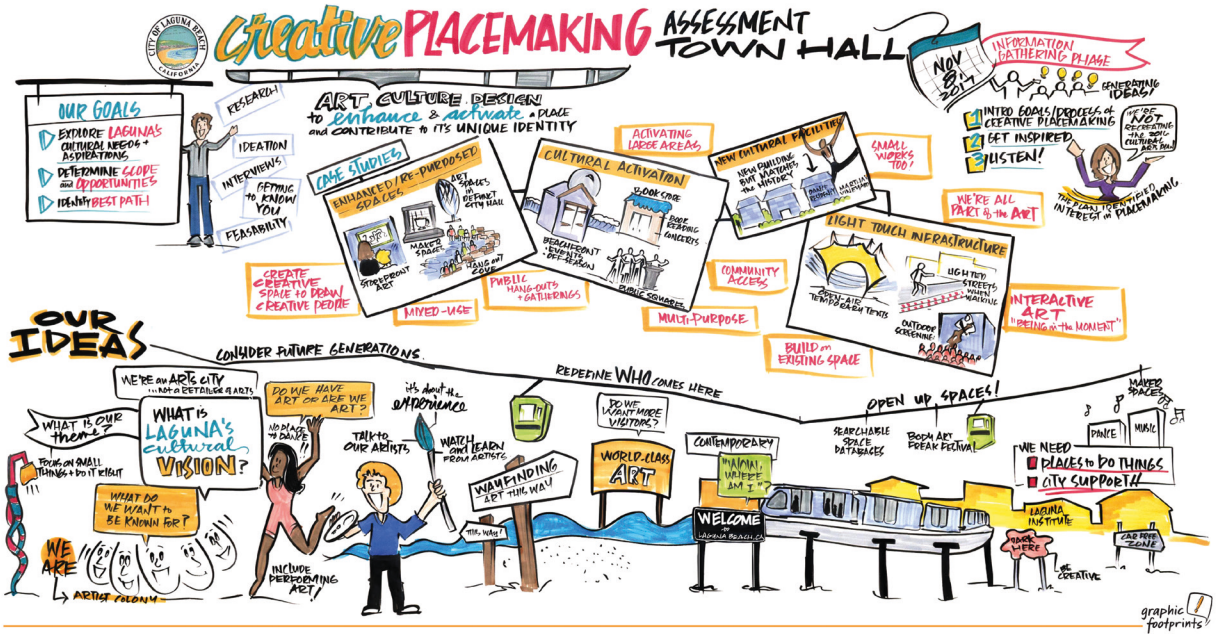
FACTS + EMPATHY + RELATIONSHIPS = LISTENING FOR STORY



Stories are rooted in ourselves.

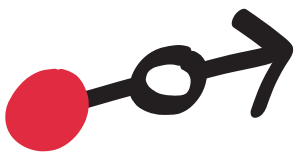
We begin listening to stories as children, learning about the world through pictures and words. As adults, we use stories to create, inform, and connect. At the center—the intersection of facts, empathy, and relationships—we focus on the voice of the storyteller. Whether it's an individual sharing their story as a presentation, or a group co-creating their organization's cultural narrative, we listen for the storyteller's voice. Why do they care? What message are they trying to convey? Why do they need us to understand their story? When we listen for story, we listen for the storyteller's truth.

Community town halls, with their multiple, diverse perspectives, each driven and rooted by a personal stake in the community and the issue at hand, challenge my listening abilities. It's incredibly emotional when everyone has skin in the game. The Laguna Hills Creative Placemaking town hall was no different. My client informed me that the small but passionate community had been through multiple assessments where they were told what was good for their neighborhood. My client wanted to involve community members in the creative process. My job was to give them a voice. So what did I focus on? I focused on listening for the community's story—their needs, their motivations, what excited them about the proposed projects. The final graphic visualized their experiences (past and present), relationships with each other and their city, and the shared challenges they faced.



WHAT'S NEXT?

Experiment. Review the three intersections and reflect on how you intend to listen versus how you actually listen. To be a powerful listening partner in the room, we must be armed with a deep and practiced awareness of our listening filters and a good understanding of the intentions of the session. This model will shift depending on your role—graphic recorder, graphic facilitator, or sketchnoter. Make it your own. Change up the intersections. My hope is that this model will push us to be more intentional, tuned in, and invested in our listening skills as a field.



Building Listening Muscles Through Daily Practice

During your next meeting, take notes–visual or text. Before you start, take a moment to think about the listening filters you've chosen to use. Afterward, review your notes.

- **What's reflected on your paper? Are your notes filled with data and facts about the meeting? Are there numerous arrows to connect ideas together? Did you emphasize the emotions?**
- **Did you try to listen using one filter, but the notes reflected another?**

Understanding the Client

Review the agenda with the client. Walk through the agenda in detail. Ask questions—lots of them.

- **Find out the objectives and goals for each section. How will they inform or impact the next conversation?**
- **Show them the model. Ask them where they think it would be valuable for you to focus your listening superpower. Their answer may surface a hidden need they didn't know they had.**

Be Vulnerable and Ask for Feedback

Get a learning buddy. Work with them to see if your work reflects the listening filters you chose. Receiving honest feedback is critical for growth.

- **Capture a session focusing on a specific listening intersection. Individually reflect on your choices and write them down.**
- **Ask a trusted colleague (who'll offer constructive feedback) to give reflections on your map. What do they see? Did they recognize the listening choices you made?**

(Be sure to read Michelle Walker's chapter, *The Growing Edge for Visual Practitioners*.)

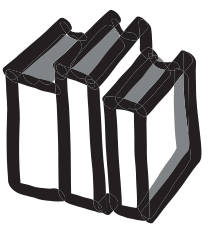
A special thanks to Alicia Bramlett and The Value Web *for contributing the* Kauffman Foundation *story.*

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Majestic Studio

JEROEN **BLIJSIE,** TIM **HAMONS,** and RACHEL S. **SMITH**

Visual Tools and Stories from 50 Experts Worldwide

THE WORLD OF VISUAL FACILITATION



unlock YOUR POWER to connect PEOPLE & IDEAS

FOREWORD BY **DAVID SIBBET** DESIGN BY **VISUALITY**

Including ONLINE BONUS MATERIAL

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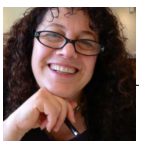


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Attending to Tone



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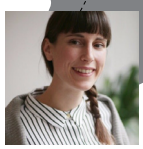


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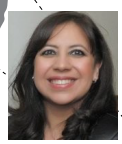
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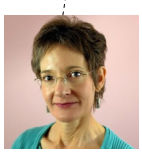
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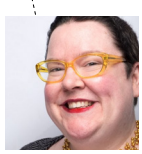
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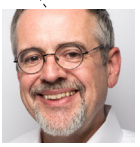
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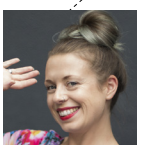
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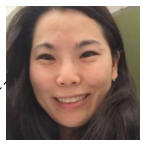
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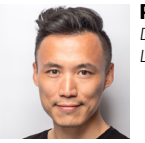


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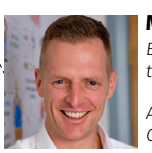
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