Commitment of **Listening**

By Tony Zampella

What is listening? Let me begin with this: Speaking is insufficient to say what listening is. As soon as we breathe a word about listening, we've reduced its fullness; we've defined and limited a human phenomenon that is misunderstood, under-appreciated, and highly involved.

We tend to observe listening as the opposite of speaking. In other words, if you are not speaking then you must be listening. These observers engage a fatal error.

Listening is a commitment first, then capacity, and then skill. If this is news to you, please consider, whether at some point you've reduced listening to something much less than what is possible.

The fullest definition I can muster for listening will be inadequate, and ... it involves all of the ways we become aware of, perceive, and observe the world and ourselves. At its fullest, listening consists of a radical openness of mind, heart, and will that expands awareness of self, focuses attention on others, and generates meaning from deeper intention.

Listening operates both as a skill for receiving and clarifying content and as a commitment that shapes the context for perceiving, understanding, and acting on that content. In sum, listening is decisive; it shapes how we perceive situations, what we say, and what we act on.

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Levels of Listening

Levels of Listening are categories of mindsets based on the notion that each of us listens from a set of concerns given by our view of reality. We are driven by an **attention-focus dynamic**. We *focus* on concerns that *drive* our attention.

1. Listening to **Protect**

We React – We care about protecting, so we *pretend*, *control*, and *project*.

Focus of Attention: To control events
Communications: Defensive/Habitual

In this mindset, we focus on whatever captures or hooks our attention as an ambition, threat, or problem. We react to threatening situations by downloading information, reflexively, in ways that protect and preserve our current attention patterns.

2. Listening to **Facts**

We Respond – We care most about certainty and finding facts. We become better at *solving* and *informing*.

Focus of Attention: To respond to events
Communications: Debate/Conform

This mindset embraces an empirical view of reality, seeking out details in any situation. We often repeat what has been heard to ensure accuracy, and can be found explaining and describing reality in concrete and absolute terms. This listening can seem transactional.

3. Listening to **Know**

We predict – We care most about leveraging knowledge to expand opportunity. We become better at *predicting* and *anticipating*.

Focus of Attention: To predict events
Communications: Explain/Expand

This mindset relies on objective knowledge to leverage opportunities. With an objective and rational view of reality, we focus on patterns of data and research to produce effective results, achieve long-term goals, and predict situations.

Up to **83% of managers and executives** listen from levels 2 or 3.

Listening in **Organizational Life**

Levels two and three underscore organizational life today. Up to 83% of managers and executives listen from levels 2 or 3. These experts, executives, physicians, college professors, CEOs, and consultants often dig in and listen through knowledge to prove or disprove another's point of view.

Level two and three listening is steeped in objective-based reality, knowledge, and expertise sometimes from *anecdotal evidence* or *grounded beliefs* (level 2) or *research, science, and patterns* (level 3).

Typical for these listeners, they "believe" that we can plan for or predict change, whenever a problem arises with any new initiative, product, or service.

These managers assume any failure to produce change or follow through on change efforts is due to lack of knowledge or clarity. They convene meetings, create new PowerPoint decks, or conduct surveys to further explain the process and clarify details.

What level two and three listeners miss, and cannot perceive, is beyond knowledge: while workers will comply with directions or defined tasks, these knowledge-based efforts are not the same as committing to new initiatives or setting new directions, which require venturing into the unknown.

When engaging change, workers tend to hold back performance if they do not feel heard, if ideas are not received or are dismissed, if a previous change initiative was never acknowledged, completed correctly or promptly, or if changes are imposed.

Only a level four listener can perceive this gap. Neither clear process, detailed facts, nor sound knowledge is the issue. Workers lack motivation, do not feel appreciated, nor do they trust what is being presented. A level two or level three manager will insult workers' intelligence or patronize them by repeating the facts, or explaining the process.

A listener at level four will confront and release the tension, and begin rebuilding the trust necessary to create change or engage new ideas.

4. Listening to **Relate**

We connect – We care most about understanding others and find ourselves respecting, appreciating, and empathizing.

Focus of Attention: Achieve mutual understanding
Communications: Dialogue/Negotiate

This mindset observes and experiences different worldviews or viewpoints as legitimate. We add these perspectives to our own listening. Different experiences and worldviews reveal biases, concerns, and commitments that shape our listening and actions.

We embrace complexity and a nuanced understanding of reality that includes data and knowledge to reveal an objective view, while appreciating how perceptions and worldviews shape context and subjective experiences.

An empathic view offers new perspectives beyond our own concerns (level 1), what the data reveals (level 2), or what knowledge proves (level 3). We are now comfortable in dialogue with each other.

Paraphrasing Peter Senge (1990), from his research on systems thinking, "dialogue is the capacity of members of a team to suspend assumptions and enter into a genuine thinking together, allowing the group to discover insights not attainable individually."

5. Listening to **Being**

We create – At this level we empower others, which finds us *generating*, *creating*, and *transforming*.

Focus of Attention: Create together from unknown
Communications: Collective Creativity

This mindset rarely occurs in organizations. At this level we observe emerging whole views of reality that result from letting go of "either/or" fragmented thinking, to adopting a view of reality with a "both/and" approach to perceiving and embracing paradoxes.

Embracing discovery finds these listeners understanding that what we perceive is the tip of an iceberg of what is unseen. And so they lead with questions or observations, rather than offering answers, pronouncements, or explanations.

From this deep attention and awareness, we realize that we alone do not "make things happen" but rather participate in ways that reveal and realize what is already-and-always-available wanting to emerge.

Researcher Otto Scharmer (2009) points to this "participatory consciousness" as "akin to what musicians experience when individual players can listen to the whole, and simultaneously attune their own instrument to an emerging pattern they are able to co-create something new together."

This is a critical limitation in conventional education, where learning often involves grasping abstraction through new skills, knowledge, and concepts without the practices and participation to access the deeper connections, meaning-making, and understanding required to contemplate, embody, and enact concepts.

Goal vs. **Commitment**

Examining listening through this mindset model distinguishes *being* (mindsets) as increasing awareness, and *doing* (skills sets) as improving results.

In sum, improving results may achieve goals; increasing awareness expands mindset. Only from mindset can we live (being) our commitment.

The difference in quality between increasing awareness (being) and achieving goals (doing) is quite remarkable. Briefly, listening as "doing skills" will occur as transactional or as a performance.

We can do things correctly, follow scripts, say what needs to be said, and look right, and never actually embody the mindset to live that commitment.

Others feel, sense, and perceive this difference. Often it accounts for what we term an "authenticity" gap. To *become* anything requires increasing awareness.

Anyone who has ever taken up any art, craft, or sport will recognize this difference. We can learn the skills to run. But if we wish to enter a marathon we must become a runner. Becoming a runner impacts our life: how we sleep, what we eat, drink, who we socialize with, choice of exercise routine, and even what we read and pay attention to. The experience of *being a runner* is quite distinct from someone who merely runs.

In a mindset model, each level evolves and expands to a new level of awareness to include skills, strengths, and awareness of each previous level to grow into any mindset as a commitment.

We invite this inquiry into developing a mindset as a commitment for listening.

Qualities of Listening

On this page, I offer a grid to distinguish each listening level or mindset with a description of each mindset, its strengths, limitations, the catalyst of change, and the percentage of the population at each level.

A. Level/Mindset	B. Strengths	C. Limitations	D. Catalyst of Change	E. % of People
1. Listen to Protect We React Time: Immediate **Teenager**	Easy, simplistic choices; quick judgments. Rejects **feedback**.	Reckless and Impulsive; focus on self; impatience leads to frustration/ neglect.	Desire to *plan*, and improve results.	US Adults: **15.5%** Managers: **10.5%**
2. Listen for Facts (conforming) We Respond Time: Efficient **Young Adult**	Conforms to evidence, and leverages beliefs for problem-solving. Uses clichés, superlatives. **Feedback** only from experts.	Cautious and avoids confrontation; can become controlling. Relying on beliefs can lead to dogma and group-think.	Desire to *become proactive* and to expand beyond beliefs.	US Adults: **36.5%** Managers: **48%**
3. Listen to Know (expanding) We Predict Time: Effective **Executive**	Questions evidence to expand knowledge, discern patterns, and predict success. Accepts **feedback** on behavior.	Objective knowledge limits view of reality. Changes require trust beyond objective facts. Challenged by abstract thoughts.	Desire to *expand beyond objective reality* (get out of box), and individual worldview.	US Adults: **30%** Managers: **35%**
4. Listen to Relate We Reveal/Connect Time: Timely **Servant**	Subjective experience, nature of bias & multiple views offers fuller under-standing of self, others, and situations. Open to and asks for **feedback**.	Confusion over relativism of differing worldviews and viewpoints, and increased complexity. Decision paralysis.	Desire for clarity of purpose, deeper meaning; and expand beyond self. Explore source of constraints, and shadow work.	US Adults: **11%** Managers: **5%**
5. Listen for Being We Create Time: Timeless **Alchemist**	Clarity of purpose; man-ifests intentions; Appre-ciates all other levels. Open and clear. Seeks **feedback** for growth.	N/A. Not enough data to assess in organizational context.	Desire for *greater freedom* through connectedness.	US Adults: **7%** Managers: **1.5%**

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The table above provides five levels of listening and their associated mindsets, and five columns as follows.

Column A "Level": Identifies each mindset and archetype (**Teenager** to **Alchemist**) with its view of time.

Column B: Highlights some of the *strengths* at each level

Column C: Highlights key *limitations* at each level.

Column D: Identifies the *catalyst* for change to the next level, identifying what needs arise to motivate one to expand listening.

Column E: Offers some data to gauge listening in the adult population and the level of listening that managers embody.

The largest swath, 66.5%, of the adult population, and 83% of managers listen from **level 2** or **3**.

This is organizational life, and represents a focus of development to expand listening.

Note: Consider that we often view reality through a dominant mindset during stable times that are predictable. When threatened, we tend to revert to a previous mindset. This can find people operating between the levels above. Through practice (Table B) we will find ourselves growing in our listening.

Developing **Listen Mindsets**

A. Level/Mindset	B. Frames	C. Attitude	D. Practices
1. Listening to Protect We React **Teenager**	**Impulsive** Right – Wrong. Good – Bad.	**I Defend Myself** I am right. I am not bad.	No Practices.
2. Listening for Facts (conforming) We Respond **Young Adult**	**Empirical** Know – Don't Know. True (Truth) – False. Agree – Disagree.	**I Debate Others** I know that. That's (not) true. I disagree.	Observe triggers and reactions. Distinguish assumptions from facts. Paraphrase speaking.
3. Listen for Knowledge (expanding) We Predict **Executive**	**Competitive** Win – Lose. Success – Fail. Problem – Answer.	**I Predict Situations** What's the problem? I can fix that. View opportunities.	Include #2, Notice filters and Bracket (suspend) assumptions. Pause in between daily events, breathe 3X, and feel ground beneath feet. Begin regular breathing.
4. Listening to Relate We Reveal/Connect **Servant**	**Cooperative** I – We. It – Thou.	**We Dialogue** That's my viewpoint. Do other views exist?	Include #3, when in conversation: Drop agenda/point of view. Be open to resistance. Be willing to receive another (view) as legitimate. Daily breathing (min. 20 min/day)
5. Listening for Being We Create **Alchemist**	**Integral** Clarity – Confusion. Inquiry – Insight.	**We Co-Create** What's possible? What's evolving?	Include #4, with silence and stillness, witness blind spots, cultivate openness. Reframe assumptions to transform perceptions.

The frames and practices in the table above detail the subtle frames, views, and attitudes that can shape, constrain and expand our listening. Use this table as a complement to the Qualities of Listening in Table A.

Column A: Lists Levels and mindsets (5) of listening.

Column B: Reveals the Frames for each level. The bolded words—Impulsive, Conforming, Competitive, Cooperative, and Integral—captures the fundamental focus of listening at each level. The other words, such as Win-Lose, Success-Fail, Problem-Answer at level 3, frame concerns that drive that level's listening.

Column C: Reveals our Attitudes as frames. These prevalent attitudes such as, "I am right," or "I am not bad," (level 1), with the frame "I defend myself." As we practice listening when we interact with others, we experience our frames and attitudes.

Column D: Lists Practices at each level. When practiced, we engage each level fully, and also prepare for the next level. listening.

It is important to say a word about practice. We do not suggest practicing to achieve some goal, or to achieve "perfection" (whatever that is). We practice to practice.

An increase in practicing develops a keen observer. Interestingly, once we observe and experience our own listening, and then engage practices, we loosen the grip any constraints may have on us.

Awareness loosens constraints, which finds us evolving our listening that can over time empower a commitment to listening.

Openness to **Change**

Based on evidence and research on listening, I am suggesting something quite different: that our listening evolves from awareness at the intersection of two fundamental capacities: *Level of Openness* and *Continuum of Change*.
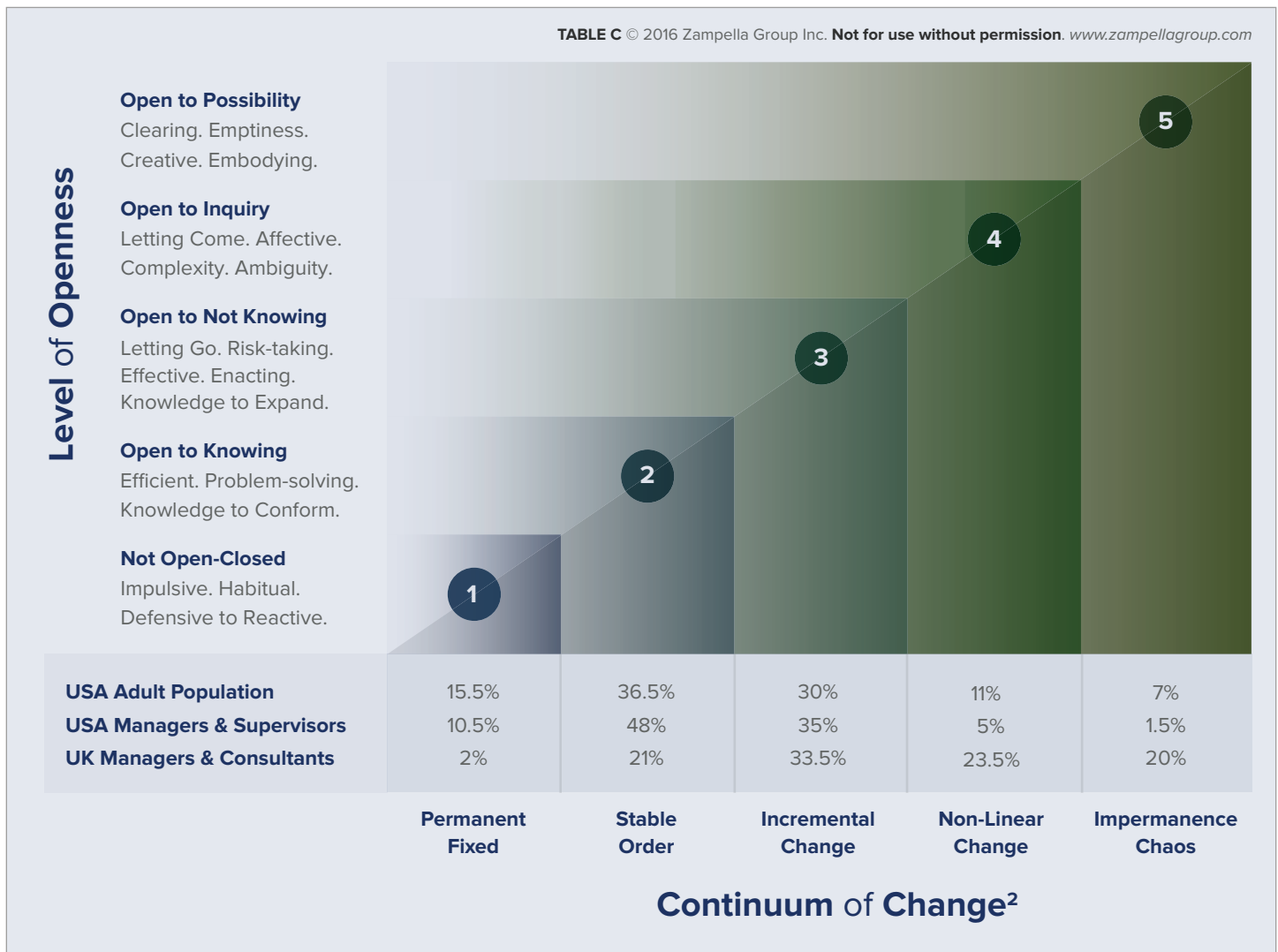
Level of **Openness**

The Y-Axis (vertical) ranks our **Level of Openness** to uncertainty. At the bottom of the axis we are **not open** (or closed-minded). Then we become **open to knowing**, receiving what's provable or concrete. The next level is **open to not knowing**; here we begin to value subjective experiences and multiple views.

Openness to inquiry holds questions, tensions, and paradoxes, often for a lifetime. Einstein's question, "What is the nature of reality?" guided his life and created new fields of scientific inquiry. The final level **open to possibility** is to be freely open. Our level of openness discloses our capacity to experience anything, newly, to accept a fresh or new perspective on ideas, concepts, viewpoints, people, experiences—viewing the familiar with a beginner's mind.

Continuum of **Change**

The X-Axis (horizontal) **Continuum of Change** defines our view of unpredictability. The axis begins (far left) as **fixed and permanent**. This view rejects change. The next view, **stable-order**, perceives an orderly world with an occasional view of change. Then we see **incremental change**, a view that accepts change as regular, and as extrapolated from the past to manage and leverage.

The view of **non-linear change** underscores change as normal and unpredictable. Then finally **impermanence** expands "now" (this moment) to embrace the order in chaos, which, ironically, finds change disappearing as a concern.

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Level of Openness

Open to Possibility
Clearing. Emptiness. Creative. Embodying.

Open to Inquiry
Letting Come. Affective. Complexity. Ambiguity.

Open to Not Knowing
Letting Go. Risk-taking. Effective. Enacting. Knowledge to Expand.

Open to Knowing
Efficient. Problem-solving. Knowledge to Conform.

Not Open-Closed
Impulsive. Habitual. Defensive to Reactive.

	Permanent Fixed	Stable Order	Incremental Change	Non-Linear Change	Impermanence Chaos
USA Adult Population	15.5%	36.5%	30%	11%	7%
USA Managers & Supervisors	10.5%	48%	35%	5%	1.5%
UK Managers & Consultants	2%	21%	33.5%	23.5%	20%

Continuum of Change²

Levels 1-3 comprise about half of the grid, yet include 82% of the adult population and 93.5% of our manager population. Becoming a listener as a *commitment* finds us living in the dynamic flow of life: *receiving* new ideas, *learning* from our experiences, *expanding* our views, and *letting go* of beliefs that isolate us.

Acknowledgments

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