

Brief Encounters with the Taos Institute

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This month, Kathy Isaacson, Taos Associate, shares with us some ideas on profound listening...

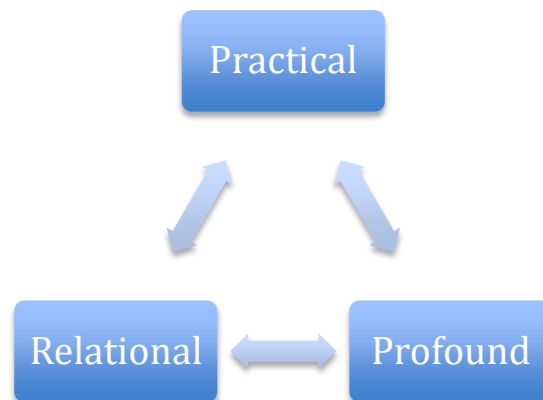
Profound Listening and the Listening Triad



By Kathy Isaacson, PhD

After decades of designing processes for engaging stakeholders in challenging communication, a new concept is emerging that has promise for including perspectives that often go unheard. **Profound Listening** is a component of the **Listening Triad** which addresses the question: *If we are to design and implement processes that manage human interactivity where all appropriate stakeholder voices are heard, what types of listening are required?*

The Listening Triad comes from my consulting work, where I guide people through difficult situations, toward the future they prefer to create. My motto in this work is: *people support what they create*. I often see this triad of listening choices emerge:



Practical listening involves the pragmatic and functional communication aimed at getting work done, goals accomplished, and progress in conversation. What do you need to hear in order to move through your day?

Relational listening illuminates how people in interactions jointly construct communication, and includes both listening and speaking. I was dismayed to see this bumper sticker, “Conversation is about competition and the loser is the listener.” Poet

Mark Nepo says the greater life of listening begins when we realize “we hear more together.” Some simple components of relational listening include:

1. Be curious (start sentences with “I wonder” “I am curious about”)
2. Acknowledge before responding (summarize to indicate that you heard the other BEFORE you give a response)
3. Create transcendent categories (manage the tension of opposing forces by creating a new category that subsumes the oppositions so that they are no longer contradictory)
4. Use generative questions (open-ended questions that invite multiple responses and lines of inquiry).

Profound listening occurs when we gather meaning from all the senses rather than to isolate and analyze the meaning from a moment or episode. Indigenous people talk about listening in a way that allows us to be touched by life, below the literal fact of things.

How do we listen profoundly?

- Giving and receiving (talking and listening) become indistinguishable. In profound listening, we don't keep track of what is said and what is not said. Harlene Anderson has remarked that we are each guests and hosts in our communication.
- Silence is honored and in that silence, what we hear enters us. We can honor silence in many ways, including not rushing in to fill silent spaces. (“Let's take a few minutes in silence to consider what we want to say”).
- Not knowing and paradox are privileged. They let us fall beneath separateness into the living truth of how difference informs each other.
- Self-reflection is key (What am I trying to say that others are having a hard time hearing? What are others trying to say that I am having a hard time hearing?)
- Hold identity and perspective lightly.
- Privilege nonverbal communication.
- Privilege the creative act and provide space for it.
- Offer strong and consistent acknowledgements and clarifications.

As I continue to explore profound listening, I remind myself by a note taped to my refrigerator: *The quieter I get the more I can hear.*