

LISTENING TO EMPLOYEES

A How-To Guide for Employee Roundtables and Workplace Engagement



Engaged Cultures are Conversational

When developing an engaged culture, organizations must plan on building towards a conversational one. Both a symptom and cause of disengaged cultures is an exclusion of conversation. The principles and practices of conversation must be woven in to the organization's engagement strategy.

What is a Culture of Engagement?

What does a culture of engagement look like? The UK's Institute of Employment Studies defines engagement as: *"A positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context, and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee."*

Engagement goes beyond job satisfaction, which is transitory and transactional in nature, and goes beyond motivation. It can be seen as a combination of commitment to the organization and its values and a willingness to help out colleagues or, in other words, to be **a good organizational citizen**. Engagement is something the employee has to offer; it cannot be required as part of the employment contract. In that sense, engagement requires the employer to engage the employee; it is not a passive activity.

Creating an engaged culture requires a complete reorientation of standard corporate processes and management attitudes. It should reject imposed engagement tactics and move beyond arms-length inquiry of employees fielded virtually and anonymously. Engagement demands collaboration. It entails mutual, sustained feedback and response. It is nurtured with an ecosystem of dialogue throughout the workplace.

An authentic conversational culture will not appear overnight. It takes time and trust. Organizations can, however, take the first step, which is to listen to itself.

This paper focuses on hearing the voice of employees using employee roundtables.

“Virtually everyone I see is experiencing some deficiency of human contact... people feel lonely, isolated, or confused at work.”

– Edward Hallowell, *The Human Moment at Work*, HBR 1999

The Where and Why of Listening

The workplace culture is what will be heard in the cafeteria, the cubicles and the corridors. Employees talk about and demonstrate culture in their beliefs and stories, in their behaviors and actions. Culture cannot be commanded from the C-suite. It cannot be mandated by marketing or summarized in the brand manual. Of course, all of these aspects can inform, influence, shepherd and guide what the culture represents and how it shows up in the organization, but no one person or role singularly defines it. In the end, the internal culture emerges out of and is expressed through the lens of human narrative and the experiences of everyone within and without that enterprise.

Too often approaches to engagement strategy are examples of listening to respond not listening to learn. Indeed, the medium of listening is frequently sterile, indifferent and data seeking, rather than human and empathetic. It becomes a box checking exercise. Instead, an engagement endeavor using active listening:

- ▶ Shows respect, by affirming the value of employee opinions.
- ▶ Nurtures trusting, strong relationships.
- ▶ Opens opportunities for mutual learning and catalyzes new thinking and innovation.
- ▶ Is an act of inclusion.
- ▶ Enables clarity, reduces misunderstanding and promotes empathy.
- ▶ Supports difficult conversations and conflict resolution.



Not Listening

Silicon Valley has developed a notorious deafness. The recent sexual harassment claims by a female employee at Uber suggested leadership's indifference to hearing such employee concerns rather than attending to business results, an indifference infecting HR behavior. Uber's situation reflects a culture endemic across tech companies of not listening to employee concerns and failing to act upon what is heard.

How To Listen

The act of listening will, over time, become an intrinsic practice of the operational processes, staff behaviors and cultural norms of the organization. Until then, to cultivate an engaged culture, the organization can initiate some practical activity to listen to employees. These actions include roundtable discussions.

Consideration should be given to the:

1. Structure of these events.
2. Cultivation of content.
3. "Is this for real?" skepticism.

Employee Roundtable Structure

1. **Timing:** It is tempting to keep roundtables brief, bowing to the perception that employees have short attention spans and that the demands of business performance should be prioritized. However, curtailing the opportunity for employees to be fully heard is to undermine the overall objective. That said, an indeterminate duration leaves everyone uncertain about the opportunity and expectations. From my experience, anywhere between 45 - 90 minutes works, but the better approach is to ask employees what they believe they need and to build in flexibility into the timing arrangements. Similarly, it is important that the roundtable is scheduled at a time most convenient for the employees, not the business.
2. **Attendee Numbers:** Having many people in the room means the process can cover all employees more quickly, but it diminishes the ability for each attendee to be heard and inhibits the facilitator's ability to draw out those that are more reserved. Having a small group creates a more intimate environment encouraging attendees to speak up, though it may extend the overall initiative and be uncomfortable for those who don't want to feel as if they're in the spotlight. I have found that open, productive conversations can be generated with eight to ten people.
3. **Attendee Selection:** In an ideal scenario every employee will take part in a roundtable. There is merit to blending roundtable groups across departments, geographies and roles to reveal unexpected similarities and dissimilarities among the participants. Conversely, it can also be beneficial to concentrate roundtable groups by, for example, department, geography or roles in order to enable comparison and contrast across roundtable discussions. Often the choice ends up being driven by logistics rather than philosophy. More important, though, is to attend to power dynamics and hierarchies. In a roundtable environment where trust is being built and openness is desired, having the "boss" in the discussion hinders the conversation.
4. **Venue:** It is common for companies to expect roundtable discussions to be held within their offices in a conference room. That environment sometimes works well. Often, though, it is a poor choice that is the result of a lack of critical thinking about the objectives of the roundtable. A productive roundtable discussion will be aided by an environment where everyone there can see and hear each other. The

“It is not speaking that breaks our silence, but the anxiety to be heard.”

– Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude*

physical structure should allow for natural light and windows, but also a sense of intimacy and confidentiality. The space also should have a layout and furniture that is comfortable and unobtrusive. Standard conference tables are great for demonstrating power and allowing people to spread out notes and writing materials, but not for a roundtable. A circle of comfortable chairs with no barrier between people is often the simplest and best arrangement.

5. **Remote:** Employees are frequently geographically dispersed. The needs for a remote roundtable forum follow similar principles as mentioned above, however, the major drawback is that it is more difficult for employees and the facilitator to recognize important non-verbal cues.



Further, the building of trust, already a challenge, is made more difficult through remoteness and technology. That said, expectations can be managed with appropriate transparency to the decision making choices in the design of this listening component. The decision for the organization is driven by how serious it truly is about listening and whether it is willing to prioritize resources accordingly as a result.

Employee Roundtable Content

It is essential not to start this listening process with the outcome in mind. The point about listening is that you don't know what you'll hear. Unearthing employees's true opinions is the whole point of this endeavor. Too often companies conceive engagement strategies with outcomes already in mind.

It is, however, efficient for the process overall and respectful to each roundtable to offer a real question or topic that needs addressing. The roundtable discussion should empower employees to talk towards a defined topic, while also allowing enough freedom for their discussion to roam.

A roundtable discussion guide can aid consistency across roundtables and provide visible expectations, but it should be flexible in implementation and responsive to the employee discussion. Often it is better to allow the dialogue to spring from a set of inquiries rather than aim towards a concluding consensus. Questions might include:

- ▶ How do employees define engagement?
- ▶ What should we be discussing if we are to talk about engagement?
- ▶ What does engagement look like to them?
- ▶ Based on what we have discussed, how would we evaluate some of the ideas emerging?
- ▶ What Aha! or Hmmm? moments arose?

To aid my own reflection and where required by the terms of the endeavor I will sometimes record the roundtable discussion. Any recording may introduce a note of anxiety. As noted below, it is essential that the group is aware of this activity and they are assured that the recording is for my ears later, not for distribution within the organization.

Obtaining valuable, insightful content from roundtables requires a careful balance between the discussion guide and the honest, human moderation of the conversation by a skilled facilitator.

**“Real listening...
requires me to
attune to your
feelings.”**

– Daniel Goleman, *Social Intelligence: The New Science of Human Relationships*

Employee Roundtable Skepticism

Before:

Here's the [good][bad] news, with you getting to choose: You can ensure the roundtables are doomed before they begin if you are not truly committed to listening and then acting upon what you hear. Or, you can ensure that with an open attitude and a commitment to follow through on what you learn, that a culture of engagement is created. Here is your initial checklist of questions (Hint: You need to be able to answer "Yes" to them all with confidence):

- ▶ Is the organization truly listening? If it is, you'll be open to hearing not just the good, but the unexpected and the bad.
- ▶ Are the organization's leaders and investors genuinely bought in to the process of listening?
- ▶ Will leaders respect the opinions of employees and engage genuinely with the opinions and ideas that emerge? Will the organization, in particular, honor the confidentiality of participants and the integrity of the process?
- ▶ Do you have a firm understanding of expectations? Does everyone understand those?
- ▶ Has the organization committed budget and resources to meet the needs arising out of this listening process?
- ▶ Will you make transparent this process and the content that materializes?

During:

Having a suitable space to host the roundtable and communicating expectations at the outset helps to generate the circumstances for a robust, candid dialogue. Essentially, the roundtable session itself must present a safe space for a conversation to be courageous and honest. In part, this is a measure of how much trust exists already within the organization at large. It is also, though, a function of a skilled facilitator to tease out the conversation and conjure an environment that is calm and open. Employees should feel not only that they have a voice in the roundtable discussion, but that they also are able to share their emotions. Emotional responses should be seen as equally valid to intellectual ones.



Employees should also recognize that it is they who are accountable ultimately for the quality and meaningfulness of their discussion. The facilitator role is clearly an important one, though it is as an agent for that activity; almost as a servant to the employees' conversation.

Everyone must also be clear on the facilitator's obligation to be an entirely neutral, impartial agent, and on whether or not there is an expectation of the facilitator to offer opinion on the roundtable discussion. Moreover, it must be transparently communicated whether or not the facilitator is reporting on the themes arising out of the roundtables and how that reporting process is being managed.

After:

This, frankly, is the "make or break" moment for the entire endeavor. The information arising from the roundtable discussions must be attentively considered by the organization's leaders, who must deliberate upon actions consistent with what employees communicated and that will instill an engaged culture.

While honoring any confidentiality built into the roundtable process, the consideration by leaders of the insights that have arisen should be as open and transparent as possible. This process can acknowledge:

- ▶ It is already a positive contribution to an engaged culture and good news to employees that they have been listened to. The question they will now have is whether they were truly heard?
- ▶ Not everything that arises from the roundtables will be realistic or possible, nor will every idea be capable of immediate prioritization. The fundamental requirement, though, is that leaders overtly recognize the insights and openly explain their decision making rationale. If an idea cannot be implemented for, say, fiscal, resource, compliance or conflict reasons, this should be made clear.
- ▶ Some insights and ideas will be reasonable and even excellent. These should be recognized and celebrated.
- ▶ As part of the transparency of the deliberation process and to perpetuate the ethos of listening and collaboration, leaders should integrate employees into the consideration process. This not only affirms to the organization that employee input matters, it also validates the process and the actions decided upon.
- ▶ It is not enough, of course, to decide to take action, action must be taken. Whatever activities, policies and tactics are agreed, the plan for their implementation and their actual implementation should be apparent. Again, employees should have an active role in creating and implementing the activities, policies and tactics that are conceived.

Leadership's failure to demonstrate that it has diligently addressed the roundtable feedback will have long term negative impact upon the organizational culture. Similarly, taking no action and not communicating any reasoning will also have long term negative consequences.

The role of the roundtable facilitator is important in this transition to consideration and action, especially if roundtables have been designed to be anonymous and confidential. The facilitator will surface and identify themes relevant to organizational engagement and culture and communicate those insights to leadership. The facilitator's task is to unearth vital, relevant employee perspectives and to articulate those powerfully and succinctly to leaders. This will enable them to take informed, productive action.

“There is no correlation between being the best talker and having the best ideas.”

– Susan Cain, *The Power of Quiet*

Listening is an act of love. Conversation, practiced authentically, is a profound experience. A sustainable, deeply engaged culture must embrace continual conversation. [Contact me](#) to discuss how you can listen to your employees and create an engaged culture.

ABOUT STUART CHITTENDEN

I am a British expatriate that has called Omaha, Nebraska home for over a decade. I believe that conversation helps us to live better and well, as individuals, families, and communities.

Driven by that belief, I founded Squishtalks to design and deliver conversation programs for corporate and non-profit organizations, for public and community purposes. Prior to moving to Nebraska, I had a fifteen year career practicing as a lawyer in the UK. I also earned Master's level accreditation in Organizational Learning & Development and am a member of the UK's Chartered Institute of Personnel & Development. Upon crossing the pond to the American Midwest, I became a partner at the Omaha-based branding consultancy, david day associates, consulting on brand strategy with local and national clients.

During my career, I have designed and conducted hundreds of formal and informal interviews, conversations, focus groups and group discussions. From both sides of the focus group one-way mirror, to moderating confidential group discussions with disgruntled employees, to man-on-the-street interviews to interviewing executives of billion dollar companies, I have facilitated initiatives across the continuum of conversational engagement.

My latest large-scale community-based project was "a couple of 830 mile long conversations," awarded a substantial grant by Humanities Nebraska. "a couple of 830 mile long conversations" was an endeavor honoring a long line of oral traditions. I adventured in an RV for four weeks along the side roads and among the small towns of the state to talk with Nebraskans. Traveling through conversations, discovering the lives, cultures and stories of people I met, the project was an exploration of community engagement.



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