

four types of listening:

- downloading
- factual
- empathic
- generative



One of the seven essential leadership capacities in the Theory U literature is **holding the space of listening**.

“The foundational capacity of the U is listening. Listening to others. Listening to oneself. And listening to what emerges from the collective. Effective listening requires the creation of open space in which others can contribute to the whole.” *Slowing Down to Understand* (p. 2)

Four Different Types of Listening

1. Downloading (reconfirms).

“Yeah, I know that already.”

Downloading – listening by reconfirming habitual judgments. When you are in a situation where everything that happens confirms what you already know, you are listening by downloading.

2. Factual (disconfirms).

“Ooh, look at that?”

This type of listening is factual or object-focused: listening by paying attention to facts and to the novel or disconfirming data. You switch off your inner voice of judgment and listen to the voices right in front of you. You focus on what differs from what you already know. Factual listening is the basic mode of good science. You let the data talk to you. You ask questions, and you pay careful attention the responses you get.

3. **Empathic** (redirected).

“Oh, yes, I know exactly how you feel.”

This deeper level of listening is empathic listening. When we are engaged in real dialogue and paying careful attention we can become aware of a profound shift in the place from which our listening originates. We move from staring at the objective world of things, figures, and facts (the “it-world”) to listening to the story of a living and evolving self (the “you-world”).

Sometimes, when we say “I know how you feel,” our emphasis is on a kind of mental or abstract knowing. But to really feel how another feels, we have to have an open heart. Only an open heart gives us the empathic capacity to connect directly with another person from within. When that happens, we feel a profound switch as we enter a new territory in the relationship; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world appears through someone else’s eyes.

4. **Generative** (subtle, but profound change, deeper sense of knowing, open to future possibility).

“I can’t express what I experience in words. I feel more quiet and present and more my real self. I am connected to something larger than myself.”

This type of listening connects us to something deeper; it is called “generative listening.” It requires us to access not only our open heart, but also our open will –our capacity to be open to possibility. It requires letting go, and being open to ‘letting come’ and seeing what’s possible.

