

# Listening (engaged/deep)

By Amanda D. Clark

## **Definition:**

Engaged or deep listening means that one does not just hear another's words but listens. Going further, one needs to not just listen to respond but listen to understand another's point of view. Other related terms include skillful listening, critical listening, active listening

## **Significance to Civic/Political Engagement:**

To achieve true collaboration or co-production of democracy or any public policy, all sides must listen deeply to each other. The power imbalance invested in modern bureaucracies often leads to an environment in which citizens do not feel heard or are not understood. Camilla Stivers, in her important 1994 piece regarding responsiveness in public administration argued that "skillful listening helps administrators to understand responsiveness as constructive rather than reactive (p. 367) In other words, those with power cannot just ignore other voices or listen and react without thought or through automated responses. Denhardt and Denhardt (2015) describe this concept as "serving, not steering", arguing that the true role of public administrators should be "to help citizens articulate and meet their shared interests rather than attempt to control society".

Engaged listening is important in all areas of civic life. Often many different civil society groups or individuals see a common need or problem in their communities and want to work together to solve these issues. Successful coalitions of disparate issue groups engage in deep or critical listening. Importantly, engaged listening and co-production need not mean complete agreement. Different conclusions are still possible. However, the benefit of engaged listening is the development of trust over time.

## **Further Scholarly Resources:**

### *Scholarly Articles:*

- Bartels, K. P. R. (2019). Encounters with an Open Mind: A Relational Grounding for Neighborhood Governance. In *From Austerity to Abundance? Creative Approaches to Coordinating the Common Good* (pp. 181–200). Emerald Group Publishing.
- Forester, J. (2009). Policy Analysis as Critical Listening. In R. E. Goodin, M. Moran, & M. Rein (Eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Public Policy*. Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199548453.003.0006
- Stivers, C. (1994). The Listening Bureaucrat: Responsiveness in Public Administration. *Public Administration Review*, 54(4), 364-369. doi:10.2307/977384

*Books:*

- *Emotional Labor and Crisis Response: Working on the Razor's Edge* by Sharon H. Mastracci, Mary E. Guy and Meredeith A. Newman (Taylor & Francis, 2014).
- *Government is Us: Public Administration in an Anti-Government Era* by Cheryl King and Camilla Stivers, (Sage Publications, 1998).
- *The New Public Service: Serving, Not Steering* by Janet V. Denhardt and Robert B. Denhardt, (Routledge, 2015).

*Websites:*

University of Minnesota's Earl E. Bakken Center for Spirituality & Healing,

<https://www.csh.umn.edu/education/focus-areas/whole-systems-healing/leadership/deep-listening>

**Related Concepts:**

Community building  
Confronting power  
Power (over, with, to)  
Prefigurative politics  
Sustainability

Developed in Collaboration with the Growing Democracy Project.

Learn more about the Growing Democracy Project at [www.GrowingDemocracyOH.org](http://www.GrowingDemocracyOH.org)

