The listening bureaucrat: responsiveness in public administration.

by Camilla Stivers

How can good listening help public administrators be more responsive to the public? In public administration, responsibility is lauded as the essence of bureaucratic professionalism while responsiveness tends to connote inappropriate political bias. Yet too much reliance on administrators’ sense of responsibility threatens democratic accountability and puts too much faith in bureaucratic expertise. This article argues that practicing responsiveness by developing the ability to listen skillfully reduces the tension between administrative effectiveness and democratic accountability. The experience of listening involves openness, respect for difference, and reflexivity. Developing the capacity to listen well promotes accountability by helping administrators to hear neglected voices and engage in reciprocal communication with the public; it promotes effectiveness by deepening our understanding of complex situations and facilitating imaginative approaches.

Vision is a spectator; hearing is a participation. (John Dewey in Levin, 1989, p. 29)

In public administration, "responsiveness" is a problematic concept. Democracy would seem to require administrators who are responsive to the popular will, at least through legislatures and elected chief executives if not directly to the people. Yet administrators and scholars alike tend to treat responsiveness as at best a necessary evil that appears to compromise professional effectiveness, and at worst an indication of political expediency if not outright corruption. Rourke’s recent assessment is illustrative:

The growing demand for responsiveness in government policy-making puts the survival of a professional outlook characterized by independence of judgment and indifference to political pressures increasingly at risk in the corridors of American bureaucracy (1992, p. 545).

The most common strategy for dealing with the idea of responsiveness is to treat it as an aspect of responsibility. This approach was evident as early as Woodrow Wilson’s “The Study of Administration,” which advocated “ready docility” on the part of administrators to “all serious, well-sustained public criticism” (1887, p. 222), but argued that, in order to be expert and efficient rather than partisan, the administrator should have a “will of his own in the choice of means for accomplishing his work. He is not and ought not to be a mere passive instrument” (p. 212). Although literal responsiveness was problematic, bureaucrats could be considered responsive because in choosing business-like, apolitical methods they were fulfilling their responsibility to the public. Wilson’s scheme backed up the individual’s sense of responsibility with a structural mechanism: a chain of command with a constitutional officer at the top. In his view, Americans could rest easy about the power of administrative expertise because “clear-cut responsibility” would make it “easily watched and brought to book” (pp. 213-214).

Over the years, emphasis has increased on trust in the administrator’s personal sense of responsibility, what Friedrich called “the actual psychic conditions which might predispose any agent toward responsible conduct” (1940, p. 12). Drawing on John Gaus’s idea of the administrator’s “inner check,” Friedrich maintained that bureaucratic responsibility consisted of technical knowledge and responsiveness to popular opinion; the former would be judged by professional colleagues while the latter would become operational as bureaucrats anticipated political responses to their actions and crafted strategies accordingly.

In answer, Finer (1941) argued that responsibility was a mirage unless the public and its representatives defined the public interest and punished administrators who defined it differently. In other words, he made responsibility a subset of responsiveness, rather than vice versa. Although a few observers have continued to argue in favor of assuring bureaucratic responsiveness by means of stronger laws and procedures that constrain discretion (e.g., Lowi, 1979), most locate the primary roots of responsibility in the expertise and morality of the individual bureaucrat (e.g., Cooper, 1990; Burke, 1987). This position is clearest in arguments for professionalism in public administration; Rourke’s (1992) is only one of a host (e.g., Kearny and Sinha, 1988; Stever, 1988; Nalbandian, 1990).

Dictionary definitions give us a hint as to why there may be so much more overt support for responsibility than for responsiveness. "Responsive" means "quick to respond or react appropriately or sympathetically, sensitive" (Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, 1986). Synonyms include “sentient, answering, passible [capable of feeling or suffering], respondent, reactive” (The New Roget’s Thesaurus, 1964). "Responsible," on the other hand, means "liable to be called on to answer; liable to be called to account as the primary cause, motive, or agent;
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being the cause or explanation; able to answer for one's conduct and obligations; trustworthy; able to choose for oneself between right and wrong; politically answerable" (Webster's, 1986). Synonyms are "answerable, accountable, dependable, reliable, stable" (Roget's, 1964).

Given the choice, and persuaded that the two ideas meet democracy's need for accountability equally well, what bureaucrat would not rather be "responsible" than "responsive"? The responsible bureaucrat is a proactive agent, one who causes things to happen, in charge of his or her own conduct, trustworthy, capable of moral judgment, reliable, and politically answerable to boot. The responsive bureaucrat, in contrast, is reactive, sympathetic, sensitive, and capable of feeling or suffering - worthy qualities, perhaps, but together hardly an image that would draw people to public service or strengthen their commitment to it. When one adds in the partisan taint that appears to color responsive public administration, it is no wonder that responsiveness seems relatively unappealing. For example, to contrast responsibility and responsiveness, Rohr (1989) offers the case of former national security advisor John Poindexter, who during the Iran-Contra hearings acknowledged authorizing an illegal diversion of funds. Rohr comments: "If this is so, he was 'responsive' to the Contras; but he failed to act responsibly because he ignored the chain of command" (p. 51). Responsibility is laudable, grounded in law, responsiveness connotes improper bias.

Yet responsiveness needs defending, if democracy's only alternative is the responsible, professional administrator. Difficulties with too great a reliance on professional norms of responsibility have been noted. Professional autonomy is in fundamental tension with democratic accountability (Mosher, 1968). Fox and Cochran (1990) suggest that professional administrators can even become Platonic guardians who use professional values to justify bureaucratic autonomy and power. They argue that by conceiving of politics as "untrammeled and greedy" bureaucratic apologists turn the electoral process into "epiphenomenal noise" and rationalize the insulation of administrative governance from "corrupting influences" (p. 106). White and McSwain (1993) warn that the legitimate expert might become a self-effacing manipulator, an "Andy Griffith of Mayberry": one who, like the benign, all-knowing small town sheriff made familiar by television reruns, gives citizens the comforting feeling that the solutions he has implanted in their minds are their own.

Interestingly, White and McSwain worry less about Andy's power or deceptiveness than about the illusory promise he represents. In their view, there are no Andys in the world, and there is no hope of one arising because the knowledge base required for being one cannot, in principle, be developed.... Our strongest knowledge traditions teach us that there are no answers of the sort that Andy always seems to be able to produce: specific, workable, on the point (1993, p. 21).

Along similar lines, Wellman and Tipple (1990) note that professional expertise per se is not enough to enable administrators to cope with changing and turbulent policy environments. For example, in a world that values forests for their beauty, recreational use, and wildlife habitat, professional foresters can no longer afford to focus solely on efficient and skillful harvesting of trees as a crop.

Thus reliance on administrators' sense of responsibility has been faulted because: (1) it tends to put too much emphasis on bureaucratic discretion, leaving judgments about the public interest to the ultimately uncontrollable and unpredictable administrative conscience (individual and/or collective); and (2) it trusts too much in professional skills and world views, which by themselves cannot be counted on to generate workable approaches in an increasingly complex world.

Granted that these propositions are debatable and likely to remain so, the questions they raise are significant enough to warrant reconsideration of that conceptual stepsister, administrative responsiveness. I would like to offer a different idea of responsiveness from the conventional one, with the aim of reducing the tension between administrative effectiveness and democratic accountability, both in theory and in practice. The argument, in essence, will be that listening, an embodied ability, way of knowing, moral capacity, and potential administrative practice, can help us shape a revivified responsiveness, one that avoids passivity and partisanship alike. After centuries of neglect in favor of the pervasive Western emphasis on vision, the capacity to listen has recently attracted the attention of a range of scholars, in philosophy (Levin, 1989; Fiumara, 1990), psychology (Brown and Gilligan, 1992), linguistics (Ong, 1982), and planning (Forester, 1989). In one way or another, all argue that the nature of our ability to listen has practical, moral, and societal implications that can teach us much, if we are only willing to open ourselves to these lessons. I will briefly review these arguments and try to show their relevance to the question of responsiveness in public administration.

The Capacity to Listen

Listening "lets be," lets come into presence the unbidden giving of sound. (Ihde 1976, p. 110)

We have less control over what we hear than over what we see. We can shut our eyes easily, but we have to plug
our ears, and even then some sound usually comes through. Therefore we are fundamentally open to sound, as anyone working near a construction site or living with a rock music fan is all too aware. We have the subjective impression that we can fix or pin down objects by means of sight, but sounds cannot be preserved.

When I listen to auditory events there seems to be no way in which I can escape the sense of a "coming into being" and a "passing from being" .... I cannot "fix" the note nor make it "come to stand" before me ... (Ihde, 1976, p. 94).

While sight distances the one who sees from the objects of his or her gaze, sound penetrates the listener; as Ong notes, "sight isolates, sound incorporates" (1982, p. 72). Vision objectifies and disembodies; things appear to us as if they existed in an eternal present. Sound, on the other hand, "pours into the hearer.... When I hear,..... I gather sound simultaneously from every direction at once" (Ong, 1982, p. 72). Rather than distancing, listening immerses and engages. The experience of sound, therefore, is an experience of openness. Listening makes us aware that reality, at least as we experience it, has permeable boundaries, and that our understanding of what is is relative to what is not. Listening calls our attention to emergent aspects of situations and leads us in the direction of contextual rather than eternal (timeless) truth.

In part because of this essential openness and relativity, the act of listening to another person is characterized by reciprocity and a committed letting-be. Fiumara says that in dialogue the listening person is a participant in the speaker's emerging thought, which in fact requires engaged listening in order to attain its fullest expression. The listener evokes that potential, paradoxically, "by taking leave,' by standing aside and making room" (1990, p. 144). At the same time, in sharing the speaker's language, the listener hears his or her own voice, evoked in and through another, just as a speaker, listening to his or her own words, is always hearing in them the voices of others (Levin, 1989, Lionnet, 1989). In dialogue, we echo and resonate with one another:

to listen to another is to learn what the world is like from a position that is not one's own; to listen is to reverse position, role, and experience (Levin, 1989, p. 193).

Through speaking and listening, we make room for the voices of others and responsively reshape the dialogue and its context. Listening lets be without passivity, participates without imposition. Listening facilitates communication.

Clearly, not all listening fulfills its potential. At the everyday level of awareness, much of the listening we do is really hearing - simply taking in sound, a great deal of which flows through us virtually unnoticed. When we do notice what we hear, particularly when we are in conversation, we tend to listen in an ego-driven way, shaping what comes to us so that it fits our existing ideas, channeling it according to our desires and needs (Levin, 1989). We wait impatiently for another speaker to finish, as we shape our reply in advance, rather than attending to what he or she is really saying. Levin argues that with practice we can move beyond this everyday form of listening to what he calls "skillful listening," which involves slowing down, giving deliberate attention to the experience, and cultivating a welcoming receptivity that accepts others in their uniqueness.

Levin suggests that skillful listening can constitute a practice of the self, that is, a deliberate self-development that also develops society. In contrast to much of the current "self-help" literature, which tends to avoid the economic and political dimensions of social interaction in favor of a focus on "co-dependence" and "getting in touch with your inner child," Levin believes there are practices of the self that make self-development a process of social change. In other words, skillful listening can join self and society, theory and action, in reflexive relationship (see also Forester, 1989). Listening has this potential because of the characteristics we have just reviewed: openness, engagement, letting-be, reflexivity.

Listening as Self-Development

In listening to others, we are gathered into compassion. Levin, 1989, p. 89)

Skillful listening promotes the development of moral sensibilities because it models the reciprocity inherent in ideas of justice. Children develop a sense of identity, a sense of self, by hearing themselves echoed and reflected back in the voices of others. To the extent that others give us respectful attention, we eventually learn to respect ourselves and to reciprocate this respect and attention. Thus according to Levin, justice is more than an abstract idea; we literally live its analogue. As we improve our ability to listen, we increasingly understand the extent to which we hear ourselves in others and they in us; this reciprocity is evoked in our theories and practices of justice. Instead of stripping away the qualities of unique individuals in favor of an ideal of universality, listening expands justice to include the details of the situation and the significant differences among human beings.

The openness of listening - the fact that we cannot pin sounds down, that we are in constant touch with the horizons from which sound emerges and beyond which it disappears - encourages our openness to the viewpoints...
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of others and our recognition of the fundamental complexity and unpredictability of the situations in which we find ourselves. Instead of spurring us to reduce every situation to a "type," listening helps us see situations as unfolding stories and trust that, if we remain open, dialogue may eventually convey to us what we do not know or what is necessary for our own self-development (Fiumara, 1990, p. 162). We may also become more open to understanding others: "[B]y taking in the voice of another, we gain the sense of an entry, an opening, a connection with another person's psychic life" (Brown and Gilligan 1992, p. 28). Such connections may encourage the kind of compassion that comes when we relinquish oversimplification and the urge to impose premature diagnoses of our own on complex problems.

The openness and reciprocity of listening promote relationship. Dialogue marked by skilled listening creates a shared reality, a public or common space (Taylor, 1989) that promotes responsiveness ("response-ability") and a sense of mutual obligation or commitment (Levin, 1989; Brown and Gilligan, 1992). Listening responsively may, therefore, help promote accountability on the part of public officials as they begin to see citizens as inhabitants of the same public square they themselves occupy and as they engage them in dialogue.

Relationship based on listening emerges from acknowledgement of the importance of difference. Each human self is shaped through interaction with people who are both similar and different. A community of listeners not only promotes diversity but recognizes that there can be no common space without difference. How we respond to difference "makes up the politics of our everyday lives" (Forester, 1992, p. 107); difference is the essence of democracy rather than a roadblock to it. In the sense that it makes room for every voice, responsiveness enacted through skillful listening is less partisan or biased than more conventional approaches.

In summary, then, listening fosters self-development in certain directions: it vivifies a reciprocal understanding of justice; it encourages open-mindedness, relationship, and acceptance of difference; and it promotes a situation-emergent view of truth, gleaned through the suspension of premature judgment. It has this potential, in Levin’s view, because it is a bodily capacity. Levin (1989) argues that reciprocity is "built in," so to speak, and that working for justice is a matter of collaborating with our physical capacity to listen. If Levin is right, then the development of skill in listening can become the starting point for a practice of responsiveness in public administration.

Listening and Responsive

Responsibility must begin with attention. To act responsibly we must ask: What is happening? What is calling us to respond? (Bellah et al, 1991, p. 283)

How can skillful listening help bureaucrats develop responsiveness in their work? Consider what notion of responsiveness we would want as a practical ideal for democratic administrators. Responsive administrators should be open, able, and willing to respond, but also just, that is, judicious, uncorrupted. They should know how to draw on their expertise while seeking diverse viewpoints and remaining open to the unexpected and the unpredictable. They should be receptive to difference and able to help evoke the reciprocal dynamics and expressive potential of dialogue.

One might wonder whether this list of qualities is too demanding: Does it not require responsive bureaucrats who can "leap tall buildings at a single bound?" Does not the complexity and turbulence of current-day public administration require bureaucrats who can "satisfice," who can do more with less in an imperfect world? Surely if we are to promote responsiveness, we must do it in a way that helps hardpressed administrators rather than expecting them to waste energy trying to live up to an impossible ideal.

The advantage of listening as a practice of responsiveness is that it asks administrators not to try to turn themselves into superpeople but simply to try some rather humble tactics and work on developing fairly modest but significant capacities. Because it promotes openness, respect for difference, and reciprocity, the practice of skillful listening can help administrators evolve toward a form of responsiveness that supports both democratic accountability and administrative effectiveness.

How does skillful listening promote accountability? By helping administrators to hear neglected voices, engage in truly reciprocal communication with stakeholders, and remain open to emerging perspectives. Listening enables us to sense the dream of power behind our hope of a single, transparent voice, with its urge to eliminate diversity, and accept instead the public space as an "interweaving of willings" (Follett, 1965 [1918], p. 69). Skillful listening helps administrators to understand responsiveness as constructive rather than reactive: public institutions take their shape partly as a result of how people at the intercept between agency and environment listen to and respond to one another. In this sense, the challenge for administrators is not whether or not to be responsive, but to whom they will respond and to what ends.
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How does skillful listening promote administrative effectiveness? By helping bureaucrats to deepen their understanding of complex situations, distinguish the impossible from the merely difficult, develop more nuanced problem definitions, and synthesize as well as they now analyze. Skillful listening helps us to open ourselves to what we do not understand but might, with time. It helps us construct possibilities for doing and being otherwise, that is, to get a sense of what limits we might be able to go beyond. Korten (1981) has underscored the importance of openness and synthesis in a global environment increasingly pressed toward sustainability and social learning, where in order to avoid costly errors, comprehensive plans and blueprints must give way to tentative, iterative approaches guided by participative processes.

In essence, then, listening helps public administrators to realize the impossibility of the final answers that Andy of Mayberry always seemed to be able to come up with and to develop a different ethical ideal than the benign manipulator Andy appeared to be. Listening bureaucrats understand themselves less as manipulators and more as facilitators, sensing the various themes sounding in their worlds, appreciating their harmony and their dissonance, creating occasions for the possibility of their interweaving.

Here and there in public administration, the importance of listening is vividly evoked. One interesting example from the early history of the American administrative state involves the Children’s Bureau and the Sheppard-Towner Act of 1921. Established in 1912, the Children’s Bureau was a product of lobbying efforts on the part of settlement house leaders. Bureau chief Julia Lathrop deliberately created an organizational culture that valued "responsiveness, individual initiative, and personal relationships" (Muncy, 1991, p. 55) and that established a network of active collaboration with female voluntary associations across the country. Over 3,000 clubwomen went door-to-door to help the bureau with its project of improving birth registration records, and millions more took part in bureau-sponsored conferences on child welfare.

Bureau chief Lathrop received hundreds of letters each month from poor women about their difficulties in bearing and rearing children; agency staff responded personally to each one. After women gained the national franchise in 1920, organized lobbying by the Women’s Joint Congressional Committee, together with the demonstrable need reflected in the poor women’s correspondence with the bureau, resulted in passage of the Sheppard-Towner Act providing maternal and infant care services to needy families (Ladd-Taylor, 1993).

The activities and approach of the Children’s Bureau show the potential impact of a deliberate resolve to listen to the voices of the public and to involve its members in agency work. The openness and responsiveness instilled by Lathrop from the bureau’s earliest days (values carried forward from the settlement houses where Lathrop and others began their careers) not only spurred thousands of middle-class volunteers to support the bureau goals with their intelligent legwork but found their way to poverty-stricken women in rural hamlets, gave them the hope that their cries for help would be heard, and made their pleas telling evidence in the fight for legislation.

A similar but current-day example is the federal community health center program, which funds over 500 community-based organizations to provide health care to residents of urban neighborhoods and rural areas where need is great and existing resources limited. I argue that reciprocal relationships between health center board members and federal officials charged with overseeing the centers, expressed in dialogue that reproduces and carries forward key values, helps all parties achieve a shared understanding of the program mission and objectives and creates a “public space” in which die views of citizens have real impact on federal priorities and strategies. Working together, bureaucrats and citizens translate program goals into activities geared to particular community needs (Stivers, 1990).

A recent profile of William Ruckelshaus provides another example, one that emphasizes the impact of a single official’s commitment to good listening. The effectiveness of Ruckelshaus’s leadership begin with “a commitment to listen and learn from all sides,” particularly by making sure that underrepresented groups were heard, trying to “view the world from the other person’s perspective,” and having an open mind (Dobel, 1992, p. 250). As head of the Environmental Protection Agency, Ruckelshaus’s skillful listening was evident in his response to auto company requests for an extension to the deadlines of the Clean Air Act: after listening carefully to all sides at open hearings, Ruckelshaus had the basis to resist strong White House pressure and deny the request. Thus he was responsive without being inappropriately biased.

Berger (1977) describes similar good listening in the Alaska pipeline hearings in Mackenzie Valley, Canada. in addition to standard formal hearings involving oil company representatives and an array of technical experts, hearing officers traveled to all 35 native communities in the region to hear evidence from residents in their own languages, thus ensuring the presence of neglected voices in the deliberations.

The sense that good listening in the public sector requires adjustment of standard policy processes has been
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underscored recently by Daniel Kemmis, mayor of Missoula, Montana. Kemmis (1990) argues that not much "public hearing" goes on at the typical public hearing; therefore public officials must create alternative processes in which parties to contested issues can speak directly with, and listen to, one another. He cites several successful examples, including one in which a grass-roots group that wanted to combine a community solar greenhouse with a laundromat (which would provide backup heat and needed revenue) reached an accommodation with owners of existing laundromats. The mayor brought the parties together but required them to negotiate their own settlement. Kemmis comments:

Once the parties themselves get the idea that they are responsible for coming up with the answer, rather than simply turning it over to a third party, they are very likely to begin to think and behave differently.... There seems to be something inherently mutual about the taking of responsibility; it is difficult not to respond to it (1990, p. 113).

Thus public officials can be good listeners (they can be responsive) by encouraging citizens’ responsibility to listen to one another and solve disputes.

Wellman and Tipple’s (1990) study of the U. S. Forest Service citizen participation processes leads them to argue that, like other bureaucrats, foresters who want to create lasting and effective partnerships with citizens must begin by being good listeners:

True communication is hard work. It requires persistent effort, since nobody - including foresters - develops wisdom on the basis of one trial. It means stimulating citizens’ involvement at times when their interest is not aroused by a perceived crisis. It means continual dialogue, which can lead to seemingly endless meetings. It means listening, sometimes with saintly patience. It means giving reasons for professional judgments.... It means being concerned with all the communications between the agency and its environment, including the routine exchanges between citizens and field staff, so that agency leadership at all levels of the organization hears what it needs to hear and misleading messages are not sent (p. 84).

Only foresters who can listen skillfully can hope to facilitate intractable disputes such as the ongoing conflict over die harvesting of old-growth timber in the Pacific Northwest.

In all these contexts, listening is important because it helps administrators glean important information, define situations more carefully, hear neglected aspects and interests, and facilitate just and prudent action in often turbulent environments. Listening offers the possibility for a real "reinvention" of agency policy and management processes, one that vivifies the common space occupied by citizens and bureaucrats and offers prospects of substantive community.

Conclusion

In public administration, as elsewhere, responsiveness begins with listening. If, as Bellah et al. argue, "democracy is paying attention" (1991, p. 254), democratically minded public administrators may want to pay attention to their own listening abilities in order to be able better to pay attention - to respond - to the public. Community activist Fran Peavey, who once traveled around the world simply to listen to what people had to say about their lives and how they viewed the United States, found the experience "a kind of tuning-up of my heart to the affairs of the world." She says: "I hear the news in a very different way now, and I act with a larger context in mind" (1986, p. 91). Listening bureaucrats could, too.

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