Four Types Of Listening, by Otto Scharmer

In my years of working with groups and organizations, I have identified four basic types of listening.

"Ya, I know that already." The first type of listening is downloading: listening by reconfirming habitual judgments. When you are in a situation where everything that happens confirms what you already know, then you are listening by downloading.

"Ooh, look at that!" The second type of listening is object-focused listening: listening by paying attention to factual and to the novel or disconfirming data. In this type of listening you pay attention to what differs from what you already know. You attend to ideas about reality that differ from your own rather than denying them (as you do in the case of downloading). Object-focused or factual listening is the basic mode of good science. You ask questions and you carefully observe the responses that nature (data) gives to you.

"Oh, yes, I know how you feel." The third and deeper level of listening is empathic listening. When we are engaged in real dialogue, we can, when paying attention, become aware of a profound shift in the place from which our listening originates. As long as we operate from the first two types of listening, our listening originates from within the boundaries of our own mental-cognitive organization. But when we listen empathically, our perception shifts from our own organization into the field, to the other, to the place from which the other person is speaking. When moving into that mode of listening we have to activate our empathy by connecting directly, heart to heart, to the other person. If that happens, we feel a profound switch; we forget about our own agenda and begin to see how the world unfolds through someone else's eyes. When operating in this mode, we usually feel what another person wants to say before the words take form. And then we may recognize whether a person chooses the right word or the wrong one to express something. That judgment is only possible when we have a direct sense of what someone wants to say before we analyze what she
actually says. Empathic listening is a skill that can be cultivated and developed, just like any other skill in human relations. It's a skill that requires us to activate a different source of intelligence-the intelligence of the heart.

"I can't express what I experience in words. My whole being has slowed down. I feel more quiet, present and more my real self. I am connected to something larger than myself." This is the fourth level of listening. It moves beyond the current field and connects to a still deeper realm of emergence. I call this level of listening

generative listening, or listening from the emerging field of the future. This level of listening requires us to access our open heart and open will â€" our capacity to connect to the highest future possibility that wants to emerge. On this level our work focuses on getting our (old) self out of the way in order to open a space, a clearing that allows for a different sense of presence to manifest. We no longer look for something outside. We no longer empathize with someone in front of us. We are in an altered state â€" maybe communion
or grace is the word that comes closest to the texture of this experience that refuses to be dragged onto the surface of words.

Youâ€™ll notice that this fourth level of listening differs in texture and outcomes from the others. You know that you have been operating on
the fourth level when you realize that, at the end of the conversation, you are no longer the same person you were when you started the conversation. You have gone through a subtle but profound change. You have connected to a deeper source â€" to the source of who
you really are and to a sense of why you are here â€" a connection that links you with a profound field of coming-into-being, with your emerging authentic Self.Â