

FOREWORD BY MICHAEL FULLAN

SHANE SAFIR

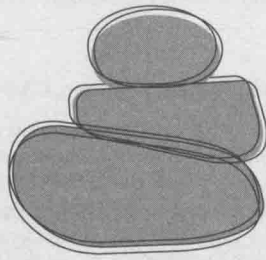
THE
LISTENING
LEADER

CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR
EQUITABLE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION



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THE LISTENING LEADER

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Shane Saifir

Foreword by **Michael Fullan**

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PRAISE FOR THE LISTENING LEADER

"This luminous book guides school leaders in developing a school culture of trust, empowerment, and excellence. With compassion and clarity, Safir coaches the hard work of leading and sustaining change—while keeping our focus squarely on equity for every learner."

—**Kathleen Cushman**

*co-author of *Belonging and Becoming: The Power of Social and Emotional Learning in High Schools**

"If only I had read this fifty years ago. It took me time to learn that listening is teaching; and then, that being a leader is being a teacher! Shane's wise and practical book is what I didn't have then, and it's fantastic that we all have it now."

—**Deborah Meier**

*senior scholar at New York University's Steinhardt School of Education, author of *The Power of Their Ideas, Lessons to America from a Small School in Harlem, and In Schools We Trust**

"As a leader in a diverse urban school, this book fills a void that I didn't realize was there. I'm sure these practical ideas on how to be a better listening leader will improve my practice immensely!"

—**Audrey Amos**

principal, John Muir Elementary School

"Shane Safir has written a brilliant book. As engaging as it is informative and as revelatory as it is relevant. It is a must-read for school leaders and those who aspire to lead."

—**Chris Emdin**

associate professor of science education, Teachers College, Columbia University

"This book is a 'must have' for any leader trying to move the needle on equity. Drawing from her lived experience as a principal and leadership coach, Safir offers stories that give insight and practical strategies that get results. It's one you'll keep coming back to."

—**Zaretta Hammond**

*author of *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain**

"In *The Listening Leader*, Shane Safir eloquently describes a powerful approach to school transformation that starts with listening to the school community—including teachers, students, and families—and highlights the importance of cultivating leadership at every level. I encourage anyone interested in understanding how to improve our schools to read her book."

—**Shael Polakow-Suransky**

president, Bank Street College of Education

"Shane's book is a must-read for new leaders as it underscores the often overlooked and underpracticed power of listening in leadership. This interactive book offers an alternative and empowering path to creating humanizing spaces in schools and immediately changed the way I interacted with students, teachers, families and community members."

—**Tamara Friedman**

assistant principal, Berkeley High School

"Shane Safir's *The Listening Leader* is a godsend to a field of thinkers, doers, and reactors. From the very first sentence, Safir draws us into her personal story of leadership as well her wisdom on how listening can be a powerful act of transformation for individuals, schools, and communities."

Reading this book illustrates how infrequently listening actually happens in our schools and school systems. Thankfully, Safir invites in a way that allows us to learn how to listen and use what we hear to take action on behalf of our students. Whether you are a teacher, coach, school or central office leader, this book will provide you with a fresh perspective and the necessary tools for moving forward as a listening leader."

—Max Silverman

associate director, University of Washington Center for Educational Leadership

"*The Listening Leader*, based on solid theoretical foundations and chock-full of stories, offers a rich and extensive exploration of this vital skill. After reading this book, you'll have no doubt about the powerful role that listening plays in leadership and you'll have many tools to refine your listening."

—Elena Aguilar

author of The Art of Coaching and The Art of Coaching Teams

"The need for action to be informed by reflection is not an idea that is foreign to social justice educators. What is often missing, however, is how one's reflective process is shaped by their ability to listen to their community. From a space of vulnerability and introspection, Safir demonstrates a commitment to praxis and the powerful role that listening plays in our work."

—Darrick Smith

assistant professor of educational leadership, University of San Francisco

"Shane Safir recognizes that in order to build equity and excellence in our schools that we have to lead with our ears and not our mouths. She provides excellent practical suggestions on how to do just that in *The Listening Leader*."

—Larry Ferlazzo

educator, teacher advice columnist, and author

"At a time when leaders are in search of different approaches to transform schools, we have a new approach. Safir offers a compelling framework on how to engage in listening as an innovative approach to leadership. Through listening in caring, empathetic, and relational ways, the ingredients for equity can become a reality. An excellent read for school leaders. Read, listen, and learn!"

—Tyrone C. Howard

professor and associate dean, University of California Los Angeles

"For today's educational leader, *The Listening Leader* gives us the most precious gift—the opportunity to pause and reflect. We must take seriously Safir's call to slow down, tune into ourselves and others, and lead with the kind of integrity that is born out of a sense of collective purpose; this is the path towards meaningful school improvement."

—Young Whan Choi

manager of performance assessments, Oakland Unified School District

"Equitable school transformation is what is most needed in today's schools, and *The Listening Leader* provides the guidance and practical tools for educators to achieve it. Shane Safir pulls on her deep knowledge of academic and professional learning communities in order to provide educators with a special resource that we can all readily use. This book is a must-have for anyone seeking to positively transform their learning community."

—Raquel Topete

instructional coach, East Side Union High School District

THE LISTENING LEADER

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for Equitable School
Transformation

Sharon

Fullan

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This book is dedicated to two beloved students, Alondra and Javon, and to my own babies, Mona and Maximo.

May we build schools that celebrate the light in every child.



I have never encountered any children in any group who are not geniuses. There is no mystery on how to teach them. The first thing you do is treat them like human beings and the second thing you do is love them.

—Dr. Asa Hilliard

FOREWORD

There are countless books on leadership, but none like Shane Safir's *The Listening Leader*. When all is said and done, it deals with the forest and the trees. It unpacks both understanding and action. Overall, this book pays equal and integrative attention to “listening” and to “driving.” It will cause you to reconsider leadership in ways that you have not thought about.

The nature of leadership in school systems these days is badly outdated, as evidenced by the long-standing failure to make improvements. We need leadership that connects with the lives and the futures of students, parents, and teachers. We need new forms of leadership that lift students from seemingly inevitable inertia to lives of action and success. *The Listening Leader* lays out how to mobilize countless numbers on the ground to forge a path forward. Old leadership discourages; Listening Leaders will unleash unrealized energy. Here's the test: Apply some of the ideas of this book to whatever you thought was an intractable situation. Then leverage the new impetus.

Every chapter has gems of insight. Each begins with “This chapter is designed to help you . . .,” and lists the four or five big ideas that you will learn. Then, after delving into the topics, the chapter ends with Key Takeaways and Listening Leader Inquiry. This format alone gives the reader ready access to the ideas in the book as a whole.

Chapter 1 gets the reader immediately into courage of purpose and pathways of solution. We get to understand local accountability, formative versus punitive feedback, experiential use of data, and timeliness. In Chapter 2, we find the core tenets of the Listening Leader, which includes both rational and emotional elements.

Chapters have deeply insightful charts and frameworks. Here are a few:

Chapter 5 identifies a list of principles and pitfalls, which includes mistakenly leading from a self-proclaimed sense of urgency; viewing emotion as unprofessional; and failing to interpret nonverbal cues, including one's own. We learn how to understand and navigate complex change by engaging the Six Stances of a Listening Leader, and what to expect when leading complex change. In Chapter 9, there is a wonderful chart comparing how one would lead a technical versus a complex change. Simple rules are provided for complex change, such as "Make your first year of implementation all about learning, not performing"; and develop and learn from "skinny plans." In discussing complex change, the author shows what she and others did to guide the change and learn from it. For example, the goal of developing "expert teachers who continually refine their craft" is coupled with allocating significant time for collaboration and professional learning. Achieving "real accountability" is linked with coleadership and consensus decision making, and so on.

In another chapter, we learn how to design a game-changing meeting around listening routines. The related appendix contains quick design tips, sample team agreements, and 10 great TED Talks for better meetings. There is also a powerful chapter on listening to students, something dear to my own recent work, where we are finding that students are "radical change agents" with respect to pedagogy, learning environments, and society.¹ This chapter, written by Matt Alexander of June Jordan School for Equity, makes the case powerfully and shows the way, including five routines to build a culture of listening to students. There is an equally powerful chapter on listening to and connecting with parents for greater equity of learning.

All of Shane Safir's chapters are based on her own work and that of colleagues and coaching clients. The book reveals mistakes made by various leaders, what was learned, and how to do it better the next time. *The Listening Leader* connects us to other practical and deep work. This is a book that amplifies listening to a deep comprehensive art. What makes this book so timely is that education systems are stuck now, mired in the status quo. Shane Safir offers a way out and forward.

Read it, act on it, and reap the benefits for all.

Michael Fullan
*Professor Emeritus,
OISE/University of Toronto*

NOTE

1. Fullan, M. (2016). *Indelible leadership: Always leave them learning*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.

PREFACE

Any citizen of this country who figures himself as responsible—and particularly those of you who deal with the minds and hearts of young people—must be prepared to “go for broke.” Or to put it another way, you must understand that in the attempt to correct so many generations of bad faith and cruelty, when it is operating not only in the classroom but in society, you will meet the most fantastic, the most brutal, and the most determined resistance.

—JAMES BALDWIN, “A Talk to Teachers” (delivered October 16, 1963)

I became familiar with the stark shape of injustice while interning for civil rights attorney Jennifer Wood inside the Rhode Island youth prison system—euphemistically called a “training school.” Wood was representing incarcerated youth in a class action lawsuit designed to improve conditions of confinement, such as access to education, quality food, and better facilities.

Each week, she and I followed armed guards through a half-dozen clanging security doors to meet with elected youth leaders. Sitting in a circle, we listened to young men and women share their stories and grievances. While taking notes on technicalities, we also witnessed much heartbreak—the profound frustration of being locked up in your prime, particularly in a system that’s overwhelmingly stacked against people of color. I recall Ramón, an aspiring artist who shared his vivid and haunting drawings with me. I remember Shawna, a buoyant young woman whose cousins lived down the hall from her in the female dormitory.

These youth had bright futures, but because of the institutional racism shaping so much of their lives, they lacked the second chances many White teenagers have.

Through this experience, a painful truth became clear to me: The prison system had siphoned off huge numbers of young people of color—

mostly Black, Latino, and southeast Asian—who were growing up in poverty. I was learning what many people of color know by necessity. I grew up in a majority White, middle-class suburb where many teenagers committed the same infractions that landed the youth I met in Rhode Island in prison. Yet I can't name a single kid I knew who did time for his or her behavior. This inequity branded itself on my heart and mind and fueled my later pursuit of a career in public education.

When I became an urban schoolteacher a few years later, I realized I had to “go for broke,” as writer James Baldwin had instructed teachers to do 30 years prior. Like so many educators, I faced both incredible opportunities and daunting challenges. How would I humanize my classroom inside an essentially dehumanizing institution? How would I support the most marginalized students to participate in a rich intellectual world? How would I develop a learning community in the face of radically different social, emotional, and academic needs? And as a White teacher working with students of color, how would I earn trust and credibility?

There were many ways to get this wrong, not the least of which is what author and Columbia University professor Christopher Emdin calls “a pervasive narrative in urban education: a savior complex that gives mostly white teachers in minority and communities a false sense of saving kids.”¹ I wish I could say I got it right from the get-go, but the truth is that going for broke is an ongoing process. Educators of all backgrounds step into an inequitable system, replete with distractions and obstacles that pull us off the path to transformation. How can one stay humble, courageous, and grounded in the face of such challenges?

Today, there are countless hawkers of solutions and programs to turn around our schools. Although these reformers are well intentioned and have at times produced some good results, I believe that the best solutions lie in the brilliance of our teachers, our students, and their families. We can't “intervene” our way to equitable outcomes without listening to the people we aspire to serve.

As I'll share in this book, I eventually left the classroom to help found and lead a new high school in San Francisco. Many years later, I spent a sabbatical year teaching Jordanian and Palestinian students in Amman, Jordan, where I learned new ways to listen. Rather than following a predetermined set of pedagogical steps, I had to study subtle cultural cues, make sense of Arabic turns of phrase with no English parallel, and create room for my students' stories. I recall one assignment for which two young women from Gaza wrote harrowing narratives about surviving a recent Israeli military assault; one minute they were sitting outside chatting, and

the next, the sky exploded with bombs. This experience reminded me that to empower young people, we must welcome their untold stories and constantly adapt to the shifting nature of culture and context. Listening and “going for broke” are lifelong propositions.

I start from the premise that we already know what it takes to educate young people. So what gets in the way? We struggle with low expectations—of ourselves as leaders, of our schools, and of so many of our students. We struggle to uncouple the blunt assessments doled out by high-stakes tests from the complex and deeply human enterprise of learning. And we struggle to convince teachers to design intellectually rich environments when so often our *adult* learning environments are devoid of depth and humanity. We can address these issues, and I hope this book will begin to chart a course.

I bring two different, but related, perspectives to this project. First, I carry my own hard-won experience as a teacher and school leader who learned, through early missteps and various successes, to navigate working across difference. Second, as a school and district transformation coach for over 10 years, I have supported a diverse cross section of leaders; this work has deepened my belief in the importance of listening and of growing a culture of transformation rather than relying on charismatic leadership to save the day. I know that the strategies in this book are effective for any leader who wants to create the conditions for change.

None of this will be easy. Interrupting decades—centuries, really—of inequitable schooling seems a Sisyphean task. But it is possible. I hope this book will help you find the courage to listen—to yourself, to your community, and to what’s possible when you decide to go for broke.

NOTES

1. Downs, K. (2016, March 28). What “white folks who teach in the hood” get wrong about education. *PBS Newshour*. Retrieved from <http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/what-white-folks-who-teach-in-the-hood-get-wrong-about-education/>

INTRODUCTION

I learned to listen in the row houses, apartments, and projects of south-east San Francisco. I had been teaching at a neighborhood high school, which served roughly a third Latino, a third African American, and a third Filipino students. In my second year, I had the opportunity to create a program called the Law Academy in partnership with an extraordinary English teacher named Rex de Guia. I taught pre-law and US history, managed student internships, and coordinated a group of attorneys who served as mentors. Our students conducted mock trials and debates, read legal cases alongside authors like Kozol, Baldwin, and Freire, and defended their ideas in college-level essays.

It was an invigorating experience, but also heartbreaking. Every year, we lost at least one student to homelessness, the dropout epidemic, juvenile hall, or violence. Our program constituted just three of a student's six class periods, and although the school at large was functional, it was also demoralizing and dehumanizing. To enter the building, students had to pass through a tall, guarded, wrought-iron fence. Using the restroom required a security escort. When a teacher quit midyear, as was far too common, I would walk past classrooms and see an endless stream of B movies running. Far too many young people either checked out emotionally or dropped out.

Several years later, I joined a group of colleagues who wanted to start a new school. We had heard of groundbreaking public schools in New York City that had flipped the script for students like ours, sending over 90% of their graduates to university. With a small planning grant, we visited New York and witnessed the magic of Urban Academy, the International High School at LaGuardia Community College, and Vanguard High School.

In these institutions, *everyone* appeared happy—adults and children alike. Instead of pockets of excellence, we found schools bursting with excellence! Students presented and defended their best work to “committees”: small groups of teachers, students, and family members trained to listen and pose critical questions. Teachers were in constant dialogue, pushing each other’s thinking and practice to new levels. Leaders listened to their school communities, valued student and staff feedback, and fended off external mandates that didn’t serve their students.

Our team returned home and formed a partnership with the community-based San Francisco Organizing Project (SFOP; <http://www.sfop.org/>), a member of the PICO National Network,¹ to rally parent and community support for our vision of a new small high school serving the district’s most underserved students. We began by conducting “one-on-one” meetings in the homes of parents, and discovered the power of story to connect people in an intimate social fabric. Throughout these meetings, we subscribed to PICO’s **90/10 principle**—90% of each meeting would focus on listening and only 10% on talking. I took a year off from teaching, and listened to over 200 parents in the community.

I remember sitting in the living room of a father, and learning of his tremendous sacrifices emigrating from El Salvador so that his children could have a better life. Only now, they were attending schools with low standards and poor safety records. “I want them to be safe,” he implored. “I want them to learn and to graduate. Is this too much to ask?” Listening to stories like this, I grew accustomed to giving my undivided attention to the speaker, paying attention to nonverbal cues, and asking questions to connect the speaker’s hopes and dreams with the potential of a new school.

From these one-on-ones, a powerful network of parent, student, and teacher leaders emerged. At first, 10 or 15 people attended our community meetings. In short order, the rooms brimmed with 30 to 40 people. By the time we brought people together to ask the board of education to support our effort, nearly 300 people turned out. The crowd spilled out of the cafeteria doors as several students, teachers, and a diverse group of parent leaders spoke passionately. Together we secured a public pledge from board members that they would help us open a new small, in-district high

school. Afterwards, the organizing team stood in a circle to debrief. One parent, whose daughter was fast approaching high school, spoke words I will never forget: “I feel like I’m part of the new civil rights movement.”

We weren’t just building relationships; we were building what I call relational capital—the interpersonal currency that fuels social change. We were building power. And we were building a movement. Only later did I realize the critical skill nested at the heart of this work: listening. By relying on a basic human capacity, we laid an unshakable foundation for what became June Jordan School for Equity.

EQUITABLE SCHOOL TRANSFORMATION IS POSSIBLE

This book is about creating the conditions for equitable school transformation through listening. By focusing your attention on people, and the daily stream of data they bring you, you’ll learn to listen and build capacity in others. There is also a larger purpose woven into these pages: to transform our schools by transforming our school *cultures* into equitable places and spaces for every student.



Listening Leadership extends well beyond the act of listening; it is also an orientation toward collegiality, shared leadership, professional growth, and equity.

Listening is a vital and overlooked tool, and the cornerstone of leading across differences in race, gender, culture, socioeconomic status, language, and age, among other factors. Listening Leaders use their ears and eyes to understand where people are coming from. They lead with questions more than answers, and they demonstrate care, curiosity, and regard for every person who crosses their path. But Listening Leadership extends well beyond the act of

listening; it is also an orientation toward collegiality, shared leadership, professional growth, and equity. It’s a mindset and a way of being. Exhibit I.1 contrasts a listening mindset with a “telling” mindset.

Equity is the through line of this project. In its simplest form, **equity** means providing every student with the resources he or she needs to learn and thrive. This requires a willingness to redistribute resources in order to close entrenched opportunity gaps. In my local district of Oakland, California, gentrification and income inequality are pushing many working families and families of color out of their communities. Currently, if 100 students start high school together, 67 will graduate, 46 will start college,

EXHIBIT I.1 WHAT IS A LISTENING MINDSET?

The concept of mindsets has gained popularity in recent years, spearheaded by the work of Stanford University psychologist Carol Dweck. In her 2006 book *Mindset*, Dweck contrasts a *growth mindset*, the belief that ability is fluid and that effort pays off, with a *fixed mindset*, the belief that one's abilities, talents, and intelligence are static.^a Listening Leadership offers a framework for holding a growth mindset as a leader.

Consider the difference between a listening and a telling mindset.

A Listening Mindset Reminds Us To . . .

- Slow down.
- Use a thoughtful process to get to an outcome.
- Listen before making decisions.
- Harness the wisdom of the group.
- Distribute leadership to others.

A Telling Mindset Instructs Us To . . .

- Move fast; be efficient.
- Drive toward outcome; ignore process.
- Use authority to make decisions.
- Be the expert in the room.
- Hold on to positional power.

I expect that many of you already possess a listening mindset and skills, which this book will help you sharpen.

^aDweck, C. (2006). *Mindset: The new psychology of success*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

and only 10 will graduate college within 10 years. As a school coach in this district and the mother of two children in Oakland schools, I am committed to building an integrated, equitable system. Each time I enter a school building, I ask myself, *Would I send my own children here?* If the answer is no, there is work to be done.



In its simplest form, equity means providing every student with the resources he or she needs to learn and thrive.

Is equitable school transformation possible? Absolutely. In 2003, I became the founding coprincipal of June Jordan School for Equity (JJSE), a social justice school preparing a working-class, predominantly Latino and African American student body for college and to become agents of positive change in the world. Now in its 14th year, and led by two incredible leaders

whom you'll meet in Chapter 10 (one of whom wrote Chapter 8), JJSE continues to serve some of the most marginalized students in San