

Leveraging the Listening Tour as a Strategy to Help Library Leaders Acclimate to a New Organization

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Abstract

Leaders stepping into new roles within a library must engage team members and learn about their new role through dialogue and interaction. Listening tours (LT) have been highlighted in business and popular literature; however, such approaches have received limited attention in academic literature. Through a series of semi-structured interviews with team members, library leaders can learn perspectives on various issues, including organizational needs, challenges, and culture. Effective LTs allow leaders acclimating to a new leadership role within a library or a new institution to start building trusting connections, prioritize steps for change, and take inventory of the organizational support structures that can impact success. This review seeks to provide a background and possible structure for LTs for library leaders at all levels by outlining useful practices for successful LTs, presenting advantages and drawbacks of these strategies, and encouraging leaders to intentionally build associated practices into their next transition.

Introduction

Leaders stepping into new roles within a library, whether as internal or external leaders, must engage their new team members and learn about the nuances of their role through dialogue and interaction (Ciampa and Dotlich 2015; Gordon 2005). Such exchanges can be facilitated by conducting a listening tour (LT). LTs have frequently been highlighted in business and popular literature as a practice associated with leadership transitions but have received less attention in the academic literature (Ciampa and Dotlich 2015; Watkins 2013, 2014). In these sources, LTs have been leveraged as mechanisms to learn more about the organization, connect with employees at all levels, uncover challenges, and promote organizational improvement (Ballard and Blessing 2006; Black and Leysen 2002; Chapman 2009; DiMarco 2005; Evans and Ward 2007a, 2007b; Gordon 2005; Oud 2008; Graybill et al. 2013; Hall-Ellis 2014; Tokarz 2018; Wallace 2009; Watkins 2013, 2014). A successful LT provides incoming leaders with a social and impactful way to engage in an investigation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats within a division or department to fuel positive change (Chapman 2009; DiMarco 2006; Evans and Ward 2007a). Listening as a methodology, however, has been highlighted for

research or information gathering across various settings and organization types, including studies of appreciative inquiry, dynamic inquiry, and problem-based inquiry (Fadul et al. 2024; Keefe and Pesut 2004; Rappeport and Wolvin 2020; Royer and Latz 2016). As an onboarding methodology that typically provides useful organizational information, regardless of the industry or discipline, this approach can particularly benefit leadership in academic library departments and divisions who might not have recent or extensive leadership preparation (Gordon 2005). Conducting LTs is a practice wherein a leader purposely has a series of one-on-one meetings with various team members as part of the onboarding or leadership transition process, or meets with a series of individuals in a set period of time to learn perspectives on a specific issue (Coghlan, Preskill, and Tzavaras Catsambas 2003; Keefe and Pesut 2004; Smerek 2013; Watkins 2013). These interactions should provide leaders with a structured and systematic framework to gather information about organizational needs, culture, progress, challenges, and next steps (Smerek 2013). The most well-executed LTs provide benefits for all involved, including surfacing and reinforcing cultural norms, highlighting accomplishments and needs, revealing gaps and problems, and promoting a sense of exchange of information between the incoming leader and their new colleagues (Rappeport and Wolvin 2020; Watkins 2014).

Once completed, an effective LT allows leaders acclimating into a new role to have started forming trusting connections, prioritize steps for change, and take inventory of the organizational support structures and gaps that can impact their success and longevity in the role (Coghlan, Preskill, and Tzavaras Catsambas 2003). Institutions can benefit from this practice when integrating new leaders and can partner with each new hire (or transitioning leader) to learn what is shared in the listening process (Byford, Watkins, and Triantogiannis 2017). This review seeks to provide library leaders at all levels with a background on LTs, outline useful practices for successful LTs, present the pros and cons of these strategies, and encourage leaders to intentionally build associated practices into their next transition.

Overview of Listening Tours as a Transitional Tool

Attention has been consistently placed on leaders using LTs when acclimating to new roles, whether transferring externally into the organization or stepping into a new leadership role from within the institution (Bell and Johnson 2019; Kaplan et al. 2019). LTs take on many forms and can be developed intentionally with a list of questions used to gather information about the organizational culture and the people as individuals (Wolvin 2005). Leaders stepping into a new role may seek guidance on semi-structured questions from their supervisor(s) to better gather

information that would benefit the leader as well as the institution (Adams 2015). Questions can also be generated based on a review of various organizational resources, including websites, position descriptions, strategic plans, transition documents, and/or exit interviews (Adams 2015).

Developing a list of well-structured and targeted questions is merely an initial step. It is also important to think strategically about the list of individuals with whom to meet and even plan the order of meetings as much as possible to start the concurrent process of synthesizing the information gathered (Creswell and Creswell 2017). The approach and format of the LT sessions may be thoughtfully constructed to use the opportunity to build rapport with others, find ways to put them at ease, inspire hope, and gain as much useful information as possible.³ The LT format is also critical, as some team members may be comfortable meeting with the new leader alone, while others may prefer small groups, depending on their place in the organization and current perceptions of administration (Creswell and Creswell 2017).

As leaders conduct their LTs, it is important to ensure they build in time for reflective practices. Thinking deeply about whether the listening sessions are yielding useful information would help leaders determine if another approach, different questions, or another strategy might work best (Rappeport and Wolvin 2020). Some leaders may opt to eliminate or add questions, modify how they ask specific questions, integrate structured follow-up meetings, or temporarily pause the LT, among other strategies (Fadul et al. 2024). As with case-study research, the use of a semi-structured interview structure can allow for maximum use of the time and energy associated with each meeting/listening session (Creswell and Creswell 2017). Adaptability in an LT format is necessary as new information is revealed and shared, and new ideas, directions, or priorities are illuminated. This may spark additional discussion or a change in conversation priorities that need to be considered with greater urgency (Adams 2015).

Literature Review

Trade Journals and Popular Business Publications

While current information on LTs remains abundant within trade publications, blogs, podcasts, position pieces, and non-scholarly studies, there is an apparent dearth of rigorous peer-reviewed research on this topic (Creswell and Creswell 2017). Popular literature highlights using LTs to learn more about the intended and accidental organizational culture, as well as team dynamics and relationship strengths and weaknesses (Cutler 2014; Lencioni 2012; Watkins 2013). Sources underscore using the LT and other aspects of the onboarding process to refine

positional goals for the first few months in the position, as well as during the first year and beyond (Watkins 2013, 2014). LTs can also be used to uncover unwritten histories, existing grievances, and gaps in formal knowledge management systems (Levy 2009; Newstrom 2007). Leaders can use the information gained from the LTs to diagnose the organizational culture and engage in a reflection on how the organization's existing structure will impact success in ways that either enable or hinder the progress leaders wish to make in both short-term and longer-term timeframes (Quinn 2011). Abundant opportunities exist to examine LTs across diverse academic institutions; evaluate their efficacy in aiding leadership transitions; and determine associated pitfalls. Use of the information gleaned from LTs can help leaders develop positive change within the organization, while ensuring they are aware of the culture and climate that will support the organization's pace for transformation (Hall and Hord 2020).

Library Onboarding

The subject of LTs is not readily apparent in academic library literature, necessitating a more general review of the literature pertaining to the orientation or onboarding process. The function of a formal onboarding process is to promote and accelerate organizational socialization and engagement to set new hires up for success, helping the new hire feel welcome and valued, increasing retention rates, particularly in the case of hires from minoritized backgrounds, and minimizing the amount of time required for a new hire to become a fully contributing member of the library (Ballard and Blessing 2006; Black and Leysen 2002; Chapman 2009; DiMarco 2005; Graybill et al. 2013; Hall-Ellis 2014; Wallace 2009).

The literature frequently focuses on recently hired, early-career librarians, such as those with less than three years in the field (Black and Leysen 2002; Oud 2008; Tokarz 2018). Existing library administrators—either explicitly or implicitly—are cast in the role of the person planning or implementing the onboarding process (Black and Leysen 2002; Evans and Ward 2007a; Wallace 2009). In the instances in which onboarding for library administrators is addressed, the expectation is that only minimal orientation may be necessary or that administrators will manage their own transition process (Evans and Ward 2007a; Gordon 2005). General advice on how the new administrator might best succeed in a self-managed transition process is sometimes offered, such as cultivating listening skills to prevent misunderstandings or devoting time and effort to developing relationships with the people in the organization, particularly prior to introducing significant changes (Evans and Ward 2007a; Gordon 2005).

Useful Practices for Successful Listening Tours

Some of the most carefully designed LTs are integrated into the fabric of the organizational development plan. Leaders assuming new roles can help their organization to gather vital information on crucial elements, including team member morale, challenges with change management, gaps in mission-critical areas, and dangers related to compliance and accreditation (Keefe and Pesut 2004). New leaders, whether coming into their roles internally or externally, can be catalysts for unearthing and surfacing challenges that existing leadership may not be able to access (Ciampa and Dotlich 2015).

Considerations for an effective listening tour include being mindful of the leader's role, perceived power dynamics, location/setting, room arrangement, and whether group meetings are acceptable (Watkins 2013). Strategies to promote more equity in power dynamics, encourage open dialogue, and create a psychologically safe space are essential to gathering useful information (Creswell and Creswell 2017). These may include meeting off site with certain team members or hosting a group meeting as the tour evolves. Consideration should also be given to scheduling LT sessions during times when energy is highest and focus is most intact (Watkins 2013). Timing, duration, and sheer volume of LT sessions conducted in the span of a day or week should be carefully examined to ensure that the LT strategy does not undermine the leader's attention and ability to engage fully.

Advantages of Adopting Listening Tours

LTs can help when acclimating leaders, especially those external to the organization, to evaluate the culture, strengths, and gaps of the organization or team with fresh perspectives (Table 1).

Table 1. Pros and cons of engaging in a listening tour

Pros	Cons
<p>Accelerates cultural learning and adaptation</p> <p>Provides historical context, revealing organizational traumas and shared anxieties</p> <p>Surfaces points of influence in the organization vs. the formal organizational chart</p> <p>Frames new leader as a servant leader and supporter</p> <p>Provides an early point of contact to start building rapport</p> <p>Gathers multiple points of view and reveals patterns of attitudes</p> <p>Offers leadership onboarding an organized and strategic process, which can be reassuring to employees</p> <p>Quickly reveals key gaps and challenges</p> <p>Identifies organizational groups and relationships</p> <p>Evaluates existing workforce (turnover risk, ambitions within organization, morale)</p>	<p>Risks employees transferring existing biases to the new leader, reducing the value of outsider perspectives</p> <p>Requires significant time and emotional energy</p> <p>Excess attention to problems and complaints can diminish the utility of the information to improve the department holistically</p> <p>Depending on organization's history, it could be viewed as disingenuous or a first step toward layoffs, undermining the new leader</p> <p>May create real or perceived inequities for remote employees, who can only meet virtually</p> <p>Power dynamics can skew the interaction toward what the employee thinks the new leader wants to hear or away from real problems</p> <p>Can be interpreted as an interrogation or interview for one's job in advance of layoffs</p> <p>More information will be forthcoming from those who extend trust more quickly</p>

Through combining LTs with data, leaders can identify whether the organization is at a point of impending crisis, stability, growth, and so on (Watkins 2013). By engaging in learning about the library’s culture, it will be possible to ask questions that are both specific to the leader’s role and useful for understanding the library holistically (Table 2).

Table 2. Examples of listening tour questions

<p>Organization-wide questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What departments or offices across the organization are already known as strong partners and collaborators? 2. What departments or offices could be stronger partners and collaborators for us? 3. What connections do we have across campus that make our lives easier and our work more effective? 4. What political/organizational landmines do I need to be mindful of to help us maximize resources and political capital for our department? 5. What events and stories from across campus should I know about so that I start building relationships with other divisions from a strong footing? 6. What organizational problems outside our immediate team are holding us back from the success we could be achieving?
<p>Role-specific questions</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Tell me about the duties you perform that aren’t part of your position description. 2. How do you believe I might best serve you in this role? 3. What did the last person in my role do that we should continue doing? 4. In what direction do you see us needing to go to succeed as a department/office, and so on? 5. What opportunities are we letting slip by in our planning and initiatives? 6. How might this role serve you in your growth and development? 7. What successes and challenges do you forecast for yourself in this organization? 8. What strengths do you bring to the team? 9. What makes you proudest about your or your team’s accomplishments to date?

By applying a consistent approach that allows flexibility, organization-wide and diverse perspectives can be gathered to help the leader in the new role shape strategy and priorities for

leading and making a positive impact. The leader's strategic and operational plans for success can leverage information related to human resources, workload, knowledge management, and leading through relationship building (Jones 2013; Kenny 2019).

Drawbacks to Listening Tours

It is important for leaders to understand and anticipate that LTs can also be met with skepticism and perhaps even cynicism. Leaders in new roles need to be mindful of how LTs have been used and framed in the past. Leaders will need to apply both curiosity and caution as they prepare for the LT, execute the LT, and then reflect on the meaning and results afterward (Figure 1).

Figure 1. A flowchart with useful approaches to crafting listening tours



Previous LTs conducted within the organization may leave an imprint on whether the new leader's LT will be well received and thus helpful to all parties involved. Biases often surround leadership transitions; thus, it is important to notice potential biases and quickly address them so that the LT can be used as an opportunity to build rapport. As a leader in a new role, it is also important to define the scope of the LT sessions to ensure that participants do not expect the LT to address individual issues and grievances. Rather, it can be useful to let the team know that the LT will help address shared departmental challenges that impact the division holistically.

Depending on how the LT is executed and the demeanor or approach of the leader while asking questions, leaders may risk alienating others or putting them on edge if the tone of the meetings becomes interrogative, tense, or terse. While balancing the focus of the LT to surface both challenges and grievances, it is important to emphasize that any complaints will be gathered to help address departmental and organizational challenges, not individual needs or preferences. This will help team members know that the leader is interested in all challenges but must prioritize problem-solving in ways that consider the impact on the whole department and holistic needs, rather than individual concerns.

What Do Leaders Do with This Information?

Once the LT data are gathered, the leader can use the information in various ways. In learning more about the organization, the leader may identify themes that connect to strategic planning priorities and directions. This step can lead to identifying individuals passionate about common areas of interest and help form effective task forces and teams to engage in the operation and tactical work of making progress on the organization's strategic plan. As part of the LT, the leader may have formed strong relational connections with others and can now serve as a strong connector with employees at all levels, linking them with one another based on their functional work, interest areas, and desire to engage in various professional activities. Finally, leaders can use valuable LT data to not only uncover challenges but also promote organizational improvement by either addressing urgent problems that surfaced or adding new work and aligning work to the strategic plan.

Next Steps and Calls to Action

Based on the review of the existing information on LTs and the authors' collective lived experiences, we suggest calls to action challenging leaders to consider engaging in LTs, conducting them more than once apart from the beginning of their administrative role, and

leveraging their LTs for organizational learning, building political capital, and relationship building. As leaders engage in LTs, we also challenge them to use them as a means to catalyze positive change within their entire organization.

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