

Leading through listening

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May
2026



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Published in April 2026 by the Confederation of School Trusts, Fifth Floor, 167-169 Great Portland Street, London W1W 5PF. Registered charity number 1107640.

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How to cite this publication:

Nigals, I and Kelliher, I (2026). *Leading through listening*. London: Confederation of School Trusts

Introduction

Schools, along with other public services, are operating in a rapidly changing civic landscape. Parents – and children – are increasingly ready to challenge public institutions. With access to myriad sources of information, they no longer accept once authoritative organisations and individuals as the arbiters of truth.

Encouraged by seemingly authentic online voices, they expect new levels of accountability and justification from public services, with increased tendencies to demand their 'entitlements' – even where, in the case of AI generated advice, it may be based on incorrect information.

Our relationships with staff and stakeholders can also be buffeted by the same winds: employees can publish online reviews of their workplaces, and internet searches can tell tales well ahead of ever meeting a potential partner.

These are not altogether new issues. In the eighteenth century Jonathan Swift, musing on a passage from Ovid's *Metamorphoses* about people exaggerating tales in the retelling, writes about political lying that: "Falsehood flies, and the Truth comes limping after it."¹

What is different in this century is the intensifying speed and scale of alternative narratives. This has power for good – leaving wrongdoing fewer places to hide – as well as bad. It also intensifies the importance of genuine connections; of direct and genuine communication between individuals, organisations, and communities. It intensifies the importance of actions and words being in tight synchronicity. If we want flourishing children, adults, and communities, we must redesign the conditions in which education operates so that the flourishing of every part of that chain becomes a deliberate, shared endeavour.

This requires moving away from models that prioritise control and compliance towards systems that recognise human experience, relationships, and meaning as central to improvement. In this context, listening is a core design principle: the means by which organisations stay connected to lived reality, surface what matters, and adapt with care and coherence.

To become flourishing organisations, schools and trusts need to move beyond passive or transactional feedback-gathering and truly embed listening in their leadership. In *Leading the listening organisation: Creating organisations that flourish* the authors explain that organisational listening is not simply hearing stakeholder views²; in the context of education, it means treating pupils, staff, and parents as legitimate partners in shaping the school community, rather than as mere data points in a survey.

Partnership implies compromise, give and take, and mutual respect. We do not always need to agree with partners, but we seek to benefit from each other's perspectives. That understanding breeds trust and reduces suspicion. It gives truth a chance to outwit lies.

A suspicious society: mitigating polarities and tensions

Today's schools and trusts are navigating a series of unavoidable polarities and tensions between standards and wellbeing, accountability and trust, stability and innovation. No one individual or organisation can

¹ Swift, J (1710). *The Examiner*, 14.

² Pounsford, M, Ruck, K, and Kraiss, H (2024). *Leading the listening organisation: Creating organisations that flourish*. Routledge.



transcend that, but instead their reality must be consciously held and mitigated with wisdom. Leaders who listen well resist the temptation to be the saviour, the expert, or the one with the right answer. Instead, they create space for understanding to emerge collectively. This aligns closely with the concept of an ethics of care against an ethics of justice, from thinkers such as Carol Gilligan³ to calls for change, seen in Hilary Cottam's (Cottam, 2011) work⁴:

Ethics of care and justice	
Ethics of care	Ethics of justice
Moral action begins with attentiveness to context, relationship and the particularities of a lived situation.	Justice is rooted in rules, consistency and certainty.
What is the most caring response here, for these people, in this moment?	What is the most fair and consistent principle to apply here, regardless of who is involved?
Relational	Transactional
Eco-system/horizontal systems	Ego-system/hierarchical systems
Flexible	Bureaucratic

Fairness, accountability and boundaries are essential in education, but justice applied without care can become rigid or even cruel. Effective listening holds both, recognising that moral leadership often lives in the tension between them.

Listening and care are sometimes labelled as soft skills, associated with empathy and understanding, yet leadership, especially in a human-centred sector such as education, requires the ability to integrate multiple ways of knowing across all human capacities. Listening, then, is not soft or optional. It is demanding, courageous and consequential. It asks leaders to slow down, to question themselves, and to remain open to being changed by what they hear. And then take intentional action to transform the system; if we want to increase this capacity, we have to plan for it. It does not just happen.

Roger Martin's idea of the opposable mind speaks to this capacity to hold competing ideas at once without rushing to false resolution.⁵ Similarly, Otto Scharmer describes leadership as a practice of rebalancing polarities: knowing and not-knowing, action and non-action, comfort and discomfort.⁶ The moral benefits of listening are juxtaposed against the strategic advantages of doing so: we argue here that this is not about choosing one or the other, but choosing both, and emerging stronger as a result. In education, this translates into leaders who are self-aware and empathetic listeners, systems that invite broad participation, and transparent communication about what will and will not change as a result of feedback. Here, what is morally right is also what is strategically right.

3 Noddings, N (2005). *The Challenge to Care in Schools: An alternative approach to education*. Teachers College Press.

4 Cottam, H.(2011). 'Relational welfare'. *Soundings*, 48. Lawrence and Wishart.

5 Martin, R L (2007). *The opposable mind: How successful leaders win through integrative thinking*. Harvard Business Review Press.

6 Scharmer, CO and Kaufer, K (2025). *Presencing: 7 practices for transforming self, society, and business*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers.

Why schools and trusts should strive for embedded listening

For schools and trusts, moving from basic listening to embedded listening represents a fundamental mindset shift. Many schools already gather feedback, but this happens only occasionally, through a survey, a parent forum, or a student council, without fully integrating insights into decision-making. These hold value, but on their own may struggle to get beyond surface level engagement.

Deep or embedded listening, by contrast, is an organisational culture where listening is continuous, strategic, and co-creative. It requires leaders, staff, pupils, and parents to see listening not as a task but as central to the success of the work itself: a way of building trust and shaping decisions together. This is because feedback and data do not drive improvement on their own. People do. Nadler's work on feedback makes clear that data only becomes a lever for change when it creates energy for action in those who are expected to respond to it.⁷ And the benefits of doing so can be felt at all levels of the system.

Benefits to individuals

For individuals, embedded listening creates the conditions for motivation, agency, belonging and clarity. When pupils, staff and parents can see how their voice contributes to shaping a shared future, feedback shifts from being extractive to empowering. Nadler's work is clear that feedback only becomes useful when it creates energy for action. Energy that emerges when people trust the process, recognise themselves in the data, and understand how their input influences decisions.

This aligns closely with the Education Endowment Foundation's emphasis on engagement, uniting around purpose, and reflective adaptation as core behaviours for effective implementation.⁸ In schools where listening is visible and responsive, psychological safety increases: staff are more likely to raise concerns early, pupils are more likely to participate actively in their learning, and parents are more likely to engage constructively. Over time, dialogue replaces defensiveness, and people move from compliance to contribution.

Advantages for organisations

For organisations, the same listening dynamic underpins better decisions, stronger engagement and retention, and greater adaptability. CST's trust-led school improvement model highlights the importance of alignment, capability-building, and trust across complex systems;⁹ listening is the connective tissue that makes these possible. When people across a trust are working with feedback, not just receiving it, organisations make better decisions, prioritise more effectively, and adapt more readily to change.

Evidence from the Education Endowment Foundation shows that engagement, retention, and innovation are stronger where staff feel heard, respected and involved in shaping improvement. Listening, therefore, is a strategic tool that

7 Nadler, D. (1977). *Feedback and organization development: using data based methods*. Addison-Wesley Publishing Company.

8 Education Endowment Foundation (2024). [A school's guide to implementation](#).

9 Rollett, S (2024). [The DNA of trust-led school improvement: A conceptual model](#). Nottingham: Confederation of School Trusts.



turns data into shared understanding, understanding into action, and action into outcomes that support flourishing across the whole system.

Listening across the domains of educational leadership

The evolution of English education to be majority-led by school trusts has brought with it new forms of educational leadership, identified by CST's Leora Cruddas as organisational, civic, and system.¹⁰

School trust leaders have the potential to lead and shape their trust, the civic landscape in their localities, and the wider education system. CST's belief is that the trust model is fundamentally about deep and purposeful collaboration,¹¹ something that is impossible to do effectively without listening. From this grows a culture that promotes wider networks and broader societal benefits.

Within the domain of trust leadership, listening is functional and deeply intentional. Leaders need robust, disciplined listening to understand how their organisation is actually experienced by staff, pupils and families, and whether it is delivering on its core purpose. Intentional listening by the executive and trust board supports organisational health: it underpins trust, workforce wellbeing, school improvement, and ethical decision-making. It is cultivating the soil of the specific context, the needs and challenges of the trust's unique characteristics.

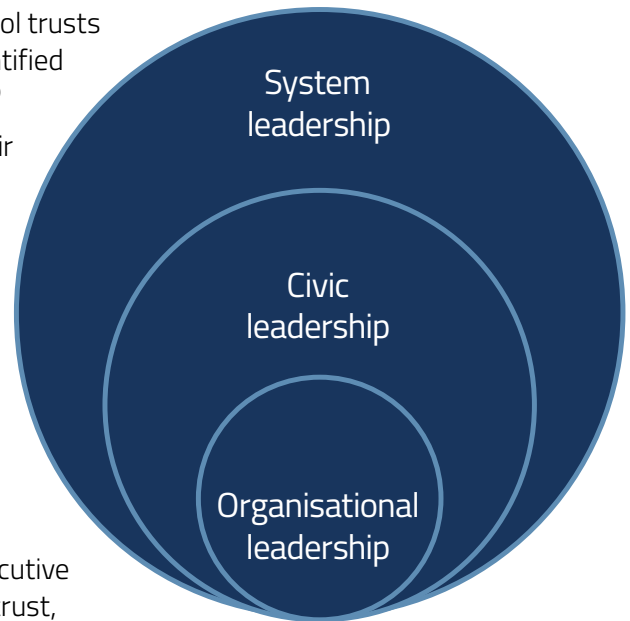
In the civic domain, listening becomes connective. Trusts and their schools are anchor institutions with long-standing relationships in place; civic leadership depends on listening that builds relationships, surfaces lived experience, and strengthens belonging across communities. This form of listening shifts engagement from transactional to relational, recognising that advancing education requires shared understanding and collective action.

Finally, in the system domain, listening becomes generative. Here, leaders within education and across sectors listen not only to understand what is, but to sense what could be. Generative listening creates the conditions for co-creation across schools, trusts and partners, enabling leaders to work with complexity, align diverse perspectives and design solutions that benefit the wider system, indeed, society as a whole. It promotes connection, putting aside differences and competitive edges to share generously as peers and colleagues with a single, shared intent, and shared goals for system change. Seen in this way, listening is not an add-on skill but a core leadership capability that connects trust, civic and system leadership into a coherent practice.

In a time that can feel wracked by societal fragmentation and polarisation, embedded listening enables schools and trusts to become anchor institutions that model cooperation, fairness, respect, and resilience.

Leading through listening is not just a commitment to develop flourishing communities, but a core strategic tool for improvement at all system levels. What is morally right is also what is strategically right in a time when the system as a whole is no longer producing the outcomes we wish to see.

Organisations that listen with care build trust, belonging and legitimacy, and improve outcomes for their communities.



¹⁰ Cruddas, L (2025). *New domains of educational leadership*. Hachette Learning.

¹¹ Cruddas, L (2026). [Why a trust-based system?](#) London: Confederation of School Trusts

A framework for listening



Listening can be a thing we all think we know how to do. But considered, effective listening needs a more conscious approach.

Edurio created its Listening Framework out of more than a decade of working alongside schools and trusts as a survey and feedback partner. Over that time, the organisation has learned a great deal about what it actually takes for feedback to be used strategically. This includes the practical steps required to move from collecting voice to making decisions and taking action: Edurio has long supported schools through this cycle using surveys as a core listening tool. Annual surveys remain one of the most common forms of listening work in education, and when used well, they can be powerful.

Despite this, trusts and others can repeatedly get stuck. Even with good data, many struggle to set clear goals, fall into “analysis paralysis,” or stall when it comes to action. Over time, this erodes trust in the process and diminishes the perceived value of listening itself. Too often, surveys are treated primarily as diagnostic tools or communication exercises, rather than as part of a deeper organisational capability.

This insight led Edurio to design a framework that brings together both listening practices and listening mindsets. Systems thinking research highlights that lasting improvement depends on leaders’ ability to see the wider system, foster reflection and generative conversation, and shift from reactive problem-solving to co-creating the future.¹²

Similarly, the EEF’s *School’s guide to implementation* shows that successful change is fundamentally social: it depends on engaging people, uniting around purpose, and reflecting and adapting over time.

The framework reflects this reality. It recognises that sustainable listening is about the intersection of processes and tools, and the mindsets, behaviours and leadership conditions that allow feedback to generate energy for action and support flourishing organisations.

¹² Senge, P, Hamilton, H, Kania, J (2015). [‘The dawn of system leadership’](#). *Stanford Social Innovation Review*.

Listening practices

In practice, strategic listening shows up through four interdependent disciplines: voice, understanding, action and communication. Together, these practices mirror CST's trust-led improvement model: they build alignment, capability, and confidence across the organisation. Weakness in any one demands reflection and work with intention; strength across all four is what allows listening to translate into sustained improvement and belonging, rather than performative consultation.

The schools featured in the case studies below were selected based on [Edurio national survey data from 2024/25](#). The schools were furthest above the national benchmark for their stakeholder group and phase for listening and acting indicators.

Voice

Voice is the foundation of a listening organisation. It is about creating structured, reliable ways for stakeholders (staff, pupils, and parents) to share their views. Too often, listening in schools and trusts is ad hoc, reactive, or dependent on a few champions.

Moving towards maturity means embedding diverse methods, from surveys and forums to informal conversations and digital platforms, as part of the school improvement cycle. Crucially, effective voice practice makes feedback a regular and expected part of organisational life, signalling that every voice matters and creating the conditions for trust and belonging.

Case study: A culture of staff voice

"Listening to staff starts with the culture created. We aim to ensure that every member of our staff team's voice is heard and staff are empowered to ask questions, challenge others and share solutions.

"The common response to staff voice is to ask a question back, 'What do you think we need to do?' This encourages all members of our team to be vocal in a way that leads to positive change. A key element is the positive relationships between colleagues. They actively demonstrate our values and act as positive examples to all staff.

"Leaders include themselves in the term colleague and do not seek hierarchy. Leaders also have a deep understanding of who works well together, and the leadership decisions taken when putting teams together are crucial."

John Sisman, Ling Moore Academy, Priory Federation of Academies Trust

How to get started with voice

- Add one method for a group you hear from less often, for example admin staff or quiet pupils
- Before running a listening exercise, share a two-sentence explanation of why it matters and how it will be used
- Ask one school to pilot a pupil-designed question or parent-suggested question



- Create a five-minute representation check: Who have we *not* heard from this term?

Understanding

Collecting feedback is meaningless without interpretation. Understanding involves analysing data in a way that goes beyond surface-level scores or anecdotal comments. It means paying attention to patterns, making space for diverse perspectives, and recognising both rational and emotional dimensions of voice.

In schools, this might mean looking not only at teacher retention figures but also at how teachers describe their workload and wellbeing; not only at pupil attainment data but also at how safe and included pupils feel. True understanding resists simplification.

Case study: Creating understanding with parents

“We operate a model where all staff spend time across different classes. This means that children, and by extension parents, build familiarity with more adults in school, giving families multiple trusted points of contact.

“Parents are encouraged to contact any staff member, which reduces barriers and increases opportunities for positive connection. Collaborative working with parents, particularly for our most vulnerable children, is a key pillar of our approach. Through open dialogue, shared problem-solving and a commitment to doing what is best for each child, we demonstrate that parents are partners in education, not passive observers.

“Over time, these consistent habits and systems build strong, long-lasting trust and reinforce our collective responsibility for every child’s wellbeing and success.”

Ellen Thompson, Manorfield C of E Primary School, Embrace Multi Academy Trust

How to get started with creating understanding

- At each school, pick one priority theme from the survey (for example, workload) to dig into more
- Use a three-question reflection routine with teams:
What do we think this means?
Why might this be happening here?
What small change would help?
- Compare data across time (this year vs last year): What has changed?
What has stayed the same? Why?
- Add triangulation: pair the survey finding with one other source, such as behaviour logs, attendance, or a safeguarding trend

Action

Action-taking is central to any mature listening organisation; otherwise, stakeholders lose faith in listening when feedback does not lead to visible

change. This involves thoughtful prioritisation, collaborative problem-solving, and sometimes explaining why certain suggestions cannot be acted upon.

In the education context, action might mean changing policies on marking workload in response to staff voice, or adapting curriculum approaches based on pupil input. What matters most is that action demonstrates responsiveness and builds confidence that speaking up makes a difference.

Without it, listening becomes performative and risks fermenting disengagement.

Case study: Action priorities with staff

“Prioritisation is a key piece of vocabulary in our leadership toolkit. We want to understand what will have the greatest impact, what will be easy to change and how long it will take. Some changes are simple and we can act quickly for others a little longer.

“We follow a simple ‘You said, we did’ approach. This is often constructed informally and can happen quite quickly. Where things are more complex, we think strategically and with a much more long term view to ensure change is the right change.

“One example of staff change that has had a particular impact has been our continued evolution of the Teaching Assistant Team. From the outset, a clear vision was shared, but aligned to the vision was a clear sense of voice being captured. Leadership needed to understand the impact of change and to give increased ownership to those who were directly impacted. Without them, change would not have been successful. Valuing our colleagues’ voices has led to them owning the change and being solutions-focused. They recognised that their ideas would be embraced.

“When evolving our Teaching Assistant team, they articulated a frustration with the spaces available to effectively support children. This led to every space being carefully considered with the environment and resources being improved. We even built a new intervention space to ensure that they could have a greater impact.”

John Sisman, Ling Moore Academy, Priory Federation of Academies Trust

How to get started with action

- Involve staff, pupils, or parents in designing one improvement action
- Build quick feedback cycles: share updates at three weeks and six weeks
- Add a simple impact check: Did this help? What changed?

Communication

Communication closes the loop of listening. It is the act of feeding back to stakeholders what has been heard, what has been done (or will be), and why. Transparency, including being honest about what cannot change, is essential to successfully implementing that change, maintaining trust and increasing the success.

Communication is also a cultural act: it shows whether leaders value dialogue, whether they recognise emotions as well as opinions, and how they view their

people. Good communication strengthens the listening climate by making people feel acknowledged, respected, and included in the organisation's journey. It turns listening from a one-way process of disseminating information into an ongoing conversation, reinforcing a sense of belonging and co-creating a future for the organisation.

It takes school improvement from "done to" to "done with".

Case study: Communicating to and with parents

"At Manorfield CE Primary School, our journey in strengthening parent engagement has taught us that effective listening is most powerful when it becomes a genuine, values-led endeavour woven through everyday school life. Our recommendation to other schools or trusts is to begin by cultivating a culture where parents feel seen, welcomed and respected as partners.

"Using a variety of communication channels has allowed us to reach families in ways that suit them, not just us. Class Dojo, newsletters, face-to-face conversations and open events have all played a part in ensuring that listening is accessible to everyone. We have learned that offering multiple routes for engagement helps parents who might otherwise feel disconnected or unsure about how to approach the school.

"Clear systems that show a commitment to acting on feedback are also vital. At Manorfield, we have found that when parents see tangible outcomes, however small, they are more willing to share their thoughts in the future. Regular updates about our endeavours have reinforced the message that parental voice genuinely shapes the direction of the school.

"Sharing feedback with staff has strengthened our internal culture, too. It has helped colleagues see the positive impact they have on families and understand how their interactions contribute to the wider vision and values of the school. Other settings may benefit from making parental insights part of whole-staff reflection, not just leadership discussions.

"Throughout our journey, transparency has been central. Being open about what we are doing, why we are doing it and what improvements still need to be made has helped parents feel truly included. This openness has been one of the strongest drivers of trust at Manorfield, and it is something we would wholeheartedly recommend to any school aiming to deepen parent partnerships."

Ellen Thompson, Manorfield C of E Primary School, Embrace Multi Academy Trust



How to get started with communication

- Use a simple script:
Here's what you told us.
Here's what we're doing and why.
Here's what we can't change and why.

- Use multiple formats: briefing, newsletter, video, corridor poster.

- Show stakeholders in the story: "Pupils asked..., teachers suggested..., parents highlighted..."

- Use communication to reinforce belonging: "We are improving this together..."

Listening mindsets

Our assumptions, habits and blind spots are always present, shaping what we notice, whose voices we hear, and whose experiences we unconsciously filter out. This work inevitably requires us to face our own biases and prejudices. In education, as in wider society, it is easy to advance the status quo by doing nothing differently, particularly if we sit within positions of power or privilege.

Listening that merely confirms existing narratives is not neutral; it reinforces what already is. As Layla F Saad reminds us, we cannot dismantle what we cannot see, and we cannot challenge what we do not understand.¹³

Five key mindsets can take the listening practices from a series of activities with limited impact to a self-sustaining model of co-creation.

Model openness

Openness is listening to learn rather than to quickly react. It requires humility: leaders accept they do not have all the answers and that diverse perspectives strengthen decision-making.

Open leaders create clarity by explaining what is within scope, what will be considered, and why, helping people feel safe to contribute.

Case study: Modelling openness and responsiveness with staff

“For me personally, as headteacher, listening and acting has been a learning journey. My instinct is to fix problems immediately. Over time, I’ve realised that good listening sometimes means resisting that urge. I now use a deliberate response: ‘Thank you for sharing that. I’d like to go away and think about it and come back to you. Is that okay?’

That pause helps me reflect properly rather than react. I also diarise follow-ups. You can get it right nine times out of ten, but staff will remember the one time you forgot to follow up with them. So I treat follow-up as non-negotiable. That reliability builds trust.

“Finally, maintaining classroom credibility is crucial. Almost all of our leadership team still work in class-based roles. That means when staff speak about the pressures of wet play, break duty, and back-to-back lessons, we genuinely understand. That shared experience strengthens psychological safety.”

Georgina Reid, Marine Academy Primary, Ted Wragg Trust

Practice empathy

Empathy is listening with the intent to understand emotions as well as perspectives. It means valuing each voice as human, not just functional.

Leaders who show empathy make themselves visible and available, share their own vulnerabilities, and work to reduce the barriers of hierarchy so that all feel heard.

¹³ Saad, L (2020). *Me and white supremacy: how to recognise your privilege, combat racism and change the world*. Quercus.



Act responsively

Responsiveness is what builds credibility. Being responsive with compassion means engaging with what is said through both action and understanding, responding with humanity, fairness, and a genuine desire to reduce harm and support wellbeing.

Effective leaders go beyond “you said, we did”: they listen for what people need, tackle tough issues collaboratively, and show progress over time. Even small, timely, compassionate responses can have an outsized impact on belonging and trust.

Champion inclusiveness

Listening without equity and inclusion risks amplifying only the loudest voices. Leaders committed to being inclusive ensure that feedback reflects the whole community, across roles, backgrounds, and experiences.

This means creating multiple, accessible listening channels, valuing different cultural perspectives, and actively working against bias in how input is gathered and acted upon.

Case study: Ensuring inclusivity of pupil voice

“Pupils feel safe and respected when sharing honest views because we have established clear routines and a culture of trust. Class discussions, circle times, and regular check-ins provide predictable spaces for pupils to express their thoughts. Staff actively model respectful listening, validate all contributions, and emphasise that every opinion matters. Head pupils and pupil ambassadors are trained to facilitate peer discussions sensitively, helping ensure pupils feel confident that their views will be heard and taken seriously.

“To gather views from a wide mix of pupils, including quieter or marginalised voices, we use multiple approaches. These include surveys, focus groups, suggestion boxes, structured interviews, and pupil-led initiatives. Subject leaders conduct pupil conferencing across different year groups and subjects to capture diverse perspectives, while the headteacher hosts ‘Hot Chocolate and Reading with the Head’ sessions, focusing on pupils who are quieter or less likely to speak up. Teachers also observe and record feedback during lessons and playtimes, ensuring all pupils have opportunities to contribute to shaping school life.”

Lalita Janssens Joshi, Avanti House Primary School, Avanti Schools Trust

Create psychological safety

Psychological safety is the foundation of effective voice: people need to know they will not be ignored, ridiculed, or punished for speaking up.

Leaders model this by welcoming challenges, acknowledging contrary views, and showing that raising concerns leads to constructive dialogue rather than risk. In addition, leaders must consider their own psychological safety: receiving feedback and feeling vulnerable can be challenging, and the energy required to build these practices and mindsets can be draining at times.

Leaders must take care of themselves throughout this work, for the benefit of themselves and their organisations.

Case study: Building safe and responsive systems for parents

"We provide explicit training for all staff from day one on how to engage with parents constructively. We talk openly about the reality that while most interactions are positive, there will be times when parents are upset or anxious.

"Staff are trained to remain calm, to listen carefully, to avoid reacting defensively, and to escalate concerns appropriately if they are unsure. This training is not limited to teachers. Support staff, office staff and site staff are included because they all interact with parents and the wider community. We coach staff where necessary, including scripting phone calls and modelling difficult conversations. The message is clear: if you are unsure, say so and seek support.

"We also expect home room tutors to make phone calls home each day. Those positive interactions mean that when a more difficult conversation is needed, it sits within an established relationship rather than feeling adversarial. It is about building home and school as a partnership, not separate entities."

Elizabeth Clewlow, Co-op Academy Florence MacWilliams, Co-op Academies Trust

How to get started with mindsets

- Invite challenge explicitly: "Is there anything in this that doesn't sit right for you?"

- Acknowledge a feeling before discussing the issue: "I can see this has been frustrating."

- Give a quick update within a week: "Here's what I've done since you raised this."

- Actively seek out quiet or under-represented voices: "I'd like to hear from those who haven't spoken yet."

- Normalise not having all the answers: "I'm still figuring this out, your insight will help."

Conclusion

Listening is as much about being understood as about being heard. People may struggle to articulate why they trust or belong, but they know when they do, and they know when they do not. A genuine listening climate creates the psychological safety for staff, pupils, and parents to speak up without fear of dismissal, blame, or exclusion.

Ultimately, how you listen determines whether listening becomes a transactional exercise or a transformational force. It is the difference between a culture of compliance and a culture of belonging; and belonging, as research consistently shows, is directly linked to wellbeing, retention, engagement, and outcomes in education.

Leaders also need to recognise that listening can be demanding work. It is a journey of deep inner work to personal mastery and understanding of the self. Likewise, holding space for others through careful, empathetic attention consumes energy and cannot be sustained without pauses and reflection. Investing time is therefore both practical and symbolic, internal and external: it signals that listening is worth slowing down for, and it creates the conditions where trust, belonging, and resilience can take root. It is the purest form of care, which the German philosopher Martin Heidegger describes as “the very Being of human life.”¹⁴

In short, listening is not time lost from improvement work; it is the work of improvement. The time invested pays back through a deeper sense of self and one’s agency, stronger relationships, better decisions, and more sustainable change.



Listening framework self-assessment

The 2026 Schools White Paper makes the direction clear: listening is becoming a formal expectation. By 2029, every school will be expected to monitor pupils’ sense of belonging and engagement. Expectations around parent partnership have also been strengthened, reinforcing listening as a core part of school improvement.

For trust leaders, that raises a strategic question: how systematic is listening across staff, pupils and parents, and could it be evidenced at trust-wide level?

Edurio has created a [two-minute self-assessment](#) to help trust leaders benchmark how embedded listening really is, and how they compare nationally. Participants receive their listening maturity level instantly, plus three practical next steps.

¹⁴ Noddings (2005)





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