

# From the President

Dr Jim Watterston FACEL



I trust that this AEL issue, the first of 2016, finds you energised and well settled into the best year of your career so far.

I was fortunate to spend the holiday break travelling from the East to West Coast and back, reconnecting with family, friends, and colleagues. In the quieter and more reflective moments – during flights and long drives stretching along the Hume and beyond – I gave thought to what I believe can easily become a lost art in the world of educational leaders (and society more broadly): the art of listening. In the challenging and fast-paced world of education, where accountability is prioritised and results are scrutinised, I often encounter people who are inadvertently sacrificing the opportunity to listen in order to efficiently tick off their ever-expanding ‘to do’ list. It concerns me that quality conversations are giving way to expedient interaction.

In the early years of our careers, as students and emerging professionals, listening holds a natural and central place in our development. We absorb the lessons of our teachers and colleagues, follow their advice, and observe the way they conduct themselves. Somehow, however, as we progress in our careers, the skill of listening often gives way to what we perceive to be more prized leadership qualities: being authoritative, being decisive, and having a vision. When we do listen, more often we are attuned to hearing those things that reinforce our preconceived ideas, or to spotting the ‘red flags’ that require correction. The ability to listen with an open and curious mind, to reflect and to understand, is often lost. Can we really be effective leaders if we aren’t listening?

Listening theorists would tell you that there are a few ways we can listen. The first – and one that I observe all too often – is combative listening. If you are listening begrudgingly, with a view to identifying flaws so that you can deliver your counter-punch, how will you ever appreciate another person’s point of view, or the value of their perspective? Too often I’ve seen and heard people give the answer or solve the problem before the speaker has told their story. Adversarial conversations quite often escalate when people think they have not been heard or understood. Attentive listening actually saves time – it is the cornerstone to building relationships and the foundation on which compromise is built.

Secondly, I often observe (or am on the end of) conversations that involve passive listening, which is often done with good intentions of ‘hearing somebody out,’

and allowing them to speak freely, but without trying to situate what they are saying within your own perspective or engaging them in deeper conversation. These people can often be seen looking over your shoulder as you speak to see if there is anyone more interesting in the room!

Finally and most desirably, there is reflective listening, a skill and practice that I believe is both an art and a crucial skill for all leaders, particularly in educational environments.

When considering influential people who have had the most profound impact on my own career, without exception they have all been authentic and truly reflective listeners. What appears to others as natural wisdom, vision and even brilliance is more often a simple reflection of the cumulative effect of many years of reflective listening. I have been struck by the humility and charisma of some larger-than-life leaders who exhibit the capacity to listen in a manner that makes a person feel that every word they uttered really mattered to them and that they are the only person in the room. They listen, they test their understanding through thoughtful questions, and then they reflect by drawing on their previous knowledge, ideas, experience, and judgement. They understand that listening does not weaken their own ideas, but challenges and ultimately strengthens them. Most of all, they *never stop listening*. They never give the indication that they have seen or heard it all, and always appear to be open to discovering new and interesting perspectives.

If I could offer a simple message for the beginning of 2016, it would be to practise continually the art of reflective and attentive listening. To listen without judgement and to understand is the greatest respect you can pay to a person. Whether this is your first year of teaching, or your tenth as a principal, it’s worth considering that the best way to understand and truly engage those who look to you for leadership is to actively listen to them. Listen with curiosity, and with a view to continually finding ways to build the capability and self-esteem of your students, your staff and yourself.

Best of luck for the year ahead and I look forward to crossing paths with many of you in 2016 at one of our many high quality ACEL events and conferences.

**Dr Jim Watterston**  
**President**