

Andy Crissinger:

Hi, everyone. This is Andy Crissinger, director of coaching at Reboot, and I'm here again to share a framework, a tool that we use in our leadership development engagements, at bootcamps, and in one-on-one coaching. This is a tool that we call Information Processing Choices, and I'll explain what that is in just a moment, but before I do, I just want to give credit where credit is due. We have adapted this content from the work of Otto Scharmer, who is a professor at MIT. He's written some amazing books, Theory U, Leading from the Emerging Future, uh, to name a few, and Scharmer's work, uh, has also, uh, been central to an organization called the Presencing Institute, and so I would commend that work to you. Uh, you can look it up online, uh, grab the books. Incredibly insightful, uh, works.

And one of the frameworks that Scharmer presents in his work is, uh, a chart on levels of listening, and so we adapted that chart, the levels of listening chart, to, uh, better fit the context of the clients that we work with. Uh, we did a little bit of translation and, um, uh, slightly shifted, uh, some of the concepts, uh, but I wanted to give credit where credit is due. This is an adaptation of Scharmer's work.

So this tool, Information Processing Choices, it- it's really about listening, but the reason we call it Information Processing Choices is so many of our clients work in distributed organizations, and much of the communication is happening in a text-based format, either asynchronously or in real time, and so the concept of listening well, of recognizing that we have choices in how we engage the communication that's coming at us from moment to moment, uh, needs to be expanded beyond simply listening, as if we're sitting in a conference room and having a conversation, to all the different ways that throughout a busy work day with our teams, with our colleagues, across functional lines, we're taking in verbal communication.

So if you take a look at the chart, the table that is, um, the visual representation of this tool, you can see that, on the left side, in the left column, there are four different modes listed, and then there's a description for each. So the first thing I want to note is that each of these modes is essentially a choice of how we will engage the communication that's coming our way, and it's important to note that we have choices. That's one of the big insights of this tool. Many of us get caught up in habitual ways of processing the, uh, verbal or written data that's coming at us, and those, those patterns, those habits, can keep us locked in behaviors that, that, that actually, uh, get in the way of our success as leaders, or as colleagues.

So the first thing is just to note, you have choices. And each one of these rows that represent a different mode of connection or of, of essentially lenses that we can look through and perceive the information coming at us has a, has a right fit and situations where it's less of a, a good fit. So, there's no value implied

in the sequencing here. It's not to say that, as we get lower in the modes, um, it's better listening, necessarily. It's just all about fit.

So I want to go through each of these quickly and talk about the different modes, um, when they're useful, when they might be not so useful, and hopefully, as you continue to, um, uh, grow in your own leadership journey, and particularly in these times when communication is, uh, the stakes are so high, as I mentioned in one of the other recordings, um, hopefully this is helpful to you.

So the first mode we call reflexive and habitual. That's the top line of the table. And, in some sense, it's actually not even really fair or accurate to call this one a choice, because you can see in the description, this is when we react quickly or even instantaneously to stimuli that's coming our way. This is really the fight, flight, freeze response to stimuli. So if we were together in a room and I reached ... I pointed across, um, your shoulder to the door behind you and said, "Fire," your body would begin reacting to that before your prefrontal cortex even, uh, really engaged. Uh, you would begin moving, because that, uh, that statement, "Fire," would most likely trigger in you, um, a survival response, and so you'd begin moving before you're really even thinking, so to speak. So it's not really fair to call this one a choice, although, we can notice when we're in a triggered state, and from that place, we can make a choice about, is this an appropriate response to the stimulus in front of me, or is another response called for?

Now, why is it great to have this response in our toolkit? Well, it keeps us alive. In true threat situations, it's actually wonderful that we can respond in this way, that our bodies can respond in fight, flight, or even freeze, which can, can actually keep us safe, can keep us alive.

The, the challenge with this response, though, in a work context, in an organizational context, is rarely, if ever, are we actually dealing with existential threats. And so, often we can find ourselves in a biologically triggered state when, uh, that's not going to be the most appropriate, um, lens through which we are going to be engaging in this situation. So, it's great that we have this. Um, we don't want to get rid of it. We couldn't get rid of it if we wanted to. And yet, most often, it's not a great fit in the situations that we find ourselves professionally.

The second row, pattern matching, problem solving, this is when we are processing the information coming at us based on, uh, established patterns that already map to some model in our mind. Uh, it can often be comparative or sorting. Oh, this is like that. This goes in this bucket. This goes in that bucket. We're sorting according to what we already know, and that's the key. When we're doing pattern matching and problem solving, we're always comparing to what we already know and fitting into those preexisting models that we carry around in our minds.

Often, the primary objective when using this mode is to fix or to solve and to do it quickly, and that's when this mode of taking in information can be quite helpful, is when we need to make decisions based on established patterns and we need to do it quickly. And so this can be a really helpful shortcut in the human experience for us. It's wonderful that we're able to see patterns. If we couldn't, every morning I would wake up, I would look at my shoes next to the bed, and I would wonder, "Hm, what are those for?" And it's great that I don't have to do that, right?

So, it's wonderful that we can build up bodies of knowledge, and in fact, all disciplines that we cultivate expertise in, we're essentially learning to recognize patterns. So, this skillset is incredibly important for us, and, and in many ways, it's how we move through our educational system, it's how we distinguish ourselves as subject matter experts, is to be able to do this.

So, one thing that I'll often say to clients, especially organizations that are in the tech space or have strong engineering cultures, is that this is probably a really strong, highly developed muscle within the culture and within your people, and it's wonderful that it's there, and again, we don't want to get rid of it. It's just, sometimes you can be, like when you go to the gym and only work out one part of your body to the neglect of other parts of your body, uh, you're not as well balanced.

So, pattern matching, problem solving, incredibly helpful, but think about one, at least one instance where it might not be helpful. Imagine that one of your direct reports comes to you with a challenge getting some work done with someone from another part of the organization, um, over which neither of you have, uh, positional authority, and your direct report is stuck, um, has had some relational challenges, and there's not really one right way to solve this one. And let's add even, imagine that the direct report is actually feeling beaten down and discouraged. If you meet that person primarily with pattern matching and problem solving, there's a good chance that that person will, um, experience your, quote/unquote, help as unhelpful. There's a good chance that they'll walk away feeling unseen, unmet, and frankly, not in a position to step into their own resourcefulness and agency to actually meet this complicated or, or complex challenge, um, operating across an organizational boundary.

And so one example of where this particular way of taking in information is not a fit is when people come to us with problems that can't be solved by simply matching a pattern or matching a tried and true solution. Um, often, and I'll give one more example, um, often it's great to be able to match patterns when we're doing something like, say, support. It's wonderful to know the known issues with a piece of software, and when a user reaches out to our help desk, to be able to provide a quick answer. But what happens when a unique issue comes into the mix? If we're simply trying to solve based on what we already

know, uh, we might miss the outlier that's come before us. So, just want to let, sort of ... i- illustrate some of the ways that this particular mode of processing information could be helpful, but also limiting.

As we cross the middle, uh, vertical line into the third row, empa- empathic listening and connection, while there's no value judgment, um, as I had mentioned, between any of these modes, we are kind of crossing an imaginary line from what we already know and what's based on either conditioned responses or learned knowledge into what we might call more of an emergent way of listening. So, we're, we're actually moving into a- a place that we don't already know about, and it's more of a discovery zone.

So, empathic listening and connection is really about meeting another person on a human level, and so this is where we seek to understand and really feel the experience of the other, see through their eyes. This is incredibly important, uh, for a number of reasons. It can help us open up to new perspectives. It can help us, um, see aspects of even organizational life that we've been blind to or unable to see. It can also, if you go back to my earlier example of leading people and dealing with challenges that are not, say, mechanical or technological challenges merely, but, uh, challenges that don't have one right answer, um, this could help us communicate more effectively, connect more effectively with the people that we're doing business with and working with, um, so that we can get better work done.

So, for instance, back to the direct report that comes to you and says, "I'm really struggling operating across this organizational boundary with this person from another team over here," if you could engage with that direct report with empathic listening and connection, you might be able to unearth the root cause of those challenges in a way that you wouldn't if you just simply went to solving and fixing. Also, you're gonna be strengthening the trust that that direct report has with you, which ultimately will lead to, um, better outcomes over the longterm in your working relationship. So, empathic listening and connection is really about suspending my preconceived notions of what's right, of what might be going on for this person, and actually asking great questions, listening, not butting in, and it can allow new insights to emerge as I allow myself to suspend, at least temporarily, my way of seeing the world and connect with how someone else sees it.

And then the last row, mining for potential, is really a build on empathic listening and connection, and this is where we go from listening to asking questions. So, we turn to curiosity and we turn to inquiry. So we might ask questions like, "What's possible here? What am I not seeing? What are we not seeing?" Mining for potential is ... has a lot in common with, say, um, design, design thinking, the way designers think, letting go of preconceived notions of what it is that the user wants, asking really good questions, using that empathic

connection to generate new insights that I couldn't have thought up or discovered on my own sitting alone in my room.

This way of engaging with a team is an incredible leadership skill for allowing innovation to surface, creativity to surface. If we are encountering a new problem that we've never encountered before, it can be limiting to try to attack that problem with pattern matching and problem solving, whereas, mining for potential and that way of gauging, engaging new ideas, can be generative, can be helpful, and can, again, support innovation.

So, this is a tool that we often share with leaders really to raise the awareness that you have choice, first and foremost, in how you process the information that's coming at you at any given time. So, we'd encourage you to slow down, begin to notice your go-to patterns, and begin to y-, to ask yourself, "Which of these modes am I under-utilizing, and how might I bring more of that mode into my work, into my leadership, and hopefully, to bring about better outcomes for me and for my team?"