



We're Learning — Are You Listening?

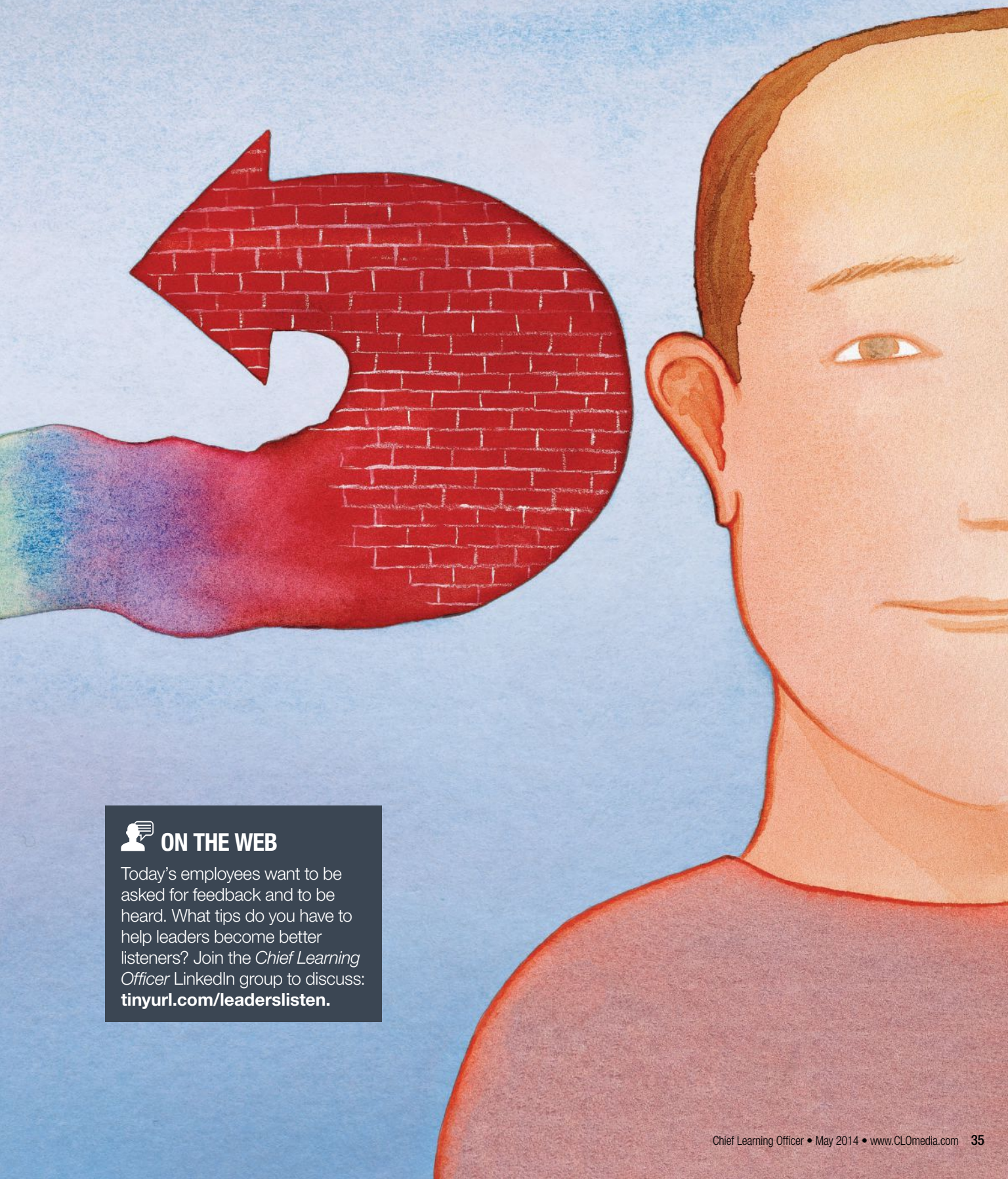
BY REBECCA RIPLEY AND KITTIE WATSON

Different people have different listening styles, and it can affect how they absorb information. To maximize learning efforts, facilitators may have to adapt to multiple listening styles.

Fortune 500 companies waste an estimated \$75 million per year in meetings, and much of the waste is due to ineffective listening, according to several reports published by consulting company groupVision since 2010. In a six-person learning session, repeating five minutes of information could waste 30 minutes of time.

Listening is an internal process, often invisible to those who haven't been trained in what to notice. While learning organizations make every effort to consider different learning styles to increase engagement — auditory, visual, kinesthetic modalities or educational theorist David Kolb's concrete experience, active experimentation, abstract conceptualization or reflective observation — many do not adapt to different listening styles and preferences to improve learning.

Listener styles determine how, where, when, who and what types of information a person likes to receive. When trainers and facilitators learn to identify differing preferences, they can determine the best speaking approach to use with audience members, even when they don't know who's in the room, connect more quickly with their participants and notice when they're losing people's attention and adapt content or messages to re-engage those participants.



ON THE WEB

Today's employees want to be asked for feedback and to be heard. What tips do you have to help leaders become better listeners? Join the *Chief Learning Officer* LinkedIn group to discuss: tinyurl.com/leaderslisten.

What People Like

Listening preferences have been developed and reinforced over a lifetime, and we all find it easier to listen to certain people. Some individuals prefer to hear only from experts, some want to be entertained and some prefer to be other-centered. Most people don't think about changing the way they listen, yet listening is more efficient and enjoyable when we do. There are four distinct listener preferences:

People-oriented: Listeners identify the emotional states of others, are attracted to personal interests and stories and have a desire to build caring relationships.

Action-oriented: Listeners concentrate intensely on the task at hand, have clear expectations and value focused, structured presentations with two to three key points.

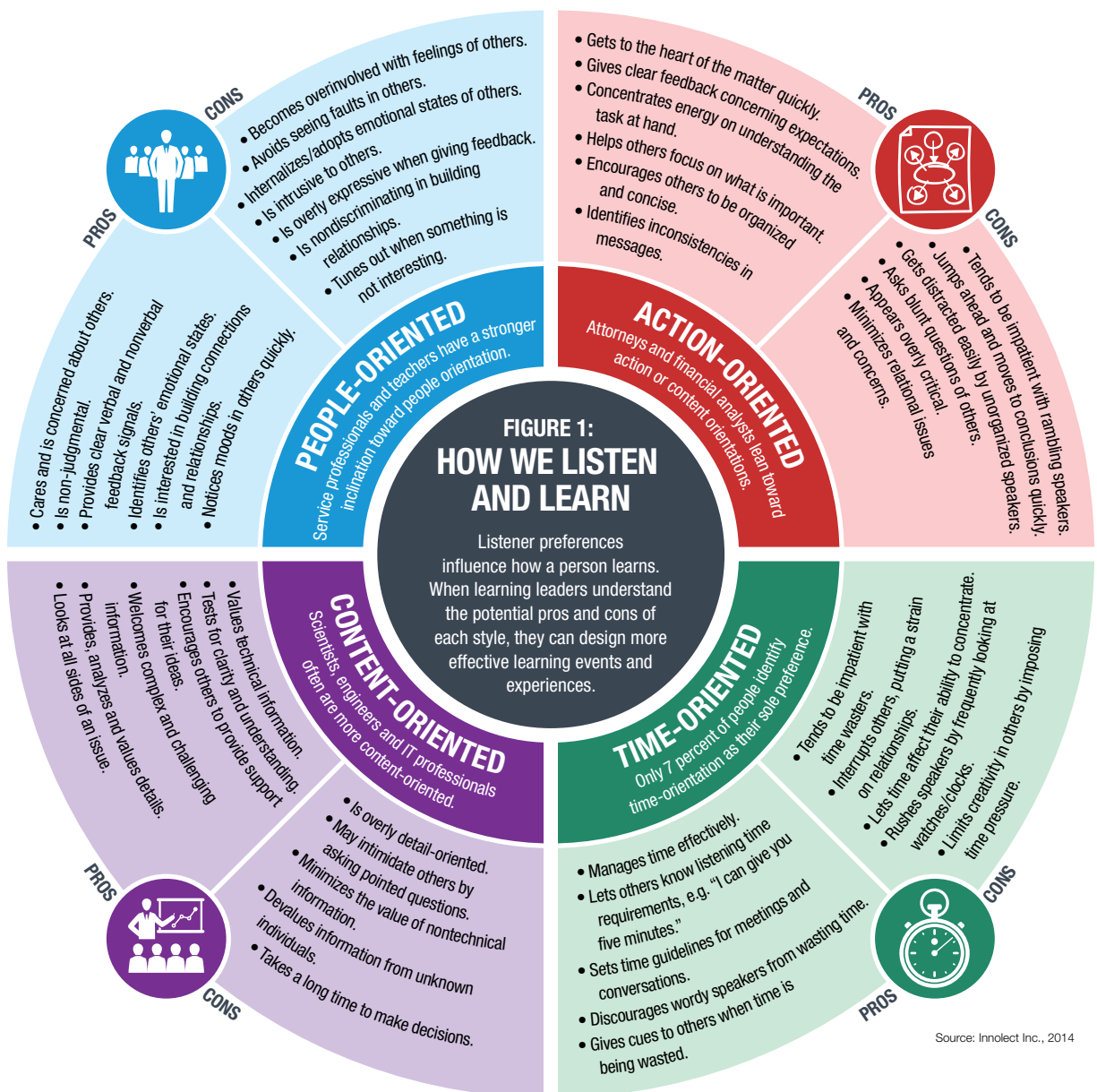
Time-oriented: Listeners are direct in how they value time, respect the clock and encourage others to do the same.

Content-oriented: Listeners carefully evaluate everything they hear and prefer to listen to experts and highly credible sources.

Two or More Listeners in One

It isn't unusual for a person to have two or more strong listener preference types. Forty percent of business people have dual or triple preferences. In some cases the preferences complement each other; in others they seem contradictory or confusing. For example, a person with strong people- and time-oriented preferences might baffle others. He or she could seem friendly and open to conversation in some settings, and appear rushed or disinterested under pressure.

Unlike personality types and learning styles, which tend to remain constant over time, listening preferences can change situationally. Listener behaviors are especially influenced by time pressures and relationships. For example, if workshop participants are under ex-



Source: Innocent Inc., 2014

treme job pressure but have to attend a mandatory learning program, they are less likely to have patience for ice-breakers. On the other hand, if the program is being presented by the CEO, people are likely to stay engaged in spite of looming deadlines. The key is to adjust the approach to listeners' needs. By adapting messages to listeners' cues, we hold their attention, get faster agreement and buy-in, and build closer relationships.

Identifying listener preferences can facilitate interactions one-on-one, but interacting with groups creates unique challenges. People tend to interpret messages through professional filters (Figure 1).

Keep in mind that small groups and large audiences are composed of individuals with diverse experiences, education levels, races and listener preferences. For trainers and facilitators looking to tailor presentations to promote listening, a good rule is to design with an action-oriented preference in mind. While people- and content-oriented listeners might prefer a slower approach, facilitators are likely to keep the majority of the audience engaged if they provide a clear purpose with two to three key points, a well-organized structure and a pace that gets to heart of the matter quickly (Figure 2).

After applying a strategy, look for nonverbal feedback to determine if it's working. If an audience is not engaged, facilitators must be prepared to adjust on the spot. To help anticipate the different listeners' needs, consider the following suggestions:

Get a feel for the target audience. When possible, assess the makeup of listeners in advance. The goal is to decide how best to help listeners tune in to what is being said. Gain insight prior to a presentation or meeting by asking the following questions:

- Who will attend?
- Did these people come voluntarily?
- Why are they here and what do they hope to gain?
- Which listener preferences are they most likely to have?
- Which speaker strategies should work best?

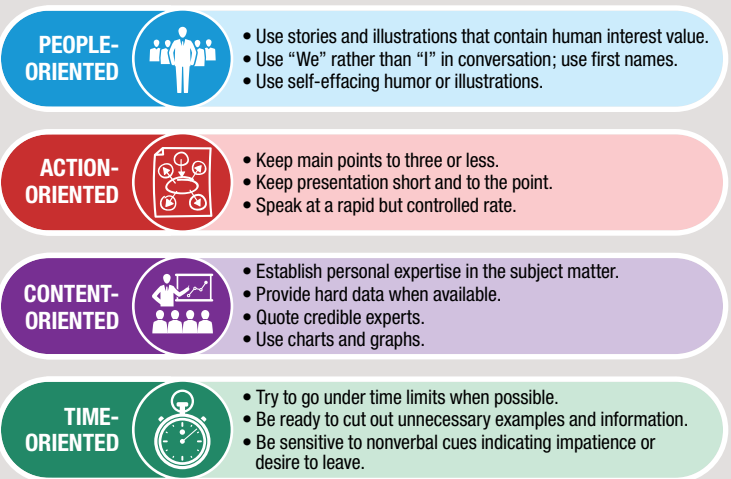
Based on projected responses, determine whether to use a more people-, action-, content- or time-oriented delivery style. Without answers to these questions in advance, make audience assessments on the spot or based on experience.

Use the smorgasbord approach. One reason people enjoy smorgasbords is because there is something for everyone. Similarly, when speaking to mixed groups, a good strategy is to provide a little taste for each preference type. Consider the following hypothetical preparation for a key presentation:

Freida analyzes her audience carefully. She is very familiar with the seven task force members who will attend. The president and primary decision-maker, Tom, is a content- and time-oriented listener. Two vice presidents, Carmen and Ralph, are almost exclusively action-oriented listeners. Gina, a people-oriented listener, is Tom's executive secretary and influences his

FIGURE 2: ENGAGEMENT: THE HEART OF THE MATTER

Learning leaders have to employ alternative ways to engage and involve their audiences. The following engagement strategies offer recommendations on how to adapt to participants' listening preferences during presentations, workshops and meetings.



Source: Innolect Inc., 2014

decisions frequently. The other two members avoid meetings, but are required to attend and vote.

She decides to focus on Tom and his secretary as her primary target audience. With 30 minutes, she plans to end early and leave 10 minutes for Q&A. For Tom, she organizes her thoughts carefully, quotes credible sources and supports each point with factual, concrete information. For Gina, she uses task force member names, personal examples and nonverbally gives Gina special attention by smiling and looking in her direction frequently.

Target content to the primary stakeholders. While Freida used techniques to keep all task force members involved and alert, she was most concerned with Tom and Gina. Strive to keep all audience members as involved as possible, but facilitators should do their best with each situation.

Keep ideas concise. Keeping ideas succinct and to the point is valuable for any listener preference. People usually accept longer presentations, but the best rule of thumb is to stop talking before the audience stops listening.

Facilitators and trainers who adapt to listener preferences can reduce the staggering costs of ineffective listening. Combining listener engagement strategies with existing knowledge of learner styles creates a solid foundation to effectively engage audiences and promote knowledge retention, productivity, engagement and change. **CLO**

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