

PHOTO: MARILYN DAVISON

BEJA

BY TINA MONBERG

HOW TO CREATE DEEP LISTENING IN BUSINESS

MEET MARILYN DAVISON IN THIS Q&A INTERVIEW. SHE IS WORKING WITH THE CHALLENGES OF BRINGING DEEP LISTENING AND REFLECTION TO GLOBAL AND VIRTUAL TEAMS FROM EUROPE AND SINGAPORE.

Q: Marilyn, you have been an inspiration to me in so many ways. You don't make a fuss about your presence, and navigate from behind and make things look so easy. How do you do it?

Thanks for the question and compliments. I actually have two influences on the way I navigate "from behind" as you phrase it. The first example comes from my corporate life when I moved from an assignment in the strategy team of a large computer company to a marketing unit. We were assessing a new technology and the possible acceptance by our user community. I proposed a full research and analysis study, designed to last about nine months. The VP of Marketing explained that we could indeed do that, and delay our market entry by a year, or we could introduce the

product quickly and monitor and fine tune as we went; the familiar story of using the trim tab of a rudder to make a large ship change direction. Once under power you can use the momentum to guide you but still make the changes in mid sail.

The second example was from my Bedouin guide Beja who did not understand why or even how I could TEACH Systems Thinking to people. "If you live in the desert, you understand Systems Thinking or you die", he said to me. The combination of corporate experience refreshed and re-experienced by the ancient wisdom of the Bedouins convinced me that the best way to accomplish a goal is to just start moving, be conscious of the winds around you but keep moving and correcting as you go.

Q: I know you have worked with many of the biggest system thinkers such as Peter Senge and Linda Gratton – just to mention a few. What made you choose them and what inspired you?

Peter Senge's company *Innovation Associates* was responsible for the Leadership Training at Digital Equipment when I worked there; so it was an easy choice to move there when I left Digital after 15 years in corporate life. I wanted to dig more deeply into the science and concepts of systems thinking. Peter's position on the faculty of MIT made it easy to move more deeply into the science and mathematics of Systems, from Systems Thinking to Systems Dynamics, to Simulation. All the work on Complexity theory and Chaos was part of this environment in which we worked, so we had the luxury of the top minds and thinking in this area.

I worked with Lynda Gratton as part of her Hot Spots Coaching and Research team for two years. Lynda's own writing and research is deeply intelligent and insightful, she also has a broad network of other researchers and authors. She generously acknowledges the thinking and research of this network, thus enriching everyone's contributions. For example one of her colleagues at London Business School, Professor Don Sull has written extensively on commitment both to oneself and to one's team and organization. Lynda incorporates this work as she writes of the productive practices that enable working in a complex environment. Commitment in the Bedouin and Druze tribal communities is embedded in all the activities and thinking. The children in a village come and go from home to home or tent to tent, truly raised by the tribe. In our contemporary lives our tribes may be our organizations or local communities and they are transactional rather than life time commitments.



PETER SENGE & LYNDA GRATTON

Q: If you should mention 3 things you've learned from Peter Senge and Lynda Gratton, what would they be?

FROM PETER SENGE'S WORK:

- Everything is part of a system.
- Systems Thinking as expressed in Causal Loop Diagrams; for example, vicious and virtuous cycles of systems are represented in a simple circle diagram with arrows in a positive or negative direction. More complicated causal diagrams show classic archetypes that once drawn or experienced visually suddenly make more sense than attempting to express many variables in words. One can see where to apply leverage to accelerate or decelerate an occurring pattern. Seeking optimal leverage is not obvious but critical (tools like Systems Loops help).
- Graphics, whether Causal Loop Diagrams, Flow Charts, Frames within Frames or Graphics Dialogue work engage a fuller thinking response. I have had numerous clients who did not "hear"

Q: Recently you have worked with the Druze and Bedouin to find the deep listening, that we have forgotten in our Western World where we all are in a hurry. It reminds me about the saying of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry "It is only with the heart that one can see rightly. What is essential is invisible to the eye."

my words, but immediately understood a Causal Loop diagram or simple graphics explaining their situation.

FROM LYNDA GRATTON'S WORK:

- Lynda has a wonderful way of synthesizing work that is sometimes obscure and academic, and making it vital to an organization's contemporary issues. For example the work on *High Self Monitoring* individuals from Martin Kilduff, translates into her work on "boundary spanning" or networking.
- She is fearless in confronting what she considers calcified sacred beliefs, for example she believes that vision is over rated, and that igniting questions are much more inspirational to people.
- Lynda blends her background as a clinical psychologist with an in depth understanding of the dynamics of organizations. Her recent book, *GLOW*, writes about how you as an individual can not only survive, but flourish even though you may be working in a deadening, mind numbing or even poisonous work environment.

Or should I say ear? What is it that we have forgotten to listen to?
When a Bedouin chief became impatient with my questioning about how he knew the time to leave a meeting, he said, "unlike you Westerners, we Bedouins can listen when we are talking and, we can tell when

people have stopped listening, so we just leave."

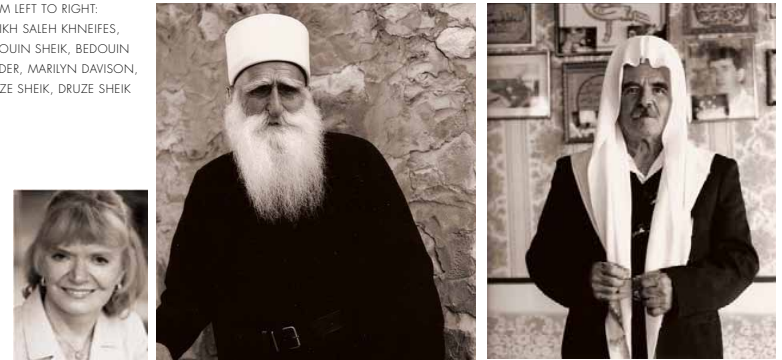
Q: How will you convince a busy business person that he or she should stop and listen to the unspoken words? And what will be or she experience by listening?

This is a really hard question. I would come at the issue in another way and coach the person to keep interrupting a meeting to test their understanding.

For example, "Help me to understand what I think I heard ; is this what you meant ?" If the answer is no, not at all, with a look of "where on earth did you get *that* impression", then you have a signal that you are listening not but *not bearing* what is being said. Our own mental models race on ahead, protecting us from danger, but also keeping us from pausing long enough to test our assumptions. Chris Argyris' work around Mental Models and how fast we run up the Ladder of Assumptions is always good to review. We cannot listen if our own brains are chattering on with the next idea or looking for the chance to interrupt. With sincere deep listening and suspension of assumptions one will discover amazing resources of talent and creativity that is just hidden beneath a permafrost layer of "polite business chatter".

Q: Your ability to navigate from behind, does that come from your deep listening skills that you are practicing?"

FROM LEFT TO RIGHT:
SHEIKH SALEH KHNEIFES,
BEDOUIN SHEIK, BEDOUIN
HERDER, MARILYN DAVISON,
DRUZE SHEIK, DRUZE SHEIK



It is hard to see these characteristics in oneself; but I do try to understand people's passions and strengths and weaknesses and fill in the blanks and help us all to have full leverage going forward. Stopping to examine what is happening and why is often just too de-energizing for everyone, just keep moving.

Q: "What do you think is the most important business advice that a Bedouin could give?"

After many days of hearing stories and conversations, I asked Beja if he could speak with my clients, what he would say to them. Without hesitation he said:

1. Don't be afraid to fall
2. Stop thinking, experience
3. Spend time with children
4. Worry about your own visions instead of worrying about others

I have spent many hours puzzling over this advice, attempting to translate it to usual business experience and have finally decided that everyone can take from it what is most applicable to them. Every time I re-visit Beja's advice it affects me in a different way.

Q: And what would your advice be?
Bill Liao in his new book *Stone Soup* lists the ingredients for a successful

ABOUT MARILYN DAVISON

As a researcher, leadership program and public seminar speaker on Dialogue Marilyn has brought her research (among the Druze and Bedouin) and study to Dialogue sessions with Executive Women's groups, large public seminars, work place conflict management and most recently to conflict surfacing and resolution with organizational virtual teams from Europe and Singapore. Marilyn is developing expertise in the selective use of technology, with issue targeted webinars, e-learning, podcasts, and videos as dialogue instruments. Marilyn recently authored a conversation provoking blog on the "Wikinomics" website proposing the creation of a Chief Mediation Officer in the Executive suite.

enterprise and covers this question very well. I would synthesize it to deep listening, to yourself, your team, your clients, to the environment, and to maintaining a strong sense of ethics in all that you do.

TINA MONBERG is a lawyer, mediator and qualified psychotherapist. She is the owner of Mediationcenter and founding and working member of House of Futures. tina@huseoffutures.dk

As a manager and consultant Marilyn worked in large organizations and in global consulting organizations. Her experience working at Innovation Associates (founded by Peter Senge, author of The Fifth Discipline) enabled her to work globally with recognized practitioners and clients to further develop knowledge bases around Dialogue and Systems Thinking.

Marilyn is a US Citizen, but has lived in Belgium and France for the past 15 years. She has a multifaceted background and undergraduate as well as Masters Degrees from Tufts University. She has also studied at Harvard University and MIT and done pre doctoral work at Boston College. Marilyn Davison is a member of Mediators Beyond Borders and a Board Member of WeForest.com.