

# The Wisdom of the Crowd

UNEARTHING WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING IN YOUR CULTURE



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## Thank you for joining The Wisdom of the Crowd: Unearthing what's really happening in your culture.

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Hosted by Dattner Group's Fabian Dattner and Zoe Dattner, "The Wisdom of the Crowd" event brought together leaders from councils all around Australia to explore the impact - and challenges - of gathering feedback from your workforces.

Together, the audience engaged in a discussion around what it feels like to be 'unheard', what's your relationship with feedback, and how good a listener do you think you are?

The event featured insights from four leading voices in local government, who shared their experiences in harnessing collective wisdom. Their presentations, representing Banyule City, Balranald Shire, Moorabool Shire, and Edward River Council, offered valuable perspectives on organisational culture, community engagement, and adaptive leadership.

This summary provides a glimpse into the event's rich content, showcasing how councils are navigating challenges and embracing innovative approaches to leadership in today's complex environment.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## Part 1: Interactive Listening Exploration

The listening exercise revealed several key insights about participants' attitudes, concerns, and emotions.

The exercise highlighted widespread recognition of listening challenges, shared concerns about future sustainability across multiple domains, and the profound emotional impact of not being heard.

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- 97% of participants acknowledged they perceive there are challenges with effective listening, recognising most people are willing but often distracted or struggling to engage.
- Only 3% felt people are always willing to listen and engage in conversations.
- When not listened to, participants reported feeling:
  - Frustrated, disappointed, and embarrassed
  - Helpless, insignificant, and invisible
  - Underappreciated, undervalued, and disrespected
  - Defensive and prone to self-protection
- Major concerns for the future centred around:
  - Cost of living and financial sustainability
  - Climate change and environmental issues
  - Workforce sustainability and technology impacts
  - Trust in government and leadership skills
  - Social issues like inequality and division

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



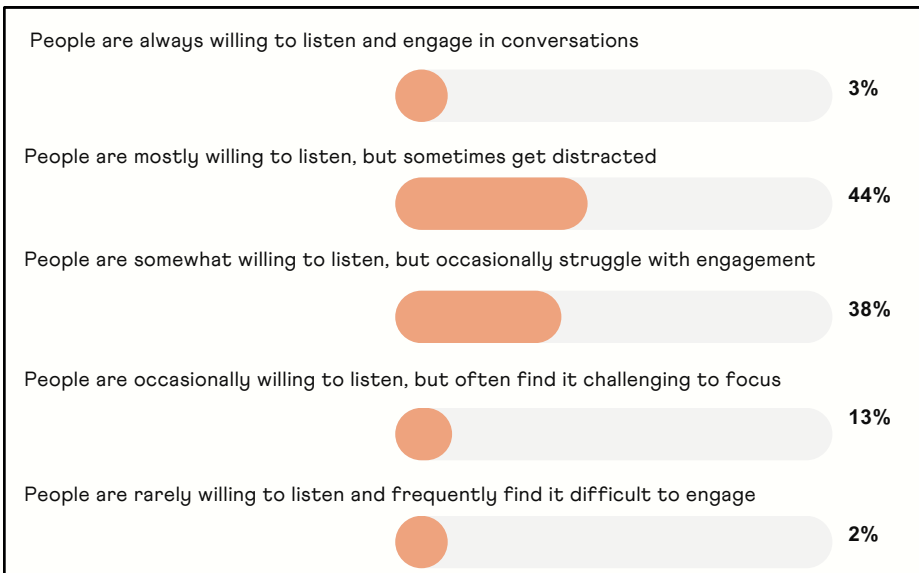
## Part 1: Interactive Listening Exploration

These results indicate a need for improved listening skills, strategies to address complex challenges facing communities and local governments, and a greater emphasis on creating environments where people feel heard and valued.

The poll and word cloud were generated in the session and are the result of 61 senior leaders in the local council sector.

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### How would you rate our willingness to listen to one another?



### What top three things concern you about the future?



# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Banyule City Council (VIC) Playbook

Allison is the CEO of Banyule City Council in Victoria. She has over 30 years' experience in local government and has been leading Banyule as the CEO for the last 4.5 years and has just been re-elected for the next 5 years. She's focused on fostering a positive workforce culture and enhancing community health and well-being through innovative programs.

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**Allison Beckwith**  
CEO  
Banyule City Council

- Leaders should create opportunities for open dialogue and truly listen to their employees' concerns and ideas, fostering an environment where staff feel valued and heard. Psychological safety is paramount to understanding how people truly feel.
- Implement a leadership capability framework: This framework helps define and develop leadership skills across the organisation, ensuring a consistent approach to leadership development and creating a shared understanding of what 'good' leadership looks like.
- Early exposure to feedback processes can strengthen leadership at all levels: Allison credits her early experience with 180-degree feedback for shaping her approach to leadership. She advocates for introducing feedback mechanisms early in one's career to build comfort with receiving and acting on feedback.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Banyule City Council (VIC) Playbook

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*"Without feedback, we can't improve.*

*Initially, the team were a little scared of the questions we were going to ask the organisation because they were confronting."*

- Encourage courageous conversations about leadership: Promote open discussions about both positive and negative leadership behaviours. This includes asking staff what good leadership means to them and what behaviours they admire or dislike in leaders.
- Focus on creating safe spaces for dialogue and vulnerability: You cannot underestimate the importance of creating environments where staff feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and concerns without fear of repercussions. This is how we encourage honesty and openness. Be mindful of the location – going for walks and getting outside the office can help build this connection.
- Implement a "share, care, and learn" model in team meetings: This approach allows team members to share challenges or experiences, receive support and empathy from colleagues, and collectively learn from each other's experiences, fostering a culture of continuous improvement and mutual support.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Balranald Shire Council (NSW) Playbook

Craig is the General Manager at Balranald Shire Council in NSW. When he arrived in March 2022 he brought over 30 years' experience in local government with him. He commenced the role following a period of administration for the council and he's since working to rebuild the organisation after a tumultuous time, focusing on creating a values-based culture and empowering staff.

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**Craig Bennett**  
General Manager  
Balranald Shire Council

- Authenticity and being genuine are key in leadership: Being true to oneself and transparent with staff is crucial for building trust and credibility, especially in a challenging organisational context.
- Truly listen to staff concerns: Seek out and value employee input to understand the challenges within the organisation, use this information to guide your leadership approach and organisational changes. A World Café and Culture Audit have been integral to achieving this.
- Being vulnerable in leadership is a necessity: Vulnerability as a leader can help build stronger connections with staff and create a more open culture, demonstrating that it's okay to not have all the answers.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Balranald Shire Council (NSW) Playbook

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*"Vulnerability is key.*

*Lots of challenges were unearthed from the culture audit. I had to show staff I cared, and I was going to change my leadership style around the toxic stuff that had been happening in the organisation."*

- Have a plan for cultural change: Cultural transformation is a long-term process that requires a strategic and structured approach, not just ad-hoc interventions that don't get to the heart of the issue.
- Cultural transformation is a long-term process: Changing organisational culture takes years, not months, and requires consistent effort and patience. Having a long-term roadmap of key leadership initiatives has been supremely helpful in charting the course.
- Focus on bringing new leaders "into the tent": Align new leadership team members with the change vision, involving them in the process from the start to ensure cohesive leadership.



# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Moorabool Shire Council (VIC) Playbook

Josh is the Executive Manager of People and Culture at Moorabool Shire Council in Victoria. He has 17 years' experience in human resources, primarily in local government. Josh is passionate about building people-led organisational cultures and has helped establish Moorabool as an emerging destination employer.

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**Josh Warner**  
Executive Manager People & Culture  
Moorabool Shire Council

- Focus on unique engagement methods for different workforce segments: Tailor communication and engagement strategies to suit various employee groups, recognising that one size doesn't fit all, especially for outdoor or non-office-based staff.
- Emphasise the importance of understanding before evolving: Fully comprehend current situations and perspectives before implementing changes, ensuring that changes are relevant and beneficial. You need to really understand how people feel before implementing changes.
- Leaders need to role-model openness to feedback: Demonstrate your willingness to receive and act on feedback to encourage similar behaviour through the organisation.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Moorabool Shire Council (VIC) Playbook

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*"We have a 'start with yes' mentality. This builds a sense of trust through the organisation, anyone can come to us and no matter what your idea is, we're going to start with yes."*

- Advocate a "start with yes" mentality: Promote an approach where new ideas are initially welcomed and explored rather than immediately dismissed, this fosters a culture of innovation and openness.
- Don't underestimate the value of mentoring and experiential learning: There's immense power in hands-on experience and guidance from experienced colleagues as effective methods for professional development, rather than relying solely on formal training.
- Recognise the long-term nature of cultural change: Significant cultural shifts can take many years and it's important to manage expectations while maintaining momentum for change.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Edward River Council (NSW) Playbook

Shelley is the Director of Corporate Services at Edward River Council in NSW. She has over two decades of experience in local government and has dealt with major organisational redesigns and crises, such as the Black Summer bushfires. She is passionate about building trust among leadership teams and cascading that down through the organisation to all levels.

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**Shelley Jones**  
Director Corporate Services  
Edward River Council

- Create space for conversations: Deliberately make time and opportunities for meaningful dialogue within the organisation, allowing for open and honest communication.
- Recognise the value of listening to and addressing past issues: Understand and respect the organisation's history, including past grievances or losses. This is crucial for moving forward effectively.
- Focus on making the concept of culture tangible for all staff: Cultural values and expectations are clearly defined and understood at all levels of the organisation, make abstract concepts concrete and actionable.

# KEY TAKEAWAYS



## The Edward River Council (NSW) Playbook

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*"Active listening means being prepared to hear the good, the bad, and the ugly and being able to respond genuinely to people's hard stories, frustrations, and sometimes grief."*

- Prioritise cascading cultural conversations: Cultural change must be driven at all levels, not just from the top. Frontline leaders need to be brought in to shape organisational culture so they don't feel as though they are merely recipients of top-level decision making.
- Incorporate feedback questions into regular one-on-ones: Actively seek feedback in regular meetings, asking specific questions about recent performance and areas for improvement, fostering a culture of continuous feedback.
- Cultivate resilience and adaptability: Cultural change is not linear and requires persistence and flexibility, especially in the face of unexpected challenges or setbacks. Be patient and compassionate along the way.



The "Wisdom of the Crowd" event highlighted the importance of authentic leadership, active listening, and creating a culture of trust and open communication in local councils. A powerful closing message emphasised [empathy, patience, and inclusivity in leadership at all levels.](#)

**Here are the most crucial action points for leaders to effectively listen to the wisdom of the crowd:**

1. Create safe spaces for open dialogue and feedback without fear of repercussions, do this offsite when possible
2. Implement regular, diverse feedback mechanisms (e.g., 360-degree feedback, one-on-ones, culture audits, World Cafés)
3. Practice active listening by being present, avoiding distractions, and showing genuine interest
4. Regularly reflect on personal leadership style and its impact on the organisation. Ask yourself, are you part of the problem or part of the solution?
5. Cascade cultural conversations throughout all levels of the organisation, listening to frontline staff can teach you so much about how people really feel
6. Demonstrate vulnerability and authenticity to build trust with staff
7. Commit to long-term cultural change, recognising it's an ongoing process.


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