

The folding chairs were all set out, neat rows facing a podium with a hand-lettered sign: Listening Session #3: Bridging the Divide. The coffee urn steamed beside untouched cookies. The clock ticked but no one was showing up.

The university had organized a series of listening sessions to ease polarization on campus. They were expensive events with big-name guests. But they were becoming a joke. A punchline about how empathy had a funeral and no one came.

I got a call about this particular event from a college administrator who was a listener to my podcast on NPR. Rough Translation was a show I created to explore how ideas travel across cultures—and what gets lost or gained in translation. The show treated foreignness as a kind of superpower, a way of stepping outside your comfort zone that could teach you to perceive the world differently.

Our listeners included executives managing international teams, officers at the State Department, immigrants trying to navigate American workplaces, and, apparently, at least one college administrator trying to encourage students to listen to each other. She wanted to know: 'How do we get students to show up?'

Maybe, I thought, you need to start by not treating listening like homework.

I gave her what pointers I could, but her question haunted me. Everywhere I've reported – from Kyiv to Kansas – the moments that changed people's minds started with a question, not a statement. They began when someone decided to listen with curiosity instead of certainty. So why do so many good faith efforts at listening – on campuses, in companies, in public life – fail?

I didn't find the answer until I met Esther Choy.

I first met Esther through Rough Translation. Esther's life was a sort of Rough Translation tale of its own. As an immigrant navigating American business schools and boardrooms, she'd learned to use her outsiderness as an advantage.

She started small—helping applicants write business school essays that actually sounded like themselves. That led to coaching executives to communicate with humanity and curiosity.

"I can't do what you do," she told me once. "But I can take what you do and turn it into steps anyone can learn."

I've watched her do it. And I've watched a room tilt toward her even as she casted the spotlight away from herself, and instead, channeled her curiosity squarely on her audience.

It was in talking with her that the puzzle from that university story finally clicked into place. Those administrators had framed listening as a duty—hear the other side, be civil, stay polite. And that's how most of us are taught about listening, right? Wait your turn. Pay attention when someone else is speaking.

That's not exactly wrong. We should consider other people's perspectives. But do we owe others our attention, like a tax that must be forked over to the gods of civil discourse? Perhaps. But good luck convincing people to pay.

The case for listening is easier to make when you look at the benefits. As I've learned from *Winning Without Persuading*, good listeners aren't just better companions – they're better parents, partners, managers, leaders. Curiosity about others can reduce your own anxiety. People who feel deeply understood can become more open to criticism and to reconsidering their own biases. Listening changes minds.

Reading this book also helped me see what went wrong in those university listening sessions when they framed listening as a courtesy instead of a creative act. If that college administrator called me today, I'd send her a copy of *Winning Without Persuading*.

If you're holding this book, you probably already sense that something's missing in the way we communicate. Maybe you lead a team and feel that every meeting produces more words but fewer insights. Maybe you're a manager whose employees nod along but rarely speak up. Maybe you've been told you need to "tell your story" and wondered what that even means.

You're not alone.

I've spent much of my professional life asking questions for a living. I've been lucky enough to interview people in war zones, in marketplaces, in laboratories. And for most of my life, I was the shyest person you'd ever meet. Shyness, I've realized, is training for this work. It teaches you to observe, to sense the mood in a room, to notice when someone's words don't match their eyes.

The truth is, curiosity isn't a personality type. It's a craft. And like any craft, you can practice it, refine it, and get better at it.

In business, that craft can feel risky. Success is often measured by your ability to persuade—to win the pitch, close the deal, lead the room. Curiosity, by contrast, can feel like exposure: what if, when you're the one in charge, asking questions makes you look incompetent? What if, in a heated argument, taking time to discover the other person's story makes you look weak?

Esther's answer is simple: the cost of not being curious is higher.

She teaches that curiosity isn't passive; it's strategic. Asking the right question isn't about giving up control. It's about creating conditions where new information—and new trust—can emerge.

And we need that now more than ever.

Expertise is under assault. Institutions are distrusted. Algorithms can out-answer us. Artificial intelligence can now analyze your quarterly report and write your résumé. But it can't yet notice the flicker in someone's eyes when something doesn't fit. It can't feel when a story is about to take an unexpected turn.

The skill of asking the right question—of knowing where your colleagues, your customers, your bosses are coming from—is what will keep the rest of us in the game.

The insights and techniques in these pages will make you better at your job. They'll also make you better at being a person. They'll help you lead meetings that don't drain the life out of people. They'll help you build teams that feel seen, customers who feel understood, and relationships that can withstand disagreement. They might even help you talk to your sullen teenager.

And maybe, if enough of us practice what she teaches, they'll help heal the wider world too.

We measure success by who we convince. Esther reminds us that real success is in who we understand.



Gregory Warner
Peabody award-winning journalist and
host of the podcasts, *The Last Invention* and *NPR's Rough Translation*

Storytelling can sharpen your leadership communication!

LEADERSHIP
story lab[™]

Here are some more resources to continue learning:

STORY FACILITATOR CERTIFICATION

Help others be seen, heard and understood. Learn the tools that enable you to become a persuasive leader as well as coach clients, teams, and colleagues to share their stories. Through an interactive, high touch learning environment with real time practice, master how to teach and build a storytelling culture in your organization. [Become a Certified Story Facilitator!](#)

STORY LAB

Learn the fundamental storytelling framework, test new ideas and receive constructive feedback at an upcoming [Story Lab](#)! This complimentary virtual small group coaching session is a great way to practice in a safe environment and ask questions about applying leadership storytelling to your business context. Come away with new ideas to elevate your communication!

WINNING WITHOUT PERSUADING

Esther Choy's new book offers a breakthrough approach: leadership storytelling built on uncovering the hidden stories that change everything. The real power of story in leadership isn't only about spotlighting yourself; it's also about revealing the overlooked moments, unseen truths, and stories waiting inside others that can elevate teams, energize cultures, and drive transformational outcomes. [Grab your copy to begin transforming your leadership!](#)

BETTER EVERY STORY

Join the thousands who receive Esther Choy's monthly insights, best practices and examples of great storytelling in our newsletter. [Subscribe today!](#)

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Leadership Story Lab equips leaders with skills in business storytelling through coaching, training, and certification in facilitation. Our T-Squared Approach: Transaction x Transformation empowers leaders to meet goals, see differently, and create long-lasting meaningful connections with their audiences. A women-led business, Leadership Story Lab has worked with leaders from across industries to unlock the persuasive power of leadership storytelling for their organizations. Our clients have built business storytelling capacities that have improved both internal and customer-facing communication, formed strong business partnerships, and brought a clear sense of purpose, invigorating their organization.

Learn how you can tell the right story at
LeadershipStoryLab.com.

Stay in touch! Contact us for more information about any of these resources:
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