Who's listening?

A small-scale research project exploring how organisations listen to employees

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PREFACE

The authors believe listening is critical to improved performance and decision-making within organisations; and is more important than ever given how the nature of work and the workforce is changing, the increased focus on ethical and social purpose as well as the drive to innovate. However, this initial small-scale study suggests that there are some important barriers to better listening because we undervalue it and pay lip service to effective listening as a key leadership capability.

The results of the work in this report suggest that while we talk a good story about listening we do not actually practice it, especially when it comes to employees. We focus more on external stakeholders and politely nod to the importance of internal listening. This report calls for recognition by leaders of the critical role of listening and challenges internal communicators to drive change in this area.

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THE RESEARCH

This report includes a review of definitions and primary research conducted by the authors in 2019. We set out to achieve a number of outcomes:

- Insights into the current state of listening in organisations
- Reflections on how well we listen as organisations
- Challenge thinking and enrich understanding of how organisations can listen effectively
- Provide and share practical hints and tips on how to improve listening in organisations

An online survey comprising 11 closed questions and four open questions was completed during January 2019 by 140 respondents with the majority (88 per cent) based in the EMENA region. Headline results from the survey were shared with delegates at the IABC EMENAComm conference in Bahrain in February 2019 and with communication leaders in London in May 2019. Feedback from group discussions at these events was collated before conducting interviews with nine senior communication managers in July 2019.

The research can be described as a small-scale project. The results are not generalisable to the wider communication management sector. Instead, they provide a useful snapshot of the way that the importance of listening to employees is understood in some organisations. The second stage of this project involves further research in 2020 that will explore good listening practice in more depth.

"
50 per cent of respondents agreed that senior managers take what employees say seriously

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THREE STAND-OUT THEMES (SUMMARY)

Three themes emerge from the review of definitions and the analysis of findings and these are shown in Figure 1 below.

Business process	Psychological safety	Social justice
• Organisations need to extend listening activities into regular face to face events and online communication to engage their people and learn how to improve • Feedback from people within organisations generates important insights into what is and is not working, and how to deliver on strategies, policies and performance	• The fear that employees have about speaking out is very real • Leaders and managers can find listening threatening because it places them in a position where they feel the need to find answers to protect their credibility	• Providing employees with opportunities to have a say can be seen as a fundamental individual right required for work to have meaning • The challenge for wider internal communication practice is how to prioritise listening within strategies and plans

Figure 1: Three stand-out themes for listening to employees

These themes are discussed in more detail in the report.

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TOP TEN INSIGHTS

- There are a range of potential benefits from listening to employees such as competitive advantage, engagement, advocacy, trust, innovation, resilience, learning and wellbeing

- Providing employees with opportunities to have a say can be seen as a fundamental individual right required for work to have meaning

- Not to listen to employees in a systemic way or in active or human ways potentially leads to employee cynicism with what might be perceived as persistent management propaganda

- The fear that employees have about speaking out is very real. Leaders and managers can also find listening threatening because it places them in a position where they feel the need to find answers to protect their credibility

- Effective listening has to go beyond a 'tick-box' exercise

- In order for leadership to value listening, activities need to relate to strategic and operational goals

- The establishment of organisation-wide listening channels, processes and systems is an important aspect of developing internal communication as a credible and respected strategic management function

- Listening to employees is important for internal communication managers in order to better understand how information is being received

- Leaders should create interpersonal face to face sessions to give people the opportunity to meet and talk without set agendas

- Surveys need to be explicit about intention and if they are listening tools, they need visible and transparent feedback and response mechanisms to demonstrate the impact that they are having

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Definitions
of listening

DEFINITIONS OF LISTENING

The act of communication incorporates talking and listening. And yet, as Macnamara observes, communication and voice are predominantly associated with speaking and there is little attention paid in many fields of research or communication practice to the vital corollary that should accompany speaking – listening.[1] But what do we mean by listening? Macnamara proposes seven general principles:

Recognition – of others as people with legitimate rights to speak

Acknowledgement – signalling to those who speak that they have been heard

Attention – investing time to listen rationally and emotionally

Interpreting – what others say as fairly and receptively as possible – not glossing over, misinterpreting or rejecting what is said

Understanding – trying, as far as possible to understand others' views, perspectives and feelings

Consideration – given to what is said, but this does not presume or require agreement

Responding – a more substantial response is usually required after considering what has been said

Two additional principles can be added to the list. One is the desire through mutual listening to build a sense of **shared meaning** (the word 'communicate' derives from the Latin *'communicare'* meaning to make something common). A second is the principle of **acting** in response to what the listener hears. We will discuss this further in various sections below.

Macnamara uses these general principles in a definition of organization listening that he applies to all stakeholders. However, the dynamics of listening to employees are, it is argued in this report, notably different to those that are used for listening to other groups such as customers or activist groups. This is because of the cultural and other barriers that
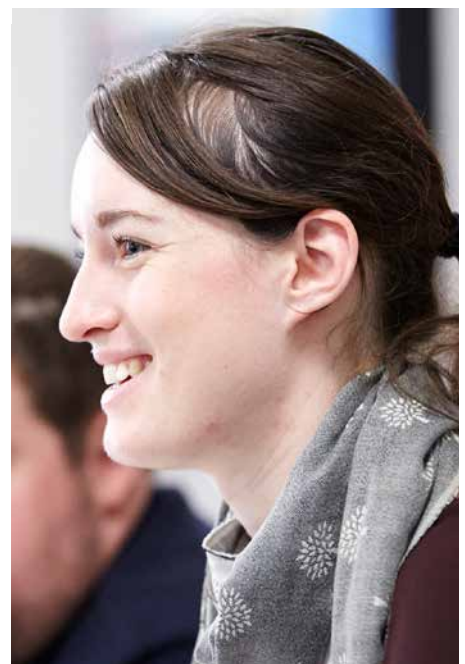
"
We often refuse to accept an idea merely because the tone of voice in which it has been expressed is unsympathetic to us

Friedrich Nietzsche

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might exist inside organisations that can make listening to employees more problematic. These barriers can include assumptions and expectations about the relative role of leaders and those they lead, the lack of emphasis on listening in management education, and a lack of structures or processes to explicitly collect differing perspectives from within an organisation to inform decision making.

MacLeod and Clark[2] characterise employee voice as:

…employees' views are sought out; they are listened to and see that their opinions count and make a difference. They speak out and challenge when appropriate

The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)[3] defines employee voice as:

The ability of employees to express their views, opinions, concerns and suggestions, and for these efforts to influence decisions at work

CIPD suggests that there are two potential purposes of voice in the management literature. First, an *organisational voice* perspective focuses on the positive benefits that voice can bring to the organisation, such as higher innovation and a more engaged workforce. A second purpose of voice flows from the so-called *social justice* perspective where voice is seen as a fundamental individual right required for work to have meaning. CIPD argues that enabling voice is central to building fairness and transparency in organisations and wider society.

CIPD research in the UK found that 50 per cent of employees are satisfied with voice in their organisation. The research also found that meetings with a line manager, team meetings and surveys are the three most used methods used to listen to employees. However, CIPD concludes that *'Many voice channels are quite superficial in terms of the scope for change that they present.'*[4]

In research in five organisations in the UK, Ruck et al.[5] found that satisfaction with employee voice is associated with what employees think and feel about their organisation and also what they do to help it become more successful. However, speaking up is dependent on how safe employees feel to speak out and how interested managers are in listening to what is said.[6] When making a judgement about speaking up, an employee first assesses whether doing so is likely to be effective. They then assess risks or potential negative outcomes - judging how safe it is to speak out.[7]

According to CIPD, senior figures play an important role in diffusing tensions and enabling employees to articulate concerns and issues, as well as drawing out ideas for enhancing practice.[8] Edmondson suggests that for organisations to thrive in a complex and uncertain world they need to become 'fearless'. She states that *'In most workplaces today, people are holding back far too often – reluctant to say something that might somehow make them look bad'* and a lack of psychological safety is hindering innovation. Indeed, Edmondson argues that 'fearless organizations' boast a hidden source of competitive advantage, which plays out in a variety of ways, depending on the industry, the company leaders, and the nature of the work.[9]

"

Enabling voice is central to building fairness and transparency in organisations and wider society

CIPD

"

For knowledge work to flourish, the workplace must be one where people feel able to share their knowledge! This means sharing concerns, questions, mistakes, and half-formed ideas

Professor Amy Edmondson

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According to CIPD, a significant proportion of employees feel unable to share matters that they feel are important. This may be detrimental not only to their wellbeing, but also damaging where organisational learning, resilience and innovation are concerned.[10]

Senior leadership approaches to listening are therefore a critical aspect of innovation and employee wellbeing in increasingly complex organisational environments. Hutchinson[11] proposes four requirements for leadership communication, including listening to employees:

Inspire – providing a clear direction for people to act

Inform – build understanding and awareness

Listen – understanding and addressing concerns

Deeply involve – making safe opportunities where people down the line and from across boundaries can shape solutions.

In this report, the authors argue that it is a core senior leadership responsibility to create a culture of listening and to develop good personal listening capabilities. Although further research is required to establish direct commercial benefits, many other highly desirable outcomes such as employee engagement, employee wellbeing and innovation are known to be associated with better listening to employees.

There is also a further, ethical, dimension to listening to employees that is emerging. Ethics is an under-discussed aspect of internal communication. However, Clampitt[12] suggests that ethical managers and organisations face two different questions:

1. Can we find healthy ways for employees to express their concerns to organisational leaders?

2. How should we respond to those concerns?

Both these points depend on listening. It could be argued that internal communication without listening is simply propaganda. This ethical dimension to communication and management reflects a growing focus recently on the relationship between good workforce relations and good governance at a corporate level.[13]

"

People cannot be viewed as passive recipients for information. They are active and questioning agents in the process of decision making. To ignore this, as a display of leader power, is to violate one of the most fundamental traits of our being

Professor Dennis Tourish

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Listening in practice

LISTENING IN PRACTICE

78 per cent of respondents in the survey strongly agree that listening to stakeholder groups is an important personal communication competence. This indicates that listening should be incorporated into ongoing development for all corporate communication managers.

59 per cent of respondents said they spend a maximum of one-third of their time listening to stakeholder groups. 33 per cent said they spend a third to two thirds of their time listening and a small group of 8 per cent said they spend more than two thirds of their time listening. This spread of time allocated may indicate that the focus on listening varies from organisation to organisation.

As a communication professional, in general, I allocate the following amount of time to listening to stakeholder groups
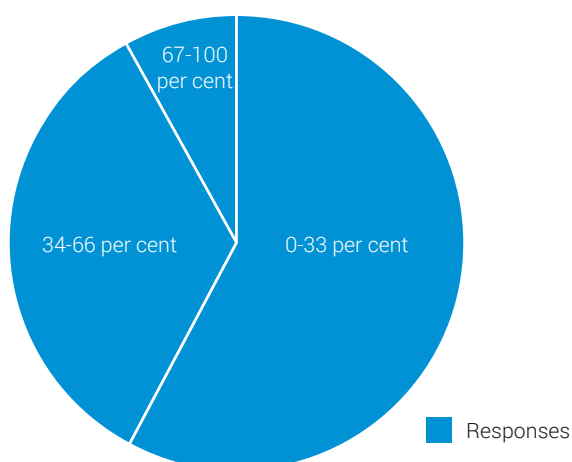

Figure 2: Time allocated to listening

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The most 'highly valued' communication competencies recorded in the survey were:

- Writing (53 per cent)
- Listening to external stakeholders (44 per cent)
- Social media management (40 per cent)
- Event management (40 per cent)

How highly are the following communication competencies valued in your organisation?
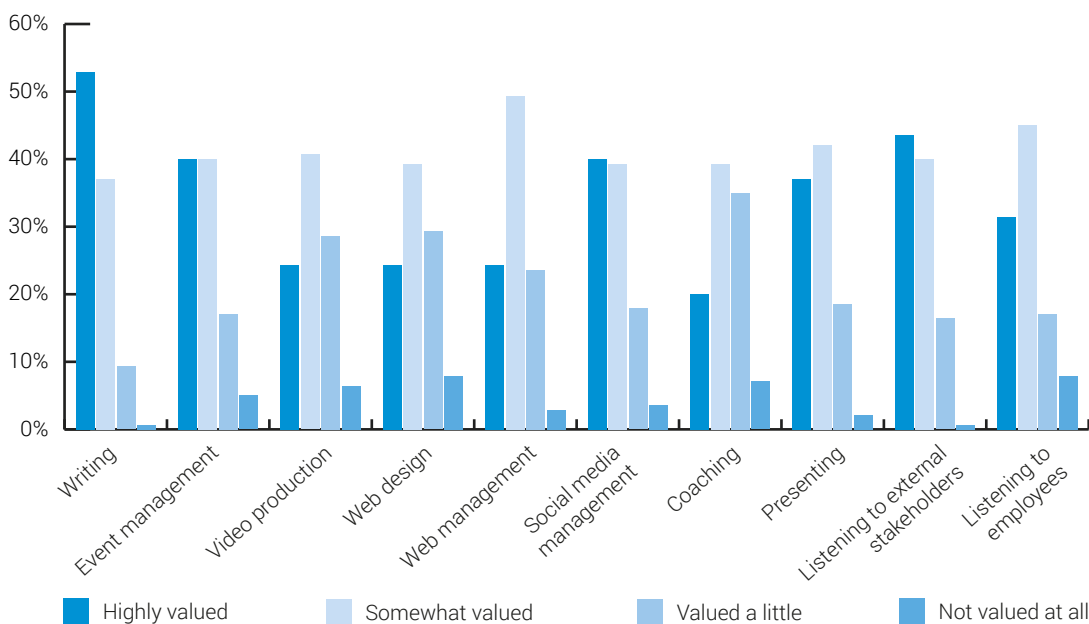

Figure 3: Valued communication competencies

It is not surprising that 'writing' is reported as the most valued competence in this report. It is also reported as the number one activity in the Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) State of the Profession survey.[14] However, respondents reported 'listening to external stakeholders' as the second most 'highly valued' competence. There is no comparative figure for listening in the CIPR's research as listening is not included in their list of activities.

However, listening to employees was recorded as a 'highly valued' competence by less than a third of respondents. **This suggests that there may be a difference in how organisations perceive the importance of listening to external stakeholder groups compared to listening to employees.**

In general, 46 per cent of respondents strongly agreed that the insights gained from listening are of strategic importance to their organisation. This implies that many communication managers appreciate that listening to stakeholder groups is a valuable strategic process. One of the main reasons cited by participants in workshops and interviews for the strategic importance of listening is the proximity that employees have to customers and processes. This is valuable knowledge that can be used for decision making and better quality innovation.

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The insights I gain from listening activities are of strategic importance to my organisation
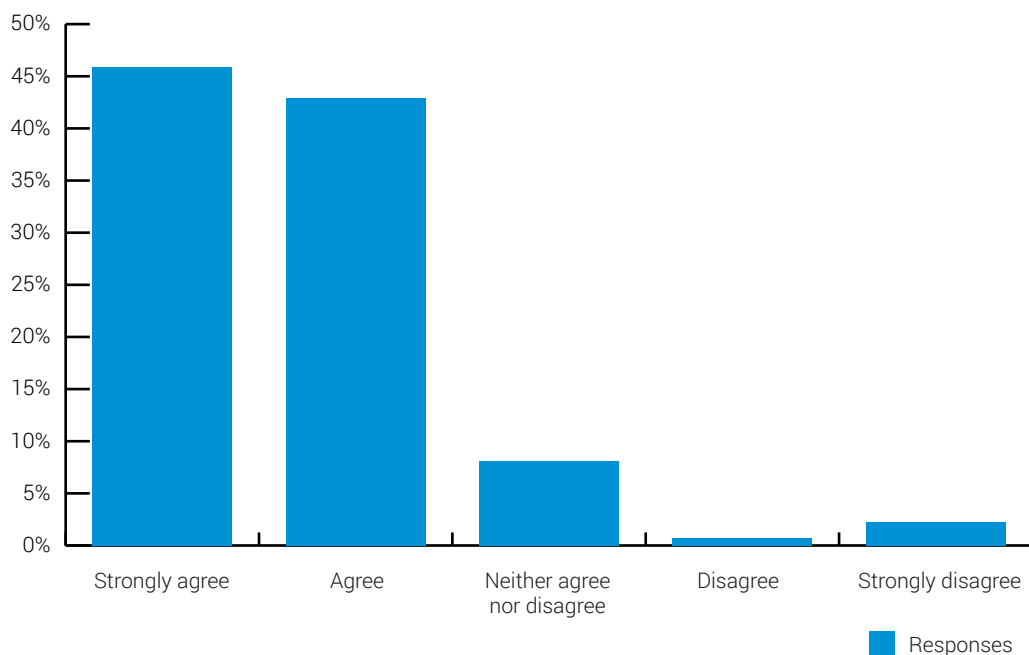

Figure 4: Strategic importance of listening

Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that listening to stakeholder groups is a fundamental component of ethical practice (63 per cent strongly agree).

Listening to stakeholder groups is a fundamental component of ethical practice
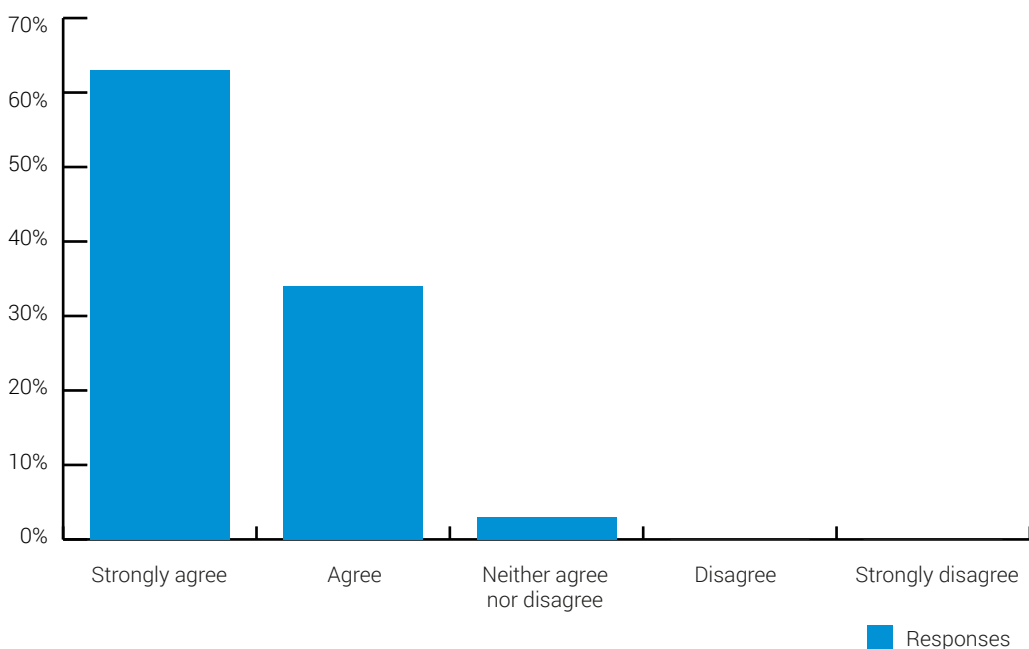

Figure 5: Listening and ethical practice

This reinforces the points discussed about ethical internal communication earlier in the 'Definitions of listening' section of this report regarding good workforce relations and good governance at a corporate level.

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In an open question in the survey, respondents were asked to state what it meant to be a 'good listener' as an organisation. 121 verbatim comments were analysed and the following primary themes established:

- Taking direct action on feedback (41 comments)
- Responding to feedback (22 comments)
- Openness and objectivity (15 comments)
- Understanding (12 comments).

This reinforces the importance of two of Macnamara's general principles for listening (understanding and responding) discussed in the 'definitions of listening' section of this report. However, it also suggests that appropriate 'direct action' could be added to the list.

The following quote in response to the open question 'What does it mean to be a "good listener" as an organisation?' represents the sentiment in many of the comments:

> *Giving employees regular opportunities and channels in which they can share their views, have open and honest conversations and contribute to company plans. Take appropriate actions as a result of employee feedback and effectively communicate actions taken as a result to the individuals and wider business*

In discussion sessions at workshops and interviews with senior practitioners we discussed what was driving the appreciation of listening. We also reviewed open comments in the survey. The following themes about why listening is important emerged from the analysis of qualitative data.

Innovation and change	Organisational learning and decision making
Changing nature of work	Employee experience
Employee wellbeing	

Figure 6: Themes from survey comments, workshops and interviews associated with listening to employees

INNOVATION AND CHANGE

Participants talked about the feeling that organisations have to listen to stay fresh. There was a strong belief that listening has to shape policy. Harvesting of ideas was related to having a 'healthy culture'. Some participants spoke about the need for appropriate speed with which organisations respond to what employees say in current environments.

ORGANISATIONAL LEARNING AND DECISION MAKING

A common point was made about employees having useful insights because they are close to customers. Employees can represent a rich source of information about customer perspectives. This can remain an untapped source if there is not a systematic approach to listening. Another theme raised the need to check messages are cutting through. Some communicators (and plenty of leaders) might assume that once information is broadcast it has been communicated. But listening can often reveal that messages have not been heard or are being misinterpreted. Listening is a crucial part of the communicator's role that provides a feedback loop to continuously improve the effectiveness of communication within the organisation. An increasing need for speed and agility was highlighted in relation to listening and learning 'on the go'. Listening was described as being about context and delving for deeper meaning. Listening can also help to identify useful triggers in decision making.

CHANGING NATURE OF WORK

Some participants felt that millennials are more demanding in terms of what they expect from an organisation and this includes the opportunity to have a say that is treated seriously. The growing use of digital communication at work was also raised as helping employees to participate in the internal communication process. Remote working was mentioned in the context of the changing nature of work and this focuses more attention on talking – and listening – more to employees who may feel more isolated.

EMPLOYEE EXPERIENCE

There was a common view from participants that listening to employees demonstrates respect and increases engagement; if you don't listen, you're just talking at people. This supports evidence highlighted in the 'Definitions of listening' section that found an association between listening and responding with organisational engagement. One interviewee stated that it was shocking that some organisations still struggle to respect employees in 2019. Poor organisational listening is likely to negatively impact employee experience and this may, in turn, impact employee advocacy. A lack of listening was also linked to the emergence of employee activism.

EMPLOYEE WELLBEING

Participants highlighted the importance of psychological safety for employees, in terms of being fearful about saying something that may be held against them in some unspecified way. This supports Edmondson's argument (as highlighted in the 'definitions of listening' section) that organisations need to become 'fearless' places. Participants also raised a different point about psychological safety –

Giving people time to voice their thoughts brings trust to the organisation. The relationships are stronger and issues can be resolved quicker!

Take the time to understand and act upon feedback

Employees feel more valued when their suggestions are listened to even if their suggestions are not taken on board. Listening to employees, in some instances like flexible working has led to improved staff morale

Being a good listener as an organisation means being 'prepared to acknowledge mistakes and learn from situations'

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the way that managers may be fearful about what employees might say and how able they would be to respond appropriately. This is an under-discussed aspect of psychological safety that warrants further investigation.

A further issue was mentioned in the context of wellbeing. The point was commonly made that organisations have to go beyond active listening to what one interviewee called 'human listening'; listening to understand, to interpret pauses and to encourage talking.

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What gets in the way of listening to employees?

WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF LISTENING TO EMPLOYEES?

Two questions were asked in the survey about senior managers concerning their willingness to listen to employees and how seriously they treat employees' views. These are two aspects that are noted as important for effective listening.

Senior managers at my organisation are willing to listen to what employees have to say
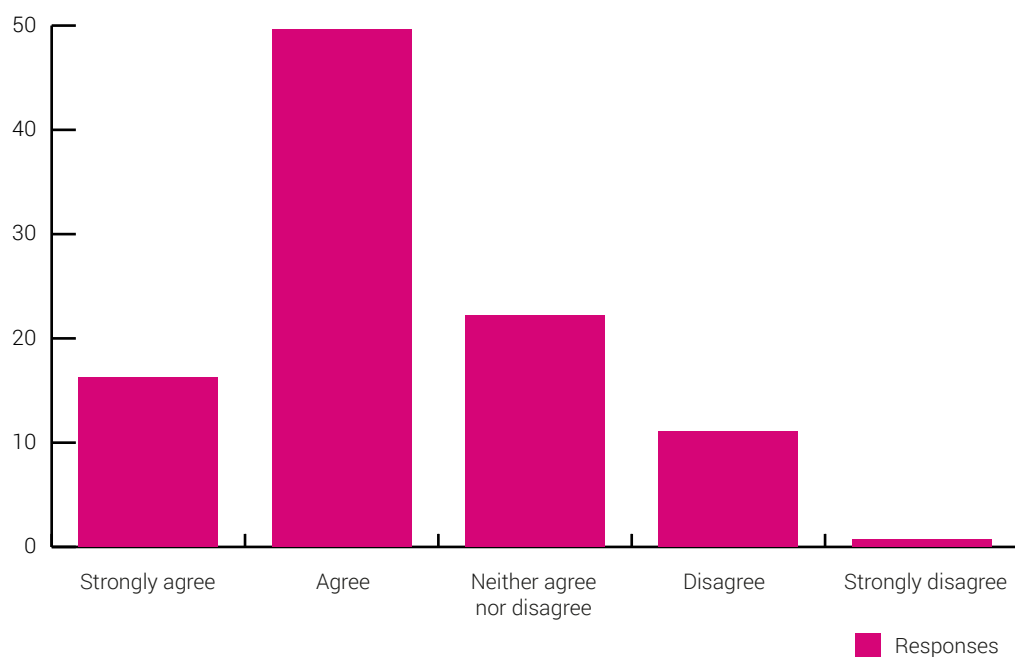

Figure 7: Willingness of senior managers to listen to employees

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Firstly, two-thirds of respondents agreed that senior managers are willing to listen to what employees have to say. This suggests that many of the respondents work in organisations where senior managers are willing to listen to employees.

In the second question, respondents were a little less sure about senior managers taking what employees say seriously. 60 per cent of respondents agreed, 27 per cent neither agreed nor disagreed and 13 per cent disagreed. This means that as many as 40 per cent of respondents did not agree that senior managers take what employees say seriously, so this also may be an issue in some organisations.

Figures 7 and 8 illustrate what may be one of the most important barriers to listening. It is true that the majority of respondents agree that their senior managers are willing to listen and take what employees say seriously. So far so good, but our attention was drawn to the numbers who were in the middle of these statements or did not agree. Respectively 34 per cent and 40 per cent. We felt that this represents a major issue that prevents organisational effectiveness. If a significant number of leaders are unwilling to listen or take on board the views of employees their organisations are unlikely to achieve effective operations or healthy cultures.

Senior managers at my organisation take what employees say seriously

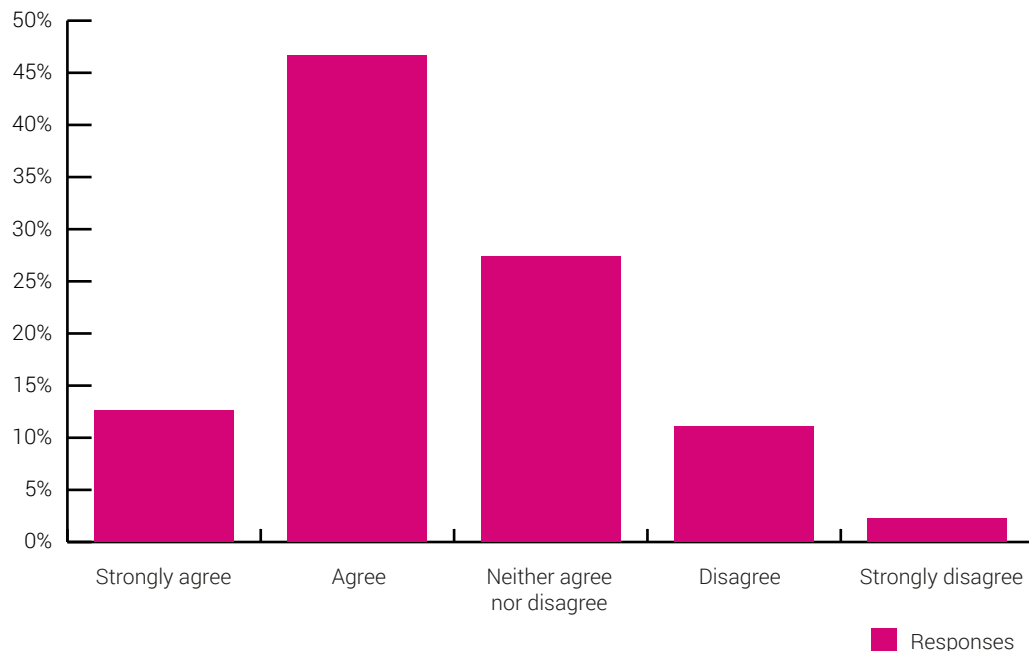Figure 8: How far senior managers take what employees say seriously

In discussion sessions at workshops and interviews with senior practitioners we discussed what got in the way of listening. We also reviewed open comments in the survey.

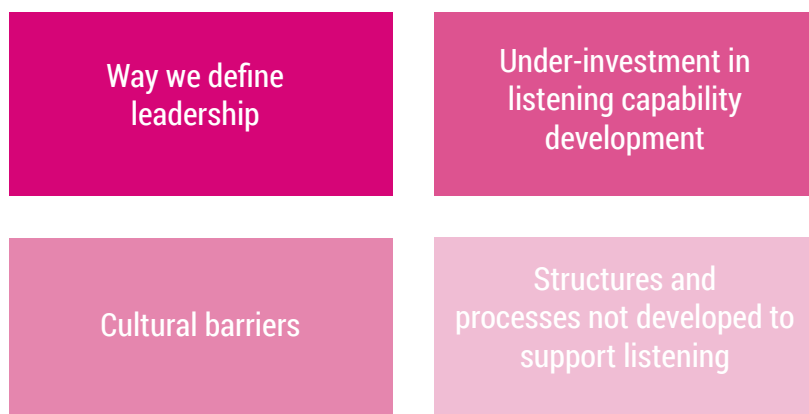The following themes emerged from the analysis of qualitative data.

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Way we define leadership	Under-investment in listening capability development
Cultural barriers	Structures and processes not developed to support listening

Figure 9: Themes from survey comments, workshops and interviews associated with what gets in the way of listening

THE WAY WE DEFINE LEADERSHIP

Participants highlighted the way that leadership is understood to mean the 'need to provide answers' rather than involving listening to employees. One interviewee talked about a 'parental trap' whereby managers feel they have to sort everything out. Employees also have a responsibility to resolve some issues themselves. Further comments were made about the 'danger of passive listening' and the 'illusion of listening'.

UNDER-INVESTMENT IN LISTENING CAPABILITY DEVELOPMENT

Participants questioned whether some leaders are 'wilfully deaf'. This was related to issues such as leaders being worried about how to respond, a fear of being exposed in some way, and nervousness about what might come at them. This can be summarised as a perceived general lack of capability to listen effectively. It also extends our understanding of 'psychological safety' as it suggests that managers have their own fears about having to listen. Points were also made about internal communication and too much emphasis on narrative and spin.

CULTURAL BARRIERS

In general, participants discussed the ways that organisational cultures are not very conducive to listening and employees are often fearful of speaking out. This was discussed in the previous section in relation to employee wellbeing but here it is highlighted as a wider cultural factor. Employees can be concerned about how to actively give views, and that they may potentially 'say the wrong thing'. Points were raised about the way that some 'middle managers' can treat listening with disdain. Additional points were made about an external focus being considered to be more important, which reinforces the survey responses discussed in the previous section.

STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES NOT DEVELOPED TO SUPPORT LISTENING

Participants highlighted the way that organisations do not always have a systemic approach to listening to employees. Some participants said that human resources and internal communication teams do not necessarily work well together. Other structural issues raised include the ways that traditional hierarchies are not conducive to cross organisational listening and the importance of having clear, established, expectations for listening.

"
Sometimes senior managers say they want to listen but do not want to believe or accept what they hear or are genuinely unsure what to do about what they hear

"
The will is there in our organisation and we know how to listen - but there is still more to do on getting the right tech in and making it affordable, so that the whole organisation can benefit. We don't always know who has been listening to whom, beyond immediate teams

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Good practice

GOOD PRACTICE

THE IMPORTANCE OF FACE TO FACE COMMUNICATION

Comments provided in the survey and discussions with interviewees and workshop participants consistently highlight the importance of a face to face setting for listening. Face to face listening with line managers/supervisors and with senior managers were the two most used methods in our survey (82 per cent and 72 per cent respectively). Focus groups and facilitated listening sessions were frequently highlighted in open comments, as the following quote illustrates:

> *Face to face will always be strongest. Informal gatherings without a set agenda, such as monthly drinks, provide an interesting barometer of people's sentiment about work and beyond*

A face to face setting enables Macnamara's seven general principles for listening (recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpreting, understanding, consideration and responding) to be applied more easily. Although this is not to say that other methods don't also have merit – see the following section on a multi-channel approach.

MULTI-CHANNEL APPROACH

Although the importance of face to face listening is a clear finding in our research, participants pointed out that a multi-channel approach is also useful. Other methods used are shown below.

Face to face with line managers/supervisors	82%
Annual survey	74%
Face to face with senior managers	72%
Facilitated focus groups	50%
Social channels (Workplace, Yammer, Jive, Slack etc)	45%
Listening lunches/sessions	40%
Regular pulse survey	38%
Suggestion schemes	19%
Online forums with senior managers	19%

" *A recent project called 'Our Future' where we asked staff for big ideas for the next strategic plan. Face to face was the main channel used and over 700 ideas were generated and will now be fed into the strategic planning process*

" *What has worked well in listening:*

'Using a range of methods (small and large group discussions, many channels, chance for anonymity)'

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The much-maligned annual survey is clearly still used by many respondents and notably used more than pulse surveys. Social channels are used by 45 per cent of respondents and they also featured in open comments and in discussions with interviewees and workshop participants.

RESPONDING

Trust in actions or appropriate responses were key points mentioned in open comments, interviews and in discussions with workshop participants. This reinforces 'responding' as an important element in Macnamara's seven general principles for listening. This can be formalised into what one respondent described as: 'Employee consultative forums hosted by the Comms & Engagement Executive who makes sure actions are assigned and progressed'. Or it can be embedded into ongoing change communication processes as outlined in the following quote:

> *In a recent change programme, we asked people for their views and then ensured that there was proper feedback which has generated trust. People know they are being listened to*

It is important to note here a distinction between 'responding' and 'acting'. As highlighted earlier in this report an expectation to always act may lead to an unhealthy parent-child culture. Responding and acting on what is heard was clearly important to participants in this study. However, further research is required to determine when acting may or may not be appropriate.

"
Employees feel more valued when their suggestions are listened to even if their suggestions are not taken on board
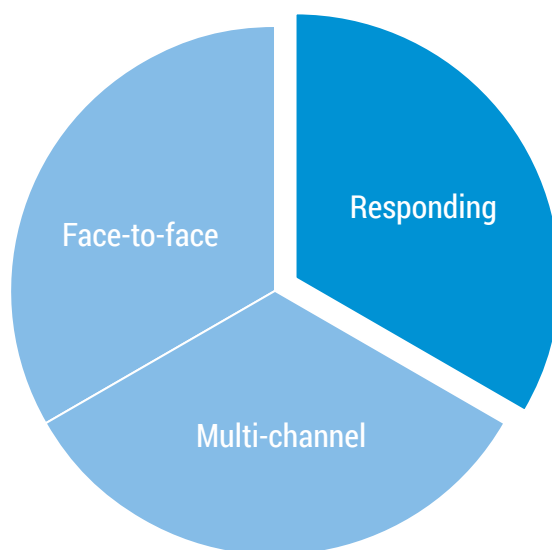

Figure 10: Themes from survey comments, workshops and interviews associated with good practice

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Insights

THREE STAND-OUT THEMES

Three themes stand out from the literature review and research conducted for this report; listening as an effective business process, psychological safety and social justice.

Business process	Psychological safety	Social justice
• Organisations need to extend listening activities into regular face to face events and online communication to engage their people and learn how to improve	• The fear that employees have about speaking out is very real	• Providing employees with opportunities to have a say can be seen as a fundamental individual right required for work to have meaning
• Feedback from people within organisations generates important insights into what is and is not working, and how to deliver on strategies, policies and performance	• Leaders and managers can find listening threatening because it places them in a position where they feel the need to find answers to protect their credibility	• The challenge for wider internal communication practice is how to prioritise listening within strategies and plans

Figure 11: Three stand-out themes for listening to employees

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LISTENING AS AN EFFECTIVE BUSINESS PROCESS

It is clear that some organisations have moved on from relying solely on an annual employee survey as a method of listening to employees. Although a regular survey is still used, according to the respondents to our survey and participants at workshops, many organisations have extended listening activities into regular face to face events and online communication.

From an organisational perspective, there is a range of potential benefits from listening to employees such as competitive advantage, engagement, advocacy, trust, innovation, resilience, learning and wellbeing. These all feed into an improved customer experience and ultimately bottom-line performance. Listening is also important to achieving success in the ever-increasing amount of change and transformation facing organisations today.

However, what emerges as a vital factor for effective listening is that it has to go beyond a 'tick-box' exercise. This entails adopting Macnamara's general principles for listening, with an emphasis on two particular points in this study; responding and acting appropriately to what is said.

Some participants talked about passive and active listening. One participant suggested that there is a difference between active and what was described as 'human' listening. Clearly there are myriad ways people view listening in organisations. People seem to view levels of listening that go from fairly superficial to more meaningful, and they also contrast listening that is more passive and listening that leads to a response and action.

The matrix below identifies different styles of listening. One axis concerns the focus of listening and the extent to which the acknowledgement and recognition of emotions are important. The second contrasts whether the intent of listening is more about recording and hearing others views or whether it is part of a process explicitly designed to lead to action.

Figure 12: Different styles of listening
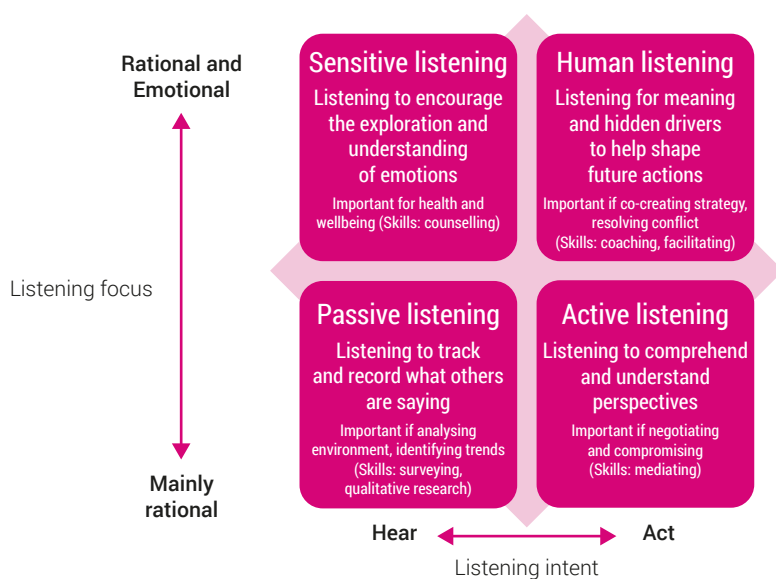
All styles of listening have an important role to play in organisations. The benefits from active and human listening to employees are significant. However, for benefits to be realised organisations have to adopt a systemic listening approach that may encompass all four styles.

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PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

The fear that employees have about speaking out is very real. An organisational culture that leads to fear is, therefore, a significant barrier to the potential benefits that arise from listening. Indeed, as Edmondson argues, organisations should consider how to become 'fearless'. And this is especially important in an uncertain world. Furthermore, as CIPD highlights, it may be detrimental to their wellbeing if employees feel unable to share matters that they feel are important.

This study also highlights another dimension of psychological safety – that leaders and managers can find listening threatening because it places them in a position where they feel the need to find answers to protect their credibility. This 'top-down' fear of listening is less often reported but it is real and is related to fears that managers have about what employees might say and how to respond or act appropriately to issues or concerns that are raised. Psychological safety for employees is dependent on the confidence or capability of a manager to be prepared to acknowledge what others want, need or feel in an unbiased way. This prompts questions about business studies education, in terms of how far listening is prioritised as an important leadership capability. It also requires communication managers and others to be able to provide effective support, guidance and training for leaders to understand the importance of listening per se and to develop active and human listening capabilities.

SOCIAL JUSTICE

The understanding of the responsibilities that organisations have to wider society continues to develop. Good governance, ethical practice and triple bottom line reporting are important considerations for all organisations – for good reputation management reasons.

As CIPD argues, enabling voice is central to building fairness and transparency in organisations and wider society. Providing employees with opportunities to have a say can also be seen as a fundamental individual right required for work to have meaning.

From an internal communication perspective, many of the respondents in the survey in this study have added listening mechanisms to their plans in addition to the standard work associated with keeping employees informed. However, it appears that this may not always be systemic or effective listening (as described above). The challenge for wider internal communication practice is how to prioritise listening within strategies and plans, balancing the importance of keeping employees informed with the need to listen to what they have to say. To not do this is to fail to address valid ethical concerns about practice.

A barrier to listening is the status gap between leaders and senior managers, and employees. Evidence from behavioural science shows that perceived status, authority and expertise play a key role in influencing us. Like anyone else leaders are subject to this bias which may be unconscious. It is only by developing systematic processes that organisations can overcome this human barrier to effective listening.[15]

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The future of organisational listening

THE FUTURE OF ORGANISATIONAL LISTENING

The authors set out to explore the state of listening in organisations, challenge thinking and share some practical hints and tips. This is a small-scale study, but it has identified key themes outlined in the previous section that suggest why and how important listening is.

What are the implications for leaders and what are the practical things that they can do to improve listening in their organisations? These points are summarised in figure 13 below.

Leadership ▶	Unless leadership believes in and champions listening, then it's unlikely to feature as a priority elsewhere in the organisation
Strategic goals ▶	Alignment of listening activities with strategic and operational goals
Channels ▶	The potential to use internal social media for listening is widely acknowledged but it is rarely used effectively
Surveys ▶	Surveys need to be explicit about intention and if they are listening tools they need visible and transparent feedback and response mechanisms
Capability ▶	Building the listening capability of the organisation

Figure 13: The future of listening

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1. THE ROLE OF LEADERSHIP AND ITS IMPACT ON THE CULTURE OF THE ORGANISATION

Unless leadership believes in and champions listening, then it's unlikely to feature as a priority elsewhere in the organisation. The study revealed a host of recommendations about what works well in listening and of over one hundred suggestions nearly 1 in 5 related to specific listening groups with leaders such as:

a. Face to face meetings with the Heads of Country or Function

b. Focus group sessions and 'voice of our people' sessions with managers

c. Using multiple channels with senior leaders involved

d. 'Having adult to adult conversations so we're listening to what is being said and not reacting like a parent to a child'

e. Question time events with the senior leadership team

2. LISTENING ACTIVITIES NEED TO RELATE TO STRATEGIC AND OPERATIONAL GOALS

One of the themes that emerged in the workshops was that in order for leadership to value listening, activities need to relate to strategic and operational goals. Alignment with business priorities was the dominant theme in seventeen per cent of the examples of good listening practice. Practical suggestions were:

a. Listening to stakeholders (not just employees) to ensure that work priorities are in line with their needs and their own priorities

b. A series of discussions about how we can listen for what we can do to make it easier for people to support the business

c. Involve employees in planning our strategy

d. Treating employees with front line experience as surrogate customers and listening to them to identify customer needs

3. EXTENDING THE RANGE OF CHANNELS USED FOR LISTENING

The most used mechanisms for listening to employees are discussions and focus groups. Examples given included: informal, small group forums to consult with employees; 'workplace of choice' initiatives; workshops to listen to and brainstorm with employees; and numerous other mentions of focus groups on specific topics. Leaders should create interpersonal face to face sessions to give people the opportunity to meet and talk without set agendas, and perhaps off-site, to provide an 'ear to the ground' and to gather sentiments about work. The potential to use internal social media for listening is widely acknowledged, but it is rarely used to listen to employees. Only 5 per cent of respondents described the use of digital tools to improve listening. This is a channel that could be used far more to extend the range of opportunities that employees have to express their views and concerns.

4. THE USE OF REGULAR EMPLOYEE SURVEYS

Surveys are still popular and were cited in 16 per cent of the good practice suggestions. But surveys increasingly seem to be used to count opinions

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and to track performance (e.g. the employee engagement survey). Many people believe that this does not represent the kind of listening, at the active or human level, that is needed today. Therefore, surveys need to be explicit about intention and if they are listening tools they need visible and transparent feedback and response mechanisms to demonstrate the impact that they are having.

5. BUILDING THE LISTENING CAPABILITY OF THE ORGANISATION

This can be done by

   a. Investing in listening skills at all levels

   b. Insisting on listening as a core competency for leadership

   c. Recognising and rewarding listening as part of the mix of factors that constitutes good performance

   d. Creating listening champions within the business as focal points for people to approach outside the traditional leadership structures

   e. Evaluating the listening capability of the business by measuring it, celebrating it where it is done well and addressing areas of weakness

Listening and the role of the internal communication manager

LISTENING AND THE ROLE OF THE INTERNAL COMMUNICATION MANAGER

In this final section of the report, we consider how listening to employees is a fundamental component of internal communication strategy, planning and day to day practice.

As the report has indicated, listening to employees is evolving and moving far beyond the annual employee engagement survey. In the section above, points have been raised in relation to how listening is a leadership responsibility - at all levels of the organisation. However, suggesting that listening to employees is a generic leadership responsibility does not mean that it will become adopted into practice. For listening to become more established it requires *organisation-wide systems and processes* and this report argues that the internal communication manager is ideally placed to do this.

The primary rationale for the internal communication manager taking responsibility for establishing robust processes and systems for listening to employees is that this is a natural corollary to keeping employees informed. Listening, as outlined throughout this report, is an essential component of communicating. Of course, all leaders and managers share responsibility for ensuring effective communication in the business but it is the job of the internal communication team to establish the infrastructure to support their listening role.

There is little data on how far listening to employees in the ways described in this report is firmly embedded into internal communication practice. The Gatehouse State of the Sector Report[16] suggests that around 80 per cent of internal communication managers are 'very' or 'usually' involved in 'encouraging two-way communication with employees'. However, in this

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report, we argue that good practice goes beyond 'encouragement' to the implementation of organisation-wide channels, processes and systems.

There are three aspects of listening that are relevant for the internal communication manager as shown below.

Figure 14: Listening and the role of the internal communication manager

1. UNDERSTANDING EMPLOYEE COMMUNICATION EFFECTIVENESS

Listening to employees is important for internal communication managers in order to better understand how successfully they are delivering their plans. This includes going beyond basic analysis of opens, reads, clicks and likes to research methods that measure the outcome of communication, including what employees think, feel and what they do as a result of the communication.

Demonstrating that communication activity has been effective requires a plan that clearly articulates desired outcomes; targeted, thoughtful and creative execution and detailed measurement processes that show how well the plan has been delivered. We believe that listening directly to employees is a major part of evaluating the success, or otherwise of communication.

Whether through surveys, focus groups, one to one interviews, it is through effective listening that we can tell not only how employees react to communication but also how it could be improved in the future.

2. HARNESSING EMPLOYEE INSIGHTS

This report suggests that internal communication managers take the lead responsibility for implementing organisation-wide listening channels, processes and systems.

This entails analysis of the views, issues and concerns that employees raise. It is the analysis that generates insights and trends that may go beyond individual employees or teams. The analysis forms the basis of management reporting that enables leaders to consider and reflect more deeply on what is being said and then provide meaningful responses that leads to wider trust in the listening process.

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In practical terms, this requires an internal communication plan that includes monthly listening activities that include senior managers and which make the best use of a wide range of channels. The internal communication team is responsible for producing a regular report of the views, issues and concerns that have been raised that the senior management team then reviews, considers and responds to regularly.

The emphasis on embedding organisation-wide listening into planning does not require a significant budget. Instead, it will often require a redistribution of the time devoted to 'sending-out-stuff' so that more time is devoted to listening.

The establishment of organisation-wide listening channels, processes and systems is an important aspect of developing internal communication as a credible and respected strategic management function. It commands additional respect for the value of internal communication that provides that much sought-after access to the board.

3. GOOD AND ETHICAL INTERNAL COMMUNICATION

Finally, listening to employees is an essential component of good and ethical practice.

Listening to employees is 'good' in the sense that it has numerous benefits for organisations and it is also associated with employee wellbeing.

And, as highlighted in the 'Definitions of listening' section of this report, there is a social justice perspective to listening to employees. As organisations increasingly understand the requirement for good governance, integrated reporting and responsible leadership so the recognition of ethical internal communication will increase. Today, ethical internal communication has received minimal attention in both academic and professional realms. In this report, we suggest that listening to employees goes hand in hand with keeping employees informed. Not to listen to employees in a systemic way or in active or human ways potentially leads to employee cynicism with what might be perceived as persistent management propaganda.

NEXT STEPS

This report is based on a small-scale research project. Further research is planned for 2020 that will be focused on a more in-depth exploration of good listening practice.

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AUTHOR BIOS

Howard Krais

Having worked in the internal communication field for over 25 years, Howard has long been passionate about the critical importance of listening for communicators, and by definition for the organisation.

Becoming President of the UK Chapter of IABC enabled Howard to raise this passion, declaring his term as a Year of Listening. Currently in his second year as IABC UK President, the focus on listening continues to underpin IABC UK's activities as well as Howard's approach to communications.

He has worked in a range of roles during his career, both senior 'in house' and consulting / agency roles and is focused as much on helping to find great opportunities for communicators to develop and grow as he is about the power of great communications to positively impact change. For his day job, Howard leads communications for the Clean Air sector of Johnson Matthey, a role he moved into in May 2018, having worked in senior communication roles at global giants GSK and EY previously.

2019/20 is Howard's fourth year as a Board Member of the IABC UK chapter. As President, he continues to build on the momentum recent years though with particular focus on the topic of organisational listening, which underpins many of the events and priorities of the UK chapter.

Mike Pounsford

Mike's interest in listening has extended over his career. He was an active pioneer of Employee Research in Europe for Willis Towers Watson (Towers Perrin at the time), applied insights from listening to help improve performance in retailing and banking while at Alexander Consulting Group and set up Banner McBride for WPP Group to help clients get closer to their people in order to build stronger brands.

He founded Couravel which works with clients to clarify and communicate purpose, vision and strategy, to design and deliver engagement programmes, and to develop the communication capabilities of leaders and managers.

He is the Past President of the UK Chapter of IABC and an IAF Certified Professional Facilitator.

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Dr Kevin Ruck

Kevin's interest in listening to employees stems from practice in BT where he instigated a series of listening events at a time of a major transformation in the IT division. His belief in the value of listening to employees was reinforced through PhD research which showed statistically significant associations between employee voice and organisational engagement.

He is the co-founder of PR Academy, the UK's largest provider of Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) qualifications. He is the course leader for PR Academy's delivery of the CIPR Specialist Diploma: Internal Communication and he is the editor and co-author of the respected textbook 'Exploring Internal Communication' published by Routledge. He is a past chair of CIPR Inside.

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