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Corporate Listening

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Abstract

Research shows that active, open, ethical listening in and by organizations can contribute to employee and customer loyalty and retention, enhance relationships with other stakeholders, and provide insights of strategic value. However, listening is often a secondary practice in corporate communication and related fields such as public relations, or conducted narrowly and sometimes in tokenistic ways, referred to as *pseudolistening*. Furthermore, organizations face particular challenges in listening due to scale, delegation of listening to various functional units, and because the voice of customers, employees, and other stakeholders is often mediated, resulting in a need for listening beyond interpersonal communication. This has given rise to specialized focus on corporate listening and the cognate field of organizational listening. Research highlights the importance of listening in and by organizations for their sustainability and growth as well as the benefit of their stakeholders, and identifies key characteristics, structures, and methods for effective corporate listening.

Keywords: Listening, voice, engagement, communication, insights, relationships

Definitions

Based on the substantial and growing body of research literature on two-way communication and interpersonal as well as organizational listening, corporate listening is defined for the purposes of this discussion as follows.

Corporate listening involves the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policy makers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider and appropriately respond to key stakeholders who wish to communicate with the organization and with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means.

This draws in the first instance on human communication theory, which is defined parsimoniously as a two-way process involving “talking and listening” (Craig, 2006, p. 39). Sociologists such as Couldry (2010) note that voice, which in a corporate environment can include the voice of customers (VOC), the voice of employees (VOE), and the voice of other stakeholders (VOS), needs to be listened to in order to “matter” and have value.

Interpersonal listening has received and continues to receive close attention in a number of fields including psychology, therapeutic practices, human resource (HR) management (Bodie & Crick, 2014; Worthington & Bodie, (2017), and leadership studies (Gott, 2022).

Two-way interaction, ostensibly including listening, is also normatively discussed in rhetorical, dialogic, relationship, asymmetric and symmetric models of public relations (Grunig et al., 2002; Heath, 2009; Ledingham, 2006; Taylor & Kent, 2014).

Of specific relevance to this text is Borner and Zerfass’s (2018) concept of corporate listening as *inbound corporate communication*. However, while establishing why organizations need to listen in intra-, inter- and extra-organizational modes, they do not elaborate on how so-called inbound communication is undertaken. Similarly, many other generalized claims of listening by organizations – corporations and other types of corporate bodies – lack the detailed operational guidelines that are applied to outbound communication.

Despite recognition of “communication as constitutive of organization” in a general sense (Vásquez & Schoeneborn, 2018) and, more specifically, that “communication constitutes organizations” (Schoeneborn, Kuhn, & Kärreman, 2019, p. 475) – also referred to as *communicative constitution of organizations* (CCO theory) – listening is often taken for granted in corporate communication and related fields of practice such as public relations.

Recently, this has changed as organizations recognize the importance of listening as a key enabler of engagement, relationships, and a contributor of strategic value. The voice of customers provides valuable insights describing their needs and expectations for products and services (Aguwa et al. (2017). Also, listening to customers has been shown to increase satisfaction and loyalty (Fanderl et al., 2016). Listening to employees is directly connected to engagement, satisfaction, loyalty, retention, and productivity (Bashshur, 2015; Ruck et al., 2017).

Studies of listening have revealed more than 50 definitions (Glenn, 1989). Most, however, relate to interpersonal communication in areas such as counselling, interviewing, mentoring, and

mediation (King, 2015, p. 331), while others relate to listening by audiences in the context of the media and entertainment (e.g., Lacey, 2013; Napoli, 2011). An analysis in *Communication Theory*, which includes discussion of the important difference between hearing and listening, says:

Listening ... is the capacity to discern the underlying habitual character and attitudes of people with whom we communicate, including ourselves, in such a way that, at its best, brings about a sense of shared experience and mutual understanding. (Bodie & Crick, 2014, p. 106)

One of the first definitions of ‘organizational listening’ that is relevant to corporate communication drew on studies of *listening competency* in a business context by Flynn et al. (2008) and others to propose the following.

Organizational listening is defined as a combination of an employee’s listening skills and the environment in which listening occurs, which is shaped by the organization and is then one of the characteristics of the organizational image. (Burnside-Lawry, 2011, p. 149)

This definition is useful in drawing attention to the organizational environment as well as the role of individuals in organizations who are required or expected to undertake listening. This perspective was taken further in an extensive study of corporate, government, non-government, and non-profit organizations, which proposed the following definition.

Organizational listening is comprised of the culture, policies, structure, processes, resources, skills, technologies, and practices applied by an organization to give recognition, acknowledgement, attention, interpretation, understanding, consideration, and response to its stakeholders and publics. (Macnamara, 2016, p. 52)

A number of definitions apply specifically to listening to employees as part of internal organizational communication. In a broad sense that is applicable to external and internal communication, Lewis (2020) defined what he referred to as *strategic organizational listening* as “a set of methodologies and structures designed and utilized to ensure that an organization’s attention is directed toward vital information and input to enable learning, questioning of key assumptions, interrogating decisions, and ensuring self-critical analysis” (p. xvi). Lewis’s

definition identifies key elements of organizational/corporate listening as including structures specifically designed for listening, methodologies, and acceptance of criticism as well as positive feedback for learning to inform continuous improvement.

An interdisciplinary literature review, which identified *seven canons of listening*, and primary research conducted in a number of corporations as well as public sector organizations, contributed the following even more comprehensive definition of organizational listening that forms the basis of the definition of corporate listening offered in this chapter

Organizational listening comprises the creation and implementation of scaled processes and systems that enable decision makers and policy makers in organizations to actively and effectively access, acknowledge, understand, consider and appropriately respond to all those who wish to communicate with the organization or with whom the organization wishes to communicate interpersonally or through delegated, mediated means. (Macnamara, 2019, p. 5191)

Based on interpersonal communication, psychology, and ethics literature, the ‘seven canons of listening’ informing this definition are (1) openness to recognize others as having a right to speak and something potentially valuable to say; (2) acknowledgement; (3) paying attention; (4) interpreting fairly and receptively; (5) striving to understand others’ perspective; (6) giving consideration, and (7) responding in an appropriate way. These ‘canons’ identify antecedents of corporate listening (e.g., openness and recognition), as well as core elements of open, ethical and effective listening. Several researchers also identify empathy as a key antecedent (Neill, 2020; Sahay, 2021, p. 10).

Key findings

The definition of corporate listening, derived from the above definition of organizational listening, is based on findings of research that identified a number of unique factors that characterize listening in and by organizations including corporations and other types of corporate bodies. For simplicity, the following discussion of ‘corporate listening’ includes research findings in relation to organizational listening, noting that ‘corporate’ (from the Latin *corpus*) is used in many countries to refer to all types of organizations and groups.

Scale

The first key factor is that organizations typically need to listen at *scale*. Unlike interpersonal listening in dyads and small groups, organizations seeking two-way communication and engagement with their stakeholders and communities frequently need to listen to thousands, hundreds of thousands, or even millions of people in the case of large multinational corporations and governments. Therefore, while the interpersonal listening skills of organizational management and staff such as customer relations departments are key competencies and a vital component of corporate culture, inclusive, comprehensive corporate listening cannot be accomplished aurally in interpersonal interactions.

Mediation

Scale, combined with the fact that many stakeholders are distanced geographically, and sometimes in time, mean that corporate listening is largely *mediated*. Corporate listening needs to be applied to correspondence such as letters and e-mails; feedback provided in surveys and other methods of research; media articles; social media posts; submissions to consultations; and calls to call centers including complaints and inquiries. In addition to the one-to-one listening undertaken in call centers, digital recording of calls over a period can be transcribed for analysis to identify common concerns, perceptions, and requests that inform product and service design and improvements. The need for mediated listening at scale leads to three other key characteristics of corporate listening.

Delegation

Because of scale and the multiple forms and sites of stakeholder voice, corporate listening is largely *delegated* to functional units such as customer relations, human resources (HR), market research, and corporate communication or public relations. These are supported by IT and other specialist functions such as data analytics or business intelligence for the following reasons.

Data analysis

Receipt of verbal, broadcast, printed, or digital information is only one part of listening. After receipt of stakeholder feedback or comments, listening requires analysis to identify and understand what is said. While analysis is done cognitively by individuals during interpersonal communication, in the case of corporate listening, textual or content analysis of potentially large bodies of unstructured data, as well as statistical analysis of structured data, is required.

Empirical research has found that, in some cases, the voice of customers, employees, and other stakeholders can amount to millions of words, as shown in the following example.

Assistive technologies

Because the voice of customers, employees, and other stakeholders is expressed in textual, audio, and sometimes video, as well as represented in statistical forms, analysis to understand what is said usually requires assistive technologies. For example, one public consultation studied received 127,400 submissions, many of which contained 10 or more pages (Macnamara, 2017). Gaining understanding and insights from such expressions of voice is not possible through manual reading and human cognition. A number of technologies that are useful and even essential in corporate listening have been identified (Lewis, 2020; Macnamara, 2019).

An 'architecture of listening'

While technologies such as online surveys, digital recording of calls to call centres, interactive media, and textual analysis applications with machine learning capabilities are necessary for delegated, mediated listening at scale, research by Brownell (2016) and others has found that unless other elements and principles are in place in an organization, effective listening is not achieved.

Research has identified eight key elements and principles that are necessary for effective listening by organizations. These have been referred to as comprising an *architecture of listening* because they provide a design framework within which customized listening spaces can be developed to suit the circumstances and context of various organizations.

First and foremost, research has found that, long before systems and technologies for listening can be effectively applied in an organization, management needs to create a *culture of listening*. This is characterized by openness and acknowledgement others – two of the ‘canons’ or antecedents of listening. In interdisciplinary literature, openness is informed by the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1989) who said that openness requires not only passive listening, but asking questions and allowing others to “say something to us”, even to the point of “recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me” (p. 361). A listening culture is also informed by the *dialogism* of Mikhail Bakhtin (1981, 1986) and particularly Martin Buber’s description of dialogue contrasted with monologue and “monologue disguised as dialogue” (Buber, 2002, p. 22).

Researchers have identified that politics plagues listening in and by organizations, manifested in selective listening that renders some groups marginalized and disenfranchised (Bassel, 2017). Many organizations are responsive to the loudest voices, such as well-resourced lobby groups that may not be representative. So, a key principle is avoiding the ‘politics of listening’. A key strategy for this is proactive *outreach* – seeking input from various groups and even approaching them and inviting input – rather than listening passively and being reactive.

With a culture of listening in place and politics put to the side, organizations can then establish and deploy systems, technologies, and resources for listening. Listening systems traditionally include market and social research such as customer and employee satisfaction studies, feedback forms on websites and intranets, traditional and social media monitoring, and public consultations. More advanced methods recommended for best practice include deliberative stakeholder and community engagement; customer councils, customer experience (CX) and user experience (UX) exercises; and collaborative and co-production projects. Also, specialized qualitative research methods such as participatory action research (PAR), appreciative inquiry, and techniques such as customer journey mapping can operationalize corporate listening.

Resources need to be applied to do the “work of listening” (Macnamara, 2016b). It needs to be recognized that active, open listening in organizations is work, particularly when required at scale. Resources include specialist staff and allocations of time for listening activities including the collection and analysis of input and feedback, planning responses, and reporting back.

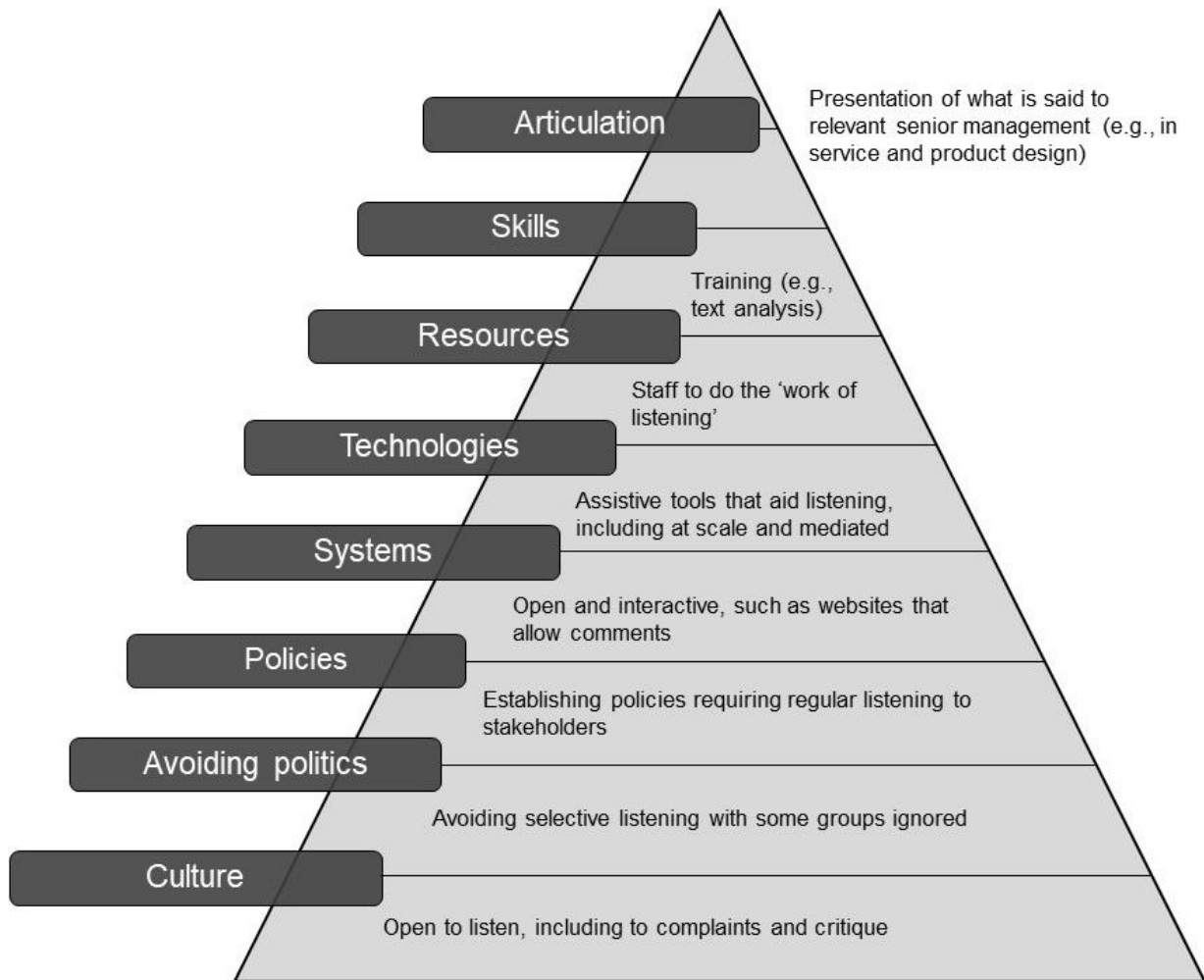
Also, when advanced systems and technologies are applied, staff involved in corporate listening need skills for listening. The skills of delegated, mediated listening at scale are quite different to the skills of disseminating information such as writing for media and producing publications. These include skills to apply the recommended methods and use the assistive technologies adopted.

As noted previously, assistive technologies for listening include online surveys, interactive media, and textual analysis applications capable of natural language processing (NLP) and with machine learning capabilities, as well as online consultation and collaboration platforms. Increasingly, listening organizations are also using voice to text (VTT) software to allow text analysis of recorded calls to call centres, *chat bots* to ‘listen’ to users of web pages and respond with relevant information, and a growing range of other artificial intelligence (AI) applications.

The use of algorithms and AI raises ethical issues that need to be carefully considered in planning and conducting corporate listening. Critical scholars warn of ethical pitfalls for organizations in ‘listening in’ as part of digital surveillance (also referred to as *dataveillance*), in capturing and using human data that breaches privacy, and in *algorithmic filtering* than can institutionalize bias (Caplan, 2018; Gillespie, 2018; Landau, 2017). Therefore, understanding of and sensitivity to ethics as it applies to contemporary listening technologies is important for those involved in managing corporate listening and advising senior management on uses of human data.

Finally, and very importantly in an ‘architecture of listening’, is that what is learned through open, ethical, delegated corporate listening needs to be articulated to senior decision makers and policy makers. Without articulation of the voice of customers, employees, and other stakeholders to senior management, their voice does not matter, as Couldry (2010) says it should. It is what Lacey (2013) calls nothing more than “noise in the ether” (2013, p. 166). Senior management usually requires short reports summarizing key findings and identifying key issues. Hence, technologies that identify patterns and trends in data, such as common complaints and pervasive concerns are important for articulation and informing organizational response.

Figure 1. Eight elements or principles of an ‘architecture of listening’ in an organization.



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In summary, corporate listening based on research into organizational listening and strategic organizational listening:

- Should be active, not merely passive;
- Should be inclusive, by stipulating that an organization should listen to all who wish to communicate with it, and vice versa, rather than selective listening or confining listening to 'audiences' that are commonly identified by an organization based on its interests;
- Incorporates interpersonal listening, but must also extend to delegated, mediated listening;
- Needs to be scaled appropriately in accordance with the number of people who seek to communicate with the organization, or with whom the organization seeks to communicate;
- Requires systems, technologies, resources, and skills to enable delegated, mediated listening;
- Must have learnings articulated to decision maker and policy maker level in order to mobilize an appropriate response.

A growing body of research confirms that active, open listening can contribute to employee and customer satisfaction, loyalty, and retention (Fanderl et al., 2016; Reed et al., 2016; Ruck et al., 2017); productive relationships with other stakeholders including increased trust (Leite, 2015; Yang, Kang & Cha, 2015); reduced crises such as the tragic 2017 Grenfell Tower fire in London that was attributed to a lack of listening by authorities (Ghelani, 2017); and provide insights of strategic value to organizations (Jenkins et al., 2013). An 18-month study of listening in three subsidiaries of a multinational corporation in Europe found that increased active listening to customers can increase customer satisfaction and retention, resulting in substantial ‘bottom line’ benefits (Macnamara, 2020).

Outlook

A recent resurgence in interest in listening in and by corporate, government, non-government, and non-profit organizations is further exploring the benefits that can be obtained for both organizations and their stakeholders. For example, Brandt (2020) has studied how corporations listen to the “voice of the consumer” (VOC). He found that, while a majority of organizations capture consumer feedback, they are not effectively analyzing, disseminating, or utilizing findings to improve products, services, and consumer experience. His study supports the exploitation of assistive technologies to aid corporate listening.

Similarly, in studying organizational change, Sahay (2021) confirmed that organizations struggle to undertake effective listening due to lack of systems, processes, structures, resources, and skill sets and joined the call for further attention to these areas.

Looking ahead, however, it is imperative that corporate listening is conducted ethically, necessitating reflexivity and training in relation to the burgeoning world of ‘ComTech’ in which data analytics, including analysis of ‘big data’, and AI are transforming practices. These are creating new opportunities that can be exploited for manipulation and malfeasance, or for improvement, innovation, and interconnection.

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