

Update

Who's listening?

Good listening practice



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PREFACE

When we started on the Listening Project, we wanted to demonstrate the importance of listening within organisations. Our first report “Who’s Listening?” was based on surveys, interviews and workshops with communication managers in Europe and workshops in London and Bahrain. It suggested that listening to employees is nothing like as central to decision making and prioritisation as many organisations may want it to be and indeed may claim it is.

The success of that report and the feedback we got from participants in our webinars and workshops has encouraged us to write this update. It is an exploration of good listening practice. With the help of the IABC Foundation we have identified good listening organisations across the globe.

When our first report was published in December 2019, no one had heard of COVID-19. As we conducted our good practice interviews, we increasingly found ourselves talking from our homes to people working from theirs. Organisations and individuals adapted to lockdown, social distancing and new ways of working in which listening will be more important than ever.

This, we believe, creates a timely update. It explores good listening practice, listening principles and tools for listening that can be applied to a rapidly changing world of work.

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Section one: context for this update





INTRODUCTION

In December 2019 IABC UK&I, Couravel and PR Academy published 'Who's Listening?' - an exploration of views about listening from communicators across the IABC EMENA region. They said listening is critical to improved performance and decision-making within organisations. Listening is more important than ever given how work and the workforce is changing, the increased focus on ethical and social purpose, employee experience and the drive to innovate. But the study suggested that one of the barriers to better listening is that organisations undervalue it and pay lip service to effective listening as a key leadership capability.

The growing use of video, social media and the explosion in the number of available channels has led to a focus on messaging, audience segmentation and channel choice. The report illustrated that leaders and communicators have lost the balance between "receive" and "transmit". The danger is that organisations forget that the heart of effective communication starts with an ability to listen closely to others in order to improve the conversation.

While the report confirmed that listening is a poor relation to messaging and broadcasting, it had not particularly explored what good listening looks like. Nor had it looked beyond IABC's European, Middle East and North African region to explore listening more globally. So, with the help of the IABC Foundation, this update sets out to identify what is good practice in listening via insights from serial winners of the IABC's International Gold Quill Awards.

To win a Gold Quill requires entrants to demonstrate that their communication planning is rooted in a thorough analysis of audiences and their needs. This analysis is often based on careful listening. Serial winners represent organisations that incorporate listening into their planning.



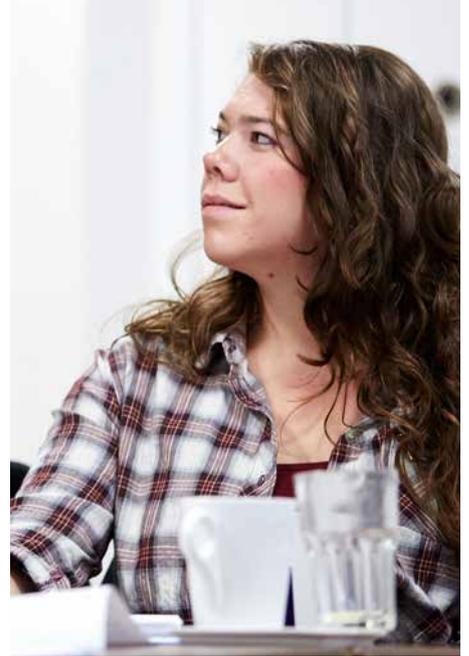
Listening is more important than ever given how work and the workforce is changing, the increased focus on ethical and social purpose, employee experience and the drive to innovate



Just as the interviews began in February 2020 the Coronavirus crisis enveloped the western world. In the space of a few weeks western economies went from hearing people talk about the disease as a distant threat to something that transformed operations and forced a move to home working. Internal communication managers became central to the way that organisations managed lockdowns, furloughed employees and organised working from home. In this environment, we argue that listening is more important than ever.

The purpose of this update to the Listening Project is twofold:

1. Report back on good practice interviews and identify core principles which can inform how leaders and communicators can listen effectively.
2. Consider how listening needs to change to respond to the impact of COVID-19 on organisations





APPROACH

To explore good practice the IABC Foundation identified a number of serial winners of the IABC Gold Quill Award and the people who had prepared the work plans that demonstrated excellence. We approached these people to ask them if they would be willing to talk about how they listen to their employees. In addition to the specific award-winning projects, the interviews explored activities outside the campaigns. They explored what these companies did as a matter of course to listen, and what they did with the insights that come from that listening.

The interviewees and their organisations that have won recognition were:

Interviewee	Organisation
Patrick Casey	The Regional Municipality of York
Jamie Colvin	Simply Connect
Susan Kun	Blue Shield of California
Jeff Pekar and Cinthia Branco	Willis Towers Watson
Danielle Bond	Aurecon
Crystal Moss and Kate Porretta	The Regional Municipality of York

In addition to these interviews this update looks at some of the practical ideas and suggestions people submitted in the 2019 Who's Listening? survey when asked about what good listening looked like in their companies and experiences.

Section two: good practice





SECTION TWO: GOOD PRACTICE

The conversations with the Gold Quill winners identified stories of great listening practices and a number of common themes that underpin good listening. This section features the stories and highlights the themes.

This update deliberately avoids the use of the term “best” practice - not to imply a diminution of the work but because what may work in one organisation may not translate to another. The stories provide ideas and inspiration, and further recognition and celebration of the work of the Gold Quill winners. The principles provide ideas, guidance and structure to help communicators think about how they can improve listening in their organisations.



The principles provide ideas, guidance and structure to help communicators think about how they can improve listening in their organisations





GOOD PRACTICE STORIES

“DRAGONS’ DEN” AT THE REGIONAL MUNICIPALITY OF YORK

The demands placed on Local Government are constantly changing. Patrick Casey, Director of Corporate Communications for the Regional Municipality of York, said that listening via the Region’s Employee Engagement Survey had identified “Support for Innovation” as an important need, and the Region’s long-term strategic plan emphasised the importance of continuous improvement.

Rather than run a traditional suggestion programme, York Region created “Get Involved, Have a Say and Make a Difference.” This was modelled on the popular TV programme Dragons’ Den in which entrepreneurs pitch business ideas to potential investors. York Region’s twist on this was to get employees to pitch business improvement ideas to a panel of their peers. It generated more than 50 ideas, of which 28 were pitched and 18 implemented.

“The subject matter experts are those close to the work,” says Patrick. “People are so creative. You have to give people a forum and hearing from them leads to more idea generation.”

Patrick and his colleagues paid particular attention to gaining the support and encouragement of the managers and leaders, while not only asking employees to contribute the ideas but also asking them to evaluate the proposals. Their short list went to a panel for consideration against the Region’s priority areas.

VIDEO NARRATIVES AT SIMPLY CONNECT

Jamie Colvin is the CEO of Simply Connect Consulting. New business mainly comes through referrals, so demonstrating results is critical for its success. Most of her clients have large front-line hourly workforces and her projects involve large scale organisational change. “Good listening creates momentum through the voice of the customer,” she says. “For leaders,

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“People are so creative. You have to give people a forum and hearing from them leads to more idea generation

Patrick Casey, Director of Corporate Communications for the Regional Municipality of York



communicators and HR functions that can mean the employee. The momentum for change comes from listening to the pain points and using the voice of the customer and the employee to provide honesty and authenticity.”

Jamie’s team put employee testimonials on film to create compelling narratives to help leaders understand the needs and perspectives within the organisations she works with. Live, experiential listening provides the empathy and understanding that helps come up with the right solutions. She describes these insights as key moments that “Pull the heart out of the organisation and put it on camera.”

“BECAUSE PEOPLE DEPEND UPON YOU” AT AURECON

Aurecon is an engineering consultancy with 5,500 people who work on major construction projects. A good health and safety record is critical for its licence to operate. “Because People Depend upon You” was a campaign designed to make Health and Safety deeply meaningful to its employees. The objective was to build self-responsibility and awareness for safety by emphasising its importance to dependents and friends.

The concept for the work came from listening to Aurecon’s health and safety people. They felt that traditional compliance-based messaging did not convince people that they should really care about safety. Danielle Bond, Aurecon’s Global Head of Brand, Marketing and Communication captured the thinking, “Young male drink drivers do not stop drink driving if they are told they will hurt themselves, but they do if you tell them they might hurt their mates!”

She explored the concept with the Health & Safety committee. “I listened a lot to these people because they really do understand the issues. They have the intelligence and insight. They highlighted that risks are not well understood, leaders are not visible in safety communications and employees do not understand the importance of reporting incidents.”

Aurecon took a deeply human approach to the work to transcend cultural attitudes and deliver directly to peoples’ core purpose - linking safety to children, spouses, partners, friends, and even pets. The execution involved Aurecon people listening to each other sharing photos, videos, posters and stories.

“When people turned on their computers, they were invited to upload a photo of someone who depended upon them,” said Danielle. “Then we created a virtual wall of the people on the Intranet - listening to our people on a digital channel. People loved this and loved telling their story. When you give people the chance to tell their story and when you show that your leaders are vulnerable, people love it. We also encouraged people to create a physical wall at work illustrating ‘My Why’”.

In support of these and in a more traditional approach Aurecon developed “My 10 Life Saving Rules” – controls that need to be in place to keep people safe during high-risk construction activities. Again, listening formed a core part of the development of these rules. “At one point we had different views on whether to adopt a quirkier creative approach or the 10 rules approach. We tested the ideas across New Zealand, Australia and Asia and the more traditional execution clearly resonated.”



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Aurecon took a deeply human approach to the work to transcend cultural attitudes and deliver directly to peoples’ core purpose - linking safety to children, spouses, partners, friends, and even pets**

As well as major shifts in the commitment to health and safety, the number of reported incidents has grown, especially in Asia - indicating not a more hazardous operation but one which recognises the importance of accurate reporting and learning from near-miss incidents.

Danielle made the point, "As we find ourselves in the middle of COVID-19, the need to care for each other is right at the heart of the message we need to get across. People depend upon each other for their safety. This is not just a rational message. The message is that if you do not behave in the correct way you are going to put the people you love, and others, in danger".

THE CHANGE CHAMPION NETWORK AT BLUE SHIELD

When health plan provider Blue Shield of California merged with the smaller Care First, maintaining productivity and retaining critical talent were business priorities. Susan Kun, change leader, believes listening was key in the process.

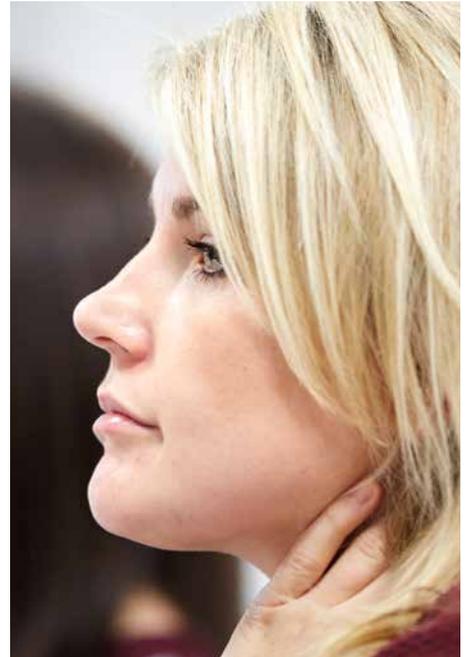
She established a change champion network to act as communicators and listeners in the process of integration. Their role was to provide an understanding of how the pace of change was landing with colleagues and identify the organisational needs. Departmental heads chose people who would speak up, give feedback and influence others.

Susan created a pulse survey to use with members of the network – rather than an organisation wide survey. She plotted hearts and minds on an emotional change curve tracking whether people were resisting, accepting or committed to change. Following Town Hall meetings, issues would be taken to the change network to act as a mini focus group.

"We created psychological safety within the network through ground rules such as whatever was said in the meeting stayed in the meeting," said Susan. "The meeting agreed what messages we would relay back and we built a great relationship and a sense of trust within the group. Although I came from Blue Shield, I sat in the Care First offices to signal the intent to integrate the businesses."

One of the benefits of the listening network was the interaction between its members and the business leaders. The exchange of views between leaders and network members provided an opportunity to check how messages from the top were being received, giving the leadership a chance to reflect on how they positioned and communicated the change. At the same time the network would let the leadership know what questions people had, what was working or not, and what expectations they had of leaders.

"Leaders make assumptions about when they should get out and talk to people on site but are often too cautious," said Susan. "My learning was to be more prescriptive and tell the leaders to 'Come now' and not to wait for transition or official announcements."



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GOOD PRACTICE PRINCIPLES AND THEMES

During the conversations people not only talked about the campaigns that had won recognition through the Gold Quill Award process but also more generally about what they thought good listening is and how they approached it in their work.

Analysis of notes from the interviews led to the development of revised themes. These are organised under good listening practice principles.

PRINCIPLE 1

Openness: good listening requires an open mind

The notes included numerous references to “being open”. Comments included:

- “Make no judgements and avoid pre-defining solutions”
- “Accept and embrace diversity; do not just listen to the loudest voices; search for the best answer; strength in numbers and diversity”
- “Ask neutral and open questions”
- “Have an open-door policy”
- “Do not scoff at ideas”

This might be the top principle. More important than listening channels or tools is a mindset that is curious and open and without that any organisation will struggle to listen effectively.



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PRINCIPLE 2

Planning: good listening is the result of thorough planning across the organisation

It might be a function of the fact that the interviewees were serial Gold Quill winners, but a second key principle concerned a thorough approach to planning listening activities. For example:

- Jeff Pekar and Cinthia Branco from Willis Towers Watson described listening as a strategy central to the communication of benefits. They emphasised the importance of planning across Internal Communication and Human Resources to manage listening effectively and the importance of measurement to link listening to engagement and wellbeing
- In discussing listening at the Municipality of York, Patrick Casey talked about listening being central to the planning of the delivery of their work with management teams working together and across functions to improve services
- Patrick's colleagues Crystal Moss and Kate Poretta emphasised the importance of understanding the purpose of their organisation and making sure that the project or campaign was clearly aligned to that purpose
- Susan Kun at Blue Shield stressed that "Planning is absolutely key" and went on to talk about the importance of prioritising and being clear about what input Blue Shield could respond to when designing her listening approach

PRINCIPLE 3

Distributed leadership: listening needs to be led at multiple levels

People talk about the leadership of listening not just in the obvious top down sense in which leaders are visible and responsive to the concerns of people, but also as a skill or practice that is woven into the way the organisation works. Some of the comments that illustrate this principle are:

- "Lead from the top, work out where to go to get the 'real' picture and walk the halls."
- "Champion listening at senior manager and departmental levels."
- "We work hard to avoid being in our own bubbles."
- "We embed listening in the business."
- "Use change champions and networks because leaders listen to them."
- "Encourage leaders to 'come now.'"
- "Need senior level champions walking the floor."

PRINCIPLE 4

Empathetic and creative feedback: good listening involves creating impactful and emotive feedback approaches

Many of the interviewees talked about highly creative approaches to feedback and how this helped listeners to hear the emotions in peoples' perspectives. Examples of this included:



Planning is absolutely key

Susan Kun, Blue Shield



People talk about the leadership of listening not just in the obvious top down sense in which leaders are visible and responsive to the concerns of people, but also as a skill or practice that is woven into the way the organisation works

- Tracking people feelings about integration at Blue Shield against the emotional change curve
- Simply Connect's video interviews to help leaders hear the experience of frontline workers and put "the heart of the organisation on camera"
- The engaging Dragons' Den approach used by the Municipality of York to innovate and improve
- The stories in the benefits communication used by Willis Towers Watson

PRINCIPLE 5

Human: good listening is rooted in an humanistic approach to communication and change

Organisations involve complex relationships between individuals with different perspectives, emotions, biases and objectives. Listening is important because it helps us to understand how the people who make up an organisation think and feel about how it is or is not working.

When Crystal Moss and Kate Porretta talk about their work it is clear that they care about their employee audience(s), are passionate about what they are trying to do, and see their role as delivering communication solutions that connect emotionally as well as logically - on a human level.

Jamie Colvin from Simply Connect enthuses about the value of sitting alongside the sales representative working in her car. It is because she realises this is the most valuable way to understand what life is like for someone doing that job. This understanding matters if Jamie's client is going to create a better business.

When Danielle Bond talks about her safety work she acknowledges the importance of creating and sharing deeply personal family stories at Aurecon because she knows that the people who work in her business care about these things. To shift behaviour she knows that this matters.

Many theorists and change managers in the past have argued that organisations respond like machines. Pull the right lever, and people will change what they do. Got a problem, then change the structure or the incentive scheme. But organisations are essentially made up of people working with each other and their suppliers, customers and other stakeholders. Listening is fundamentally about understanding how the people who operate within and with organisations think and feel in order to make their relationships and transactions more effective.

RESILIENCE: GOOD LISTENING BUILDS THE ORGANISATION'S CAPABILITY TO MANAGE CHANGE

The Who's Listening? Report identified a number of important outcomes that listening can provide: innovation, engagement, performance, wellbeing, learning and development and effective management of change. Resilience could be added to this list; one that is significant given the challenges in these Coronavirus times.

There is evidence of factors that drive resilience amongst the contributors to this study.



Listening is fundamentally about understanding how the people who operate within and with organisations think and feel in order to make their relationships and transactions more effective



Danielle Bond at Aurecon observed that the work her business had put into listening had increased its capability to manage through the crisis created by COVID-19. Creating leaders who are more tuned into employee perspectives, recognising and being explicit about what really matters and creating channels for peoples' views to be heard enabled her organisation to weather the challenges created by the crisis. Danielle conducted an online search of the latest employee comments around COVID-19. Aurecon's survey asks whether leaders demonstrate care for employees' health and safety and she found comments like: "10 out of 10 especially in this time of COVID-19;" and "Particularly noticeable in this recent Covid pandemic."

Shared purpose plays an important role in resilience. Patrick Casey at the Regional Municipality of York talked about the shared purpose their teams felt around serving the local communities, a feature that he thought contributed to their ability to listen effectively. "We are not focused on making departments better but on making the organisation better. We all have different roles but we all focus on the whole organisation. Public Health is leading but it conducts regular teleconferences on Coronavirus across the whole organisation."

Recognition and confidence also help build resilience. Jamie Colvin at Simply Connect had this to say about what a good listening company does; "It is open to new ideas," she said. "I've always believed that organisations who are very good at recognition tend to be good at listening.... a desire to celebrate good work leads to really good listening. If you really believe in the power of your people then innately it breeds the need to want to hear, to listen and then employees respond positively."

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LISTENING SPECTRUM

The first Who's Listening? Report identified different interpretations of what listening to employees meant and offered a number of different 'styles' or modes of listening. These ranged from passive to human or deep listening. The new listening spectrum below is an updated version and reflects the findings in this latest research.

	← More reactive Rational Business as usual		→ More proactive Emotive Change	
	Passive	Active	Sensitive	Deep
Approach	Single survey: monitor for general trends	Multi-channel: identify common themes and respond	Listening culture: building trust	Listening for collaboration and innovation
Objective	Monitor and map the environment to identify trends and needs	Multi-channel: identify common themes and understand what's driving opinions	Create a safe space to speak up	Listen to co-create, change ways of working and innovate
What characterises the approach	Interpret: receptive and objective listening to what employees report	Understand and respond: listening for the reasons behind opinions to generate appropriate responses	Consider seriously with emotional intelligence: attention to psychological needs and safety, listening up so that people feel free to speak up	Collaborate and innovate: listening to synthesize perspectives and come up with new insights and ways of working
Approaches and tools	Annual survey	Pulse surveys, senior manager informal listening forums (F2F and online); trending topics in internal media (sentiment analysis); suggestion schemes	Local listening champions; line manager conversations; confidential counselling; employee support lines; representative groups; communities of practice	Big conversations; conferencing; open space; appreciative inquiry; solutions groups; task forces; engagement champions; cross-functional working
What's important to improve listening	Quantitative data, benchmarks, comparisons, anonymity, samples	Quantitative and qualitative data, explanations, action planning and responses	Confidentiality, empathy, freedom to speak out	Diversity of input, openness, curiosity, equal voice

Diagram 1. The Listening Spectrum

The listening spectrum indicates how organisations can develop their listening strategies and evolve from passive and reactive approaches to more proactive, change-oriented thinking that is associated with a range of benefits such as competitive advantage, engagement, advocacy, trust, innovation, resilience, learning and wellbeing.



GOOD PRACTICE TOOLS

This section of the report summarises the tools that are used for listening to employees. Some will be more familiar than others. The intention is to provide internal communication and HR managers with a range of tools that can be considered. At the end of the section a table is included to map each tool according to suggested frequency of use, the type of analysis and reporting required, potential drawbacks and notable strengths.

ANNUAL SURVEY

Used by many organisations, the annual (or once every two years) engagement survey is a well-known and useful way to gauge the general thoughts and feelings of a large number of employees. Good practice incorporates quick analysis and action planning so that employees see that what they have said is treated seriously. Regular engagement surveys are useful for trend analysis as part of action planning. Verbatim comments in surveys should be fully analysed and developed into themes. Engagement surveys should also include questions about satisfaction with communication, including satisfaction with opportunities for voice and the way that managers listen to employees. Key drawbacks to an annual engagement survey include the time it can take to analyse all the data thoroughly and to develop trust that meaningful actions are taken. Sometimes further, qualitative, listening is useful to explore the 'why' behind the 'what' that emerges in the general situation analysis from a survey.

PULSE SURVEY

Increasingly used in organisations, pulse surveys provide a good way to check what employees are thinking or feeling on a more regular basis than an annual engagement survey. They are usually shorter than an annual survey and are therefore quicker to analyse which can result in more immediate consideration and action than annual surveys. As the number of respondents is often less than in annual surveys, some caution needs to be given to comparing data with previous surveys. Pulse surveys can also be used for specific projects, such as consulting with employees on a range of options being considered for a proposed change.



Good practice incorporates quick analysis and action planning so that employees see that what they have said is treated seriously

INTERNAL DIGITAL PLATFORM AND ONLINE CHAT

Interaction and participation levels, posts, comments and likes on internal digital platforms (such as MS Teams, Workplace by Facebook and Yammer) provide rich and varied data that can be reviewed using quantitative and qualitative analysis. For example, the volume of posts on a discussion or blog, compared to other discussions or blogs, can be an illustration of how interested employees are in a specific topic. The actual comments can be analysed using sentiment analysis techniques (for example, how positive or negative they are) and they can also be categorised using cluster techniques that are developed into themes that can be used to produce deeper insights into employee thoughts and feelings. As with all qualitative analysis, care should be taken to avoid any impression that themes identified are representative of the whole organisation as they will usually be based on small samples of employees.

SENIOR MANAGER LISTENING EVENT

Listening events involving senior managers are increasingly being used by organisations. They typically take place in an informal work setting and involve small groups of employees (less than twenty). Formats vary, but generally there is no set agenda, no formal presentations, and employees can raise anything they like. Explaining the purpose of the event is important so that employees understand that they are safe environments where managers listen, but cannot always provide quick fix solutions. Senior managers should approach them with an open mind and be prepared to listen more than talk. Senior managers should also be empathetic to points that are raised, acknowledging that employees may feel strongly about issues, and commit to serious consideration and potential action on issues that are commonly raised. Senior managers should also ensure that it is a safe environment so that employees trust the process. Done well, these events can lead to more 'adult to adult' conversations and build trust in the leader and the organisation.



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LINE MANAGER/SUPERVISOR/TEAM LISTENING

Listening at a line manager or supervisor level works best when it is embedded into regular team meetings. It is, naturally, more focused on discussions about team work and related to local process improvement. It is heavily reliant on managers and supervisors adopting an open-minded approach to listening to a wide range of suggestions and ideas. Organisations also need to have effective processes for considering and exploring suggestions for improvements that line managers or supervisors can use.

FOCUS GROUPS (FACE TO FACE)

These are typically informal and in small groups (at least 6 people and no more than 15 people). An important aspect of a focus group is that it incorporates multiple voices that provide a richer understanding than even the most knowledgeable single voice. Focus groups often form part of a larger quantitative survey (such as an engagement survey) to provide qualitative and interpretative data. They may run during or after quantitative data collection. Confidentiality of what is said is critical. Focus groups can also be used to explore specific topics (for example, values, relocation,



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people policies) to inform planning. Focus groups are generally around 60-90 minutes. Notes are typically taken, with permission of participants, but do not identify participants. An alternative approach is for focus groups to be audio recorded and then transcribed (again with permission and notes that do not identify participants). Typically, 6-8 focus groups are run before writing a report to summarise the themes. An independent facilitator makes it easier for people to speak up and reduces the risk of biased interpretation.

FOCUS GROUPS (ONLINE)

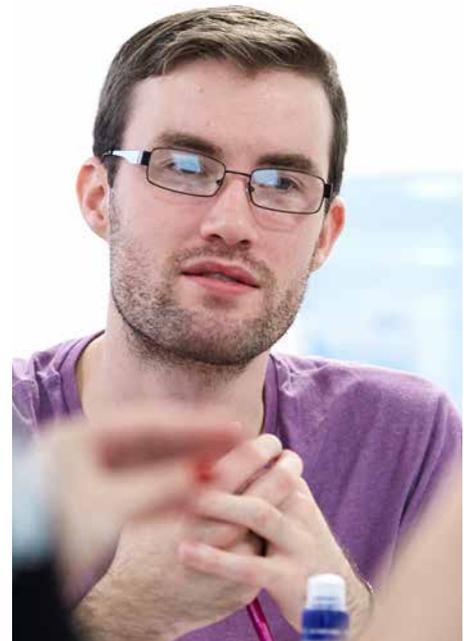
The same process applies as for face to face focus groups, but in this case they are run using MS Teams, Zoom, Skype for Business or similar systems. As for face to face focus groups, confidentiality of what is said is critical. Online focus groups are more difficult to facilitate as it is harder to encourage contributions, manage dominant voices and to keep a close eye on the body language of participants. Advantages of online focus groups are the ease with which they can be developed to widen participation across locations and functions, the potential for automatic recording and semantic analysis of what is said.

SUGGESTION SCHEMES

Suggestion schemes have been around for many decades and they are usually associated with developing new products or services or reducing costs. Good practice is based on transparency of the decision-making process, the involvement of employees in the evaluation and implementation of their ideas and establishing a collaborative environment where suggestions can be seriously considered.

INTERVIEWS

Interviews that are conducted to explore points in more depth are usually designed as semi-structured interviews. They can be conducted face to face (usually in a closed office) or virtually. Confidentiality must be assured for interviewees and all interviews should be recorded and transcribed in full. If the interviews are conducted in English and the interviewee's first language is not English, then care should be given to any potential misunderstandings. Semi-structured interviews include a list of questions on fairly specific topics developed into an interview guide. However, the interviewee is given leeway in how to reply (unlike in more structured interviews). Questions may not always follow the interview guide and may be added within the conversation as the interviewer responds to what is said. The interview process therefore incorporates a degree of flexibility. This aids the listening process for the interviewer and enables detailed coding of the data. Gaining trust is often dependent on non-verbal cues, such as eye contact or facial expressions and therefore interviews should be conducted face to face whenever possible. Interviews usually take between 30 and 60 minutes to conduct and, if recorded, the interviewer can focus on the dynamic of the conversation rather than note-taking. Transcriptions enable closer analysis of what was said. However, transcribing interviews can be either time consuming (if done yourself) or costly (if done for you).



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INTERNAL CHAMPIONS

Listening 'champions' are people who volunteer to gather views, issues and concerns from colleagues which are fed into the listening process. This is an informal role. However, responsibilities should be made clear from the start and will often include a set expectation of the amount of time a 'champion' will spend as part of their overall role. These include honouring the confidentiality of what is said and not favouring comments about some points over others. The key benefit of having 'listening champions' is that they may pick up issues that employees might not raise with managers for fear of retribution. A 'listening champion' should be trusted and respected by colleagues and seen as a 'go to' person.

COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

Communities of practice (COPs) are groups of employees who share the same interests and meet to develop learning from each other's experiences. COPs can either have formal rules and procedures or they can be completely informal. Listening is more of a cross-organisational process, focused on specific areas of professional practice. Organisations need to have processes in place for concerns, ideas and suggestions emanating from COPs to be considered seriously.

EMPLOYEE RESOURCE GROUPS

Employee resource groups (ERGs) are increasingly used to provide certain groups of employees with a voice in their organisations. ERGs are groups of employees who join together in their workplace based on shared characteristics or life experiences. They provide support and enhance career development, ensuring the perspectives of certain groups are included in the design of the work environment and in policy development. ERGs have traditionally been focused on characteristics for under-represented groups, for example women, sexual orientation, gender, age, disabilities etc.

OPEN SPACE

Open Space is a listening method for organising and running a meeting or multi-day event, where participants have been invited in order to focus on a specific, important task or purpose. In contrast with pre-planned conferences where speakers are scheduled in advance, and people tend to come to listen, Open Space sources participants once they are physically present at meeting. In this sense Open Space is participant-driven and less organiser-driven. Pre-planning remains essential; you simply need much less pre-planning.

The meeting focuses on the agreed issue or problem and participants pitch to host conversations on a particular theme. People vote on which conversations they want to attend and the group devises its own agenda. In the meetings the themes are explored by the participants so the whole session is based on listening and collaborating together. At the end of each Open Space meeting, a debriefing document is created summarising what worked and what did not work so the process can go more smoothly if repeated.

The listening project of which this report is part originated in an Open Space event held in Copenhagen in 2018. Although less pre-planning is needed it still remains essential.



The key benefit of having 'listening champions' is that they may pick up issues that employees might not raise with managers for fear of retribution



WORLD CAFÉ

A world café is a structured conversational process for knowledge sharing in which groups of people discuss a topic at several small tables like those in a café. The intention is to create an informal ambience encouraging people to talk and listen. Typically, cafés provide the opportunity to explore strategic challenges and opportunities, generate ideas, share knowledge and deepen relationships. Some degree of formality may be retained to make sure that everyone gets a chance to speak. Although pre-defined questions may have been agreed upon at the beginning, outcomes or solutions are not decided in advance. Participants move between tables and continue discussion in response to a set of pre-determined questions. The assumption is that collective discussion and listening can shift people's conceptions and encourage collective action. Events tend to have at least twelve participants, but there is no upper limit and cafés have involved as many as 1,000 participants.

GRAFFITI WALLS

Graffiti walls provide spaces for people to record ideas, suggestions, comments, questions, pictures, images or issues in a space open to all employees but not normally visible to external stakeholders. The technique encourages people to build on others input and ideas and is not normally anonymous. People are encouraged to take ownership of their feedback. Walls can stay up for a number of weeks but will often change focus so that, for example, a team leading change work within a business can invite ideas and comments on different aspects of the work that they are doing. The wall provides a way of collecting feedback in an open forum. A typical use would be a wall for people to ask questions in advance of a major conference or event enabling people to see each other's questions and to group and develop themes.

SOLUTION GROUPS/HOT SPOTS

Solution groups or hot spots are employee-led task forces in which teams listen to their colleagues in order to develop better ways of working. The essence of the process is to commence with an open listening session in which a group of employees discuss ideal and actual working arrangements. The group develops an approach to collect further input from amongst their colleagues driven by the factors they identify. A locally appointed and supported influencer leads the process to develop recommendations to put to local managers. The approach is a classic structure for developing responses to survey results and places the emphasis on "bottom up" listening and action. Critical success factors include a support team to monitor the process across a number of hot spots and assist with meeting design and facilitation if required, and local managers who are prepared to listen without prejudice.

ENGAGEMENT CAFÉS

The Engagement Café is a particular form of Knowledge Café – a conversational process that brings a group of people together to share experiences, learn from each other, build relationships and make a better sense of a rapidly changing, complex, less predictable world to improve decision making, innovation and the ways in which people work together.



Typically, cafés provide the opportunity to explore strategic challenges and opportunities, generate ideas, share knowledge and deepen relationships



The assumption is that collective discussion and listening can shift people's conceptions and encourage collective action



Solution groups or hot spots are employee-led task forces in which teams listen to their colleagues in order to develop better ways of working



The engagement café is focused on those factors that influence performance and motivation and brings together a group of people to better understand the issue in the context of their organisation. At its best it is a powerful sense-making tool that can lead to insights and action. It is most powerful if it includes people from different roles and levels within the organisation.

The aim of the café is to surface the group's collective knowledge; learn from each other; share ideas and insights; gain a deeper understanding of a topic and the issues involved and explore possibilities. It can also be used to help connect people, improve interpersonal relationships, break down organisational silos, and improve trust and engagement. Cafes typically involve 12 – 24 participants, who rotate two to three times in order to discuss the same question before meeting in plenary to discuss insights.

EMPLOYEE SUPPORT SERVICES/COUNSELLING

Employee support and counselling services often form part of wider Employee Assistance Programmes (EAP) - an employer funded benefit that offers employees confidential counselling and advice on a wide range of work and personal issues.

Depending upon the need, support lines may help on a fairly practical basis to inform and support people who need help navigating specific benefits, people or HR administration questions. And for employees in stressful situations, for example facing mental health issues including depression or isolation, support lines and counselling may provide listening in its purest sense where the act of listening itself helps support the employee. For many people facing difficult situations, it can be difficult to find someone to talk to in order to share the concerns that they face. A professionally trained support worker, mental health advisor or counsellor can provide a listening service that offers important help. This support is not focused on providing answers or solutions but is focused on providing an outlet to encourage and help people talk about their feelings. It can provide an essential service to improve health and wellbeing, and may also help to signpost additional support available.

	Annual survey	Pulse survey (general)	Pulse survey (specific)	Internal digital platform posts and comments	Online forums/chat
Analysis	Primarily quantitative	Primarily quantitative	Primarily quantitative	Qualitative (sentiment and thematic analysis)	Qualitative (sentiment and thematic analysis)
Frequency	Annual	At least quarterly	At least quarterly	Monthly analysis	At least quarterly
Reporting and responding	Trends, themes, proposed immediate and long- term actions and plan for review of actions	Themes and proposed immediate actions	Analysis of preferred options for a specific topic - used for decision making	Themes and responses from relevant managers	Summary of points raised with responses and/or proposed actions
Benefits	Good for trend analysis with previous years	Quick and easy to do. Good for contemporary trend analysis	Quick and easy to do. Good for informed decision making	Easily accessible data. Good for getting a feel for what some employees think and feel on specific topics	Easily accessible data. Good for greater understanding of important issues
Drawbacks	Reports can take some time to be completed and there can be a lag before actions result	A low number of respondents may mean that confidence intervals for results are quite large	A low number of respondents may mean that confidence intervals for results are quite large	Limited to people who are comfortable in speaking up on platforms	Limited to people who are comfortable in speaking up online

	Senior manager listening event (F2F)	Line manager/team listening (F2F)	Focus group (F2F)	Focus group (virtual)	Interviews
Analysis	Qualitative (sentiment and thematic analysis)	Primarily qualitative			
Frequency	At least quarterly	Weekly	At least quarterly	At least quarterly (if appropriate to organisation)	Ad hoc
Reporting and responding	Summary of points discussed with responses and/or proposed actions	Summary of points discussed with responses and/or proposed actions	Notes recorded of points discussed which are then synthesised for a number of focus groups to develop a report	Notes recorded of points discussed which are then synthesised for a number of focus groups to develop a report	Notes recorded of points discussed; synthesised
Benefits	Raises level of senior manager visibility. Good for input on important organisational topics	Good for input into local team/work topics	Good for generating deeper understanding of what employees think and feel	Good for generating deeper understanding of what employees think and feel. Automation can be used for sentiment analysis	Identifies what key individuals think and feel
Drawbacks	Requires trust in the manager and the process. Also dependant on the attitude towards listening of the manager	Requires trust in the manager and the process. Also dependant on the attitude towards listening of the manager	Time consuming to organise. Notetaking can be laborious	Limited to people who are comfortable in speaking up on platforms	Time consuming to organise. Notetaking can be laborious

	Internal champions, influencer networks	Graffiti walls	Employee support lines	Counselling	Mental health; support networks
Analysis	Primarily qualitative	Primarily qualitative (quantitative analysis of common themes)	Primarily qualitative (can include quantitative)	Qualitative	Qualitative
Frequency	Ongoing	Continuous	Continuous	Continuous	Continuous
Reporting and responding	Champions self-report; often comprise focus groups	Themes identified	Periodic analysis of common themes; trends	Counsellors may report on trends; individual content confidential	Periodic analysis of common themes; trends
Benefits	Good for checking impact of messages and identifying needs	Generates both insights into perspectives and ideas	Valuable feedback for HR related communications	Insights into nature and levels of stress	Insights into levels of stress
Drawbacks	Difficult to identify champions; low levels of control	Limited by who wants to contribute	Difficult to generalise lessons for organisation	May be difficult to generalise	May be difficult to generalise

	Engagement cafes	Staff networks; communities of practice	Open space	World Café
Analysis	Action research; real time analysis	Primarily qualitative	Action research; real time analysis	Action research; real time analysis
Frequency	Based on local needs	Monthly	Ad hoc	Ad hoc
Reporting and responding	Process managers may record key points, lessons and actions	Practice leads identify themes	Process managers may record key points, lessons and actions	Process managers may record key points, lessons and actions
Benefits	Deep insights on themes explored	Provides opportunity for deep engagement	Generates energy and momentum behind the issues that concern people	Flexible format for large group listening
Drawbacks	Benefits focused on participants	Prone to bias	Requires trust in the process. Dependent on a good facilitator	Requires trust in the process. Dependent on a good facilitator



Section three: the impact of COVID-19





THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was first identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, the capital of China's Hubei province, and has since spread globally. As of June 2 2020, more than 6.5 million cases have been reported across 213 countries and territories, resulting in over 382,000 deaths.

To protect the health of their citizens most governments closed down public places (including non-essential workplaces) and introduced social distancing policies in February and March 2020. This has forced dramatic and rapid shifts in the way people work, and has affected workers in very different ways.

For many employees COVID-19 has led to remote and online working, which involves social isolation and the sudden acceleration in the use of online communication tools. For others the shift has led to a lack of work and compulsory furloughing. For yet others in essential services including health and distribution, where working from home is not an option, it has increased workloads. More than this; it has put front line health and care workers in real danger calling for reserves of courage and dedication that has attracted the admiration and gratitude of the rest of the community.

The impact on individual organisations and the economies within which they work will emerge over time. COVID-19 represents the biggest economic shock since at least the second world war. At the time of writing it is uncertain how deep and long-lasting these changes may be. It is likely that this crisis will lead to a substantial change in the way many people work in the longer term.

In addition to the impact on livelihoods, COVID-19 also threatens the health of people, their families, communities and colleagues. People are fearful and anxious about getting the disease or hearing that others they know have become ill.



COVID-19 represents the biggest economic shock since at least the second world war



These changes have significant implications for organisational listening. It is difficult to know what will emerge over the coming months and years, and the impact of change on individuals will differ greatly. However, some of the significant consequences are likely to be:

- For those working from home, social relationships have been disrupted and the camaraderie of working in a team and in close proximity to others has gone. These social relationships meet one of the major needs we have as human beings. Employees need to find different ways to listen and connect using different routines to replace the water cooler conversations and regular human contact
- It is more difficult to know what information people need when they are isolated from the main workplace. Any global or national multi-site operation faces this challenge. But the scale and complexity of finding the answers has grown because workforces are currently more dispersed. Long-term working patterns are likely to change following this crisis as more organisations appreciate the feasibility and benefits from more flexible working patterns. Communicators still need to support central and local leaders so that they stay informed of information needs, but the challenges inherent in providing effective support may have grown considerably
- It is more challenging to develop ways to ensure that people have a voice in terms of how work is done at a local level. While people often gain autonomy over how they manage their work by working remotely, which in itself can be motivating, they risk losing a sense of common purpose and goals which is also important
- It may be more difficult to show that the leadership of the business cares about and values its people through listening to their concerns
- It places new demands on all individuals to develop online listening skills. Attending virtual meetings requires new skills for leaders, managers and team members. People need to become more attentive, avoid multi-tasking, ask more questions about how people are feeling, and avoid talking over each other
- But, in addition to these challenges, the shift also provides a catalyst to explore new opportunities that technology creates to enhance how we listen to each other.

COVID-19 has changed the way we work with implications for how we listen:

- Organisations need to create more opportunities for passive listening which is important to keep a “finger on the pulse” of how people are thinking and feeling in the absence of everyday face to face exchanges
- Active listening provides an important opportunity for leaders to demonstrate that they are aware of and responsive to the needs of their people, confirming that leadership cares and strengthening relationships with people
- Sensitive listening gives people the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling, and employers need to provide emotional support and be alive to the greater risks to the mental health of their employees, especially for those exposed to the danger of infection

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It is difficult to know what will emerge over the coming months and years, and the impact of change on individuals will differ greatly



- Deep listening is more difficult in the absence of face to face contact and perhaps requires the greatest shift in to make this style of listening work online

It is difficult to forecast with any certainty how much long-term difference the COVID-19 crisis will have on the way we work and therefore the way we need to listen. However, we believe this crisis marks an inflection point for how organisations need to listen to their people in the following respects:



- As in any major recessionary cycle the organisations and leaders that listen to, engage with and treat their people well will emerge stronger. They are more likely to retain the loyalty of the people who stay, the goodwill of those who leave and their reputation in the marketplace



- The wellbeing of people has emerged as a top priority. Leaders will be judged on how they have responded and the “new normal” will include the expectation that leaders listen to and care for their people as critical stakeholders in the enterprise



- The listening styles of sensitive and deep listening on the right-hand side of our spectrum will be more important to sustain organisations through this change



- COVID-19 has acted as an accelerator; businesses have experimented and found that online tools can be efficient and effective. Online listening and collaboration will become part of the normal way of working in the majority of organisations



- Listening has and will continue to grow in importance to help connect people to their organisations and each other as organisations develop more hybrid and flexible ways of working.





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