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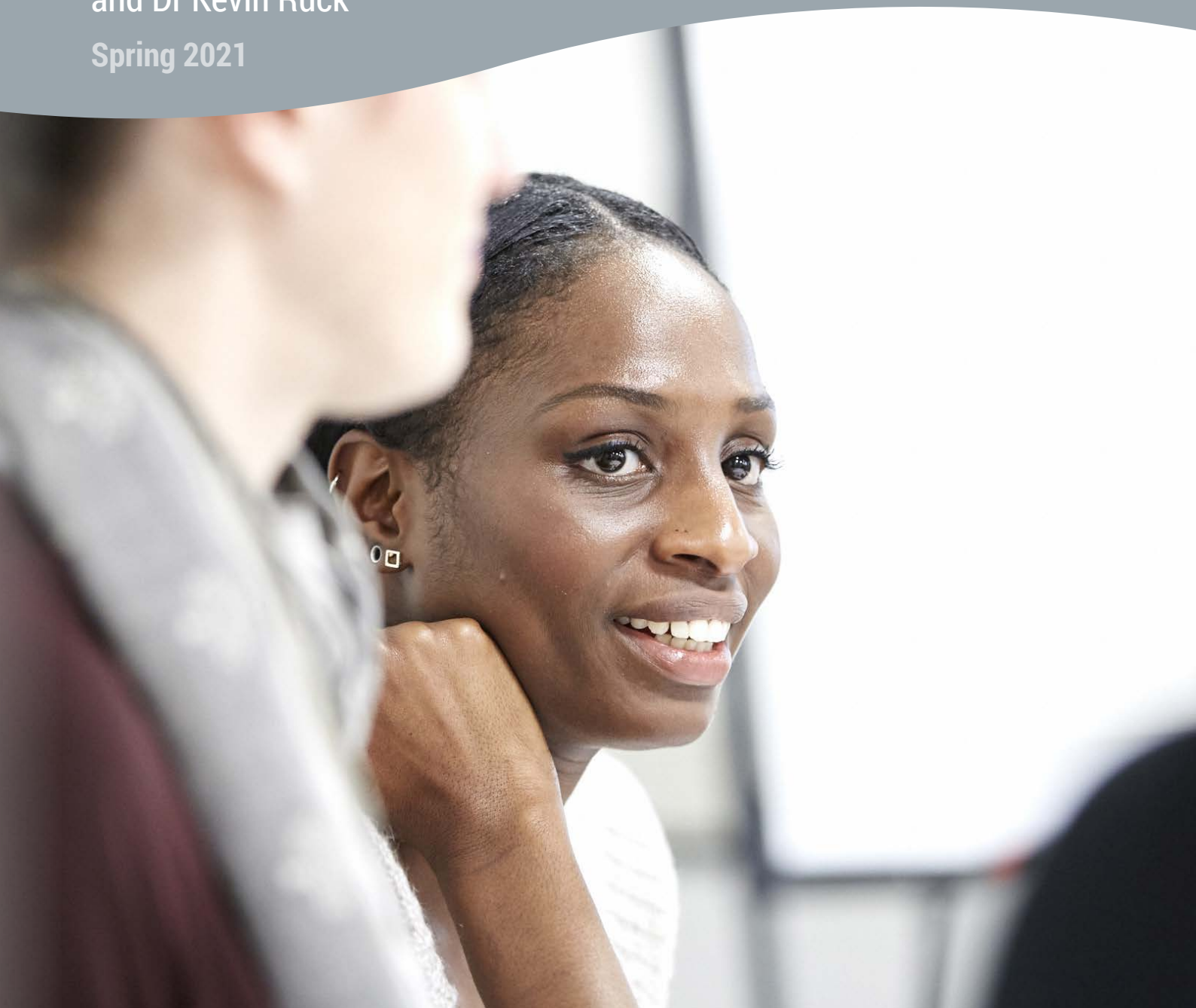
Who's listening?

From Measurement to Meaning



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and Dr Kevin Ruck

Spring 2021





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PREFACE

The Listening Project, and this third 'Who's Listening?' report, is about how organisations listen to their employees. It is not about listening as an interpersonal communication skill. We are not suggesting this is not important, it is just that our focus is on helping organisations to get the maximum benefits from listening to their people. Individual listening skills play a part in this, but we are concerned with the practices, processes and outcomes that distinguish great listening within organisations.

Our previous reports explored a number of issues about why and how organisations listen to their people, and we highlighted practices from businesses with a track record of listening excellence. We identified core themes around listening processes, psychological safety and social justice, and principles that underpin good listening.

Now, we have extended our research to gather input from organisations across the world delving deeper not just into how organisations listen but also to the outcomes they achieve as a result of the way they listen.

This report explores the findings and the implications. Our thanks go to more than 500 participants who mostly work in or with large organisations. They represent every region with a majority in the UK. Their responses provided hard data and extensive written comments that provide the backbone to support the insights reported here. (See the appendix for a breakdown of the respondents.)

We conducted this work during the COVID pandemic. Organisations were forced into rapidly adopting new working practices during this period of great uncertainty. It meant businesses needed to provide regular information on progress, and it also increased the need to listen to how people were coping. While this has flavoured the feedback, we think the insights are timeless. The data provides some hard-hitting conclusions about the need for many organisations to rethink how they listen if they want to improve the way they manage change and develop new working practices.

Howard Kraiss, Mike Pounsford and Dr Kevin Ruck



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Listening to employees is going to be critical to navigate change in the post-Covid environment. Leaders need to create cultures in which employees' voices are valued, encourage all managers to listen and communication managers need to develop more qualitative and digitally enabled processes to aid listening.

These conclusions are based on the views of more than 500 professional communication managers and advisors across the globe, collected in late 2020. In summary:

- Respondents are generally very positive about how their organisations listen to employees, but not so positive about actions that will deliver effective listening – we “say” but don’t “do”
- Listening provides many benefits, but the management of change and generating ideas for improving how we work are the outcomes most strongly associated with listening
- Organisations that listen also feel fairer to work in – an increasingly important differentiator in the world of work
- Identifying risks (by creating psychological safety so people can speak up) is not perceived as an important benefit of listening, which might be an important omission
- Organisations rely heavily on employee surveys to listen and undervalue the insights and value that can be delivered through more free ranging discussion and conversational approaches
- Digital listening channels have huge potential but their use is limited
- Leaders are critical – more critical than line managers – to create organisations that get the most from listening. Developing listening skills, planning to listen throughout the organisation and responding promptly to employees' perspectives represent key opportunities to improve a wide range of beneficial outcomes for organisations

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Leaders need to create cultures in which employees' voices are valued



INTRODUCTION

This is the third in a series of reports and other activities that make up the Listening Project – an exploration of how organisations listen.

Our goals are to:

- **Generate insights** into how and why we listen in organisations
- **Challenge thinking** and enrich understanding of how organisations can listen more effectively
- **Provide practical hints** and tips on how to improve listening

In previous reports we suggested that one of the barriers to listening is that organisations undervalue it and pay lip service to effective listening as a key leadership capability. We also explored what companies that listen well do, and highlighted a number of principles. These included, for example, the importance of planning listening into regular communication processes and ensuring leadership adopted an open mind to feedback from employees.

At the end of 2020, following an enthusiastic response to our initial findings at the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC) World Conference and encouragement from participants at workshops and seminars in the UK and online, we launched a major global survey. The intention was to validate the work to date and extend the enquiry to both a broader range of issues and to include a much larger population. With the help of the IABC Foundation we received responses from more than 500 participants including in-depth written responses to a series of open questions about how people managed listening and the benefits they enjoyed as a result.

As you will see our respondents are, for the most part, positive about the way organisations listen to employees. Many respondents are communication or HR managers responsible for listening processes. Clearly this group know why and how organisations listen. But they may also be susceptible to a positive bias so we've explored how the group report organisational outcomes and correlated this with listening processes.

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We received responses from more than 500 participants including in-depth written responses to a series of open questions about how people managed listening and the benefits they enjoyed as a result.

This exposes for the first time how key associations such as listening and change management are related. We have also read through every one of nearly 1,000 open comments to look beyond the numbers at the patterns and insights that qualitative data provides.

There is a certain irony to adopting a survey as the approach to explore listening. Some vocal critics see the “employee survey industry” as the antithesis of good listening. The constant cycle of questionnaires appearing, to some, to meet a management need to count opinions rather than an employee’s need to feel that their opinion counts. Despite the growth in new digital tools, the results of this study clearly illustrate that surveys still dominate the way organisations listen.

In our analysis of the detailed written responses from participants we have tried to illustrate how analysing open comments in surveys can provide explanations and meaning behind and beyond the numbers. Our data shows that the willingness to listen and respond, and the role of leadership, drives good listening. Surveys can help measure and compare, but good listening also involves making meaning through exchange, conversation and dialogue.

There are many good reasons why organisations should listen to their people. Leaders need to know what is going on in their business to expose potential risks. Marketing, quality and customer service experts gain insights from those in regular contact with customers. Communication and HR professionals see listening as a key driver of employee engagement and the employee experience. Employees themselves want to feel that they have a voice.

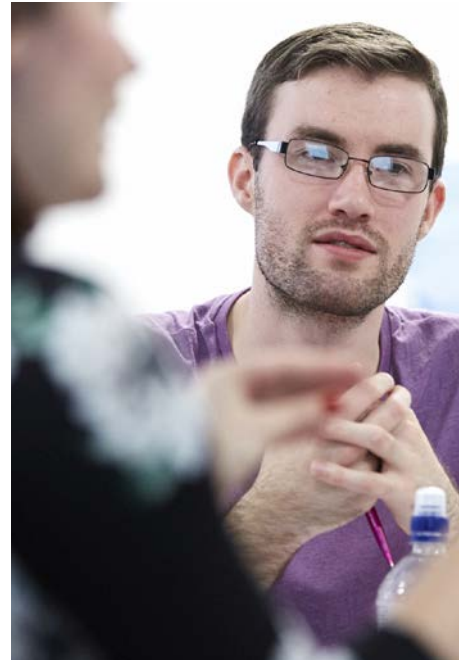
Respondents were very positive in their views about listening in their organisations. For example:

- **81 percent** agreed that their organisation is willing to listen to what employees say
- **73 percent** thought that their organisation takes what employees say seriously
- **66 percent** agreed that senior managers in their organisation respond to what employees say
- **66 percent** agreed that line managers/supervisors respond to what employees say

Note: percentages are strongly agree and agree responses combined.

These results are encouraging. In the section on Leadership Listening below we drill down into more detailed findings that suggest organisations are more positive about listening in principle than practice.

The following sections focus on our key findings and the final section discusses their implications.



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This exposes for the first time how key associations such as listening and change management are related.”



LISTENING IS KEY TO THE EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE AND INNOVATION IN WAYS OF WORKING

We wanted the survey to pinpoint specific benefits.

To do so this report highlights:

1. Open comments about the benefits enjoyed as a result of listening to employees – **Table One**
2. Correlations between listening and a range of desirable outcomes – **Table Two***
3. Listening principles associated with managing change – **Table Three**
4. How those who thought they used data from listening to employees to improve performance ('performers') differed from those who did not ('non-performers') – **Figure One**

The following themes stand out:

1. Listening to employees is strongly associated with managing change, innovation and the development of more effective working practices
2. Listening to employees is strongly associated with fairness in the workplace

*Correlations in this report are all statistically significant. We have focused primarily on reporting correlations that are above 0.3 as notable associations between listening and a range of beneficial organisational outcomes. Correlations are not causations and where reported they should not be interpreted as such.

MANAGING CHANGE EFFECTIVELY

Tables One and **Two** and **Figure One** highlight the connection between listening and managing change effectively. Related outcomes such as “responding well to changing situations” and “adapting quickly to unexpected new demands” also showed strong associations across a range of listening practices.

To be clear, this data provides statistically significant evidence that listening to employees is most strongly associated with generating ideas to improve how we work effectively and managing change effectively.

This is the first study we are aware of that provides compelling and robust evidence of why listening to employees matters in hard performance terms. The clear implications are that if innovation and effective change management are outcomes an organisation seeks, then listening to employees is critical to achieving those goals.

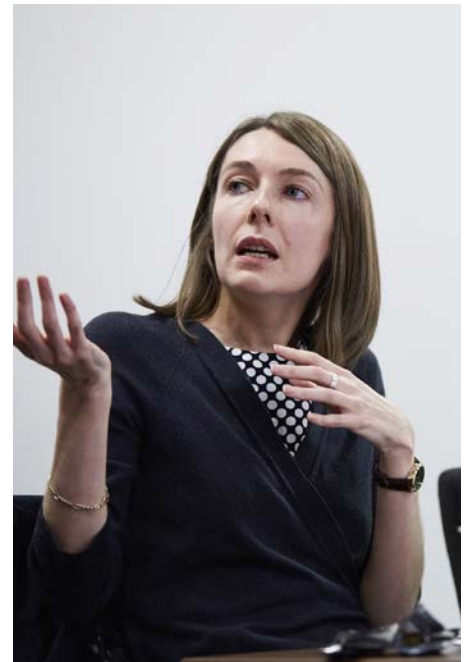
Table Three digs deeper and summarises the strength of the relationship between different aspects of listening and managing change effectively (a correlation above 0.3 is notable). It provides a snapshot of what to do if managing change is an outcome that matters. It suggests that cultural factors (e.g., valuing opinions, open mindset) as well as practical actions (e.g., prompt response to feedback and planning to listen) are important. The role of leaders is also significant – a theme we will return to later in this report.

Companies have been going through significant change before and during COVID and these insights provide critical pointers for how listening to employees can be incorporated into further changes after we emerge from the pandemic.

GENERATING IDEAS TO IMPROVE HOW WE WORK

Tables One and **Two** highlight how important listening is to generate ideas and innovation. Furthermore, we explored how the “performers” (people who agreed that they used data from listening to employees to improve performance) differed in their responses from the “non-performers” group (people who disagreed that they used data from listening to employees to improve performance) – see **Figure One**. Again, the stand out difference is generating good ideas to work more effectively.

What this data suggests is that one of the most important tangible benefits of listening to employees is generating good ideas to improve work effectiveness. Or, putting it another way, one of the best ways for organisations to improve is by involving and asking employees for their ideas.



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Let me say generically that demonstrating to anyone that you listen to them shows that you believe they are someone of value - and to me that is, fundamentally, what everyone wants to hear. Get that right in a business and people will run through walls for you.

Source: Survey Respondent

“

Most of our best ideas come from employees.

Source: Survey Respondent

Table One – ten benefits enjoyed as a result of listening to employees; highlighted in open comments in the survey

Themes	Illustrative comments
More engagement, trust, motivation	"More and better engaged staff; Engaged employees; Greater motivation; Motivated and engaged employees; Engagement; More motivated staff; Good engagement levels; Building trust, sense of leadership transparency, improving employer brand"
New ideas, innovation	"We receive better ideas from casting the widest net; Innovation in process and development of product; Diversity of views and advice shared effectively; By inviting a diverse range of perspectives from our employees, we get some inspiring and innovative thinking on how we can change for the better"
Higher performance (retention, productivity, reputation)	"Improved performance, reduced absenteeism and employee turnover; Productivity, high morale; High retention; High levels of job satisfaction and a desire to stay with the organisation; Improving productivity, agile processes; Improved retention, and a reputation as a top employer"
Better insight and understanding	"Reality check; We can understand the success of various strategic initiatives by obtaining frank feedback and learn and improve for the future; Issues identification; We understand the aspects that need attention in terms of ways of working"
More flexible and adaptive	"We remain flexible and adaptable to situations as we change; By listening to employees, we are able to pivot more quickly to address needs in our business; You can respond to what people want/need to be able to do their job more effectively"
Alignment (buy-in, ownership)	"You get a greater sense of the company working as a team; and feel closer to the decision making; Support to meet targets; Mostly a sense check and confirmation of the alignment of employee behaviours and attitudes with the organisational values"
Better appreciation of customer needs; improved customer service	"Better services as the front-line colleagues can speak about customer care, which they know plenty about, rather than hearing from the head office leaders who aren't at the coal face; Improved customer service; Customer insights, feedback on new products/initiatives, sentiment from 'shop floor'"
More effective communication	"More empathetic messaging in communication plans; Better content and direction by involving IT developers in framing the message; Developing communications that address employees' concerns"
Better understanding of employees' needs	"Tailor the programs we offer through our Total Rewards program; Understand the needs of employees in terms of career development and wellness; We understand the employee experience and can shape our actions based on their experiences"
Organisation cares; leadership values people	"Employees feel heard and that the organisation cares; The organisation has fostered a workforce mindset of the organisation cares about me; Greater respect for each other. Being more compassionate; Colleagues feeling valued and cared about by leadership"

Table Two – outcomes that are most strongly associated with listening practices

Table Two ranks nine organisational outcomes that listening can deliver. These are ranked by the strength of association between each outcome and a range of 14 different listening principles. The table also shows which particular principle was correlated most strongly with each outcome. The final column highlights how much respondents agreed that each outcome described their organisation.

Outcome	Average strength of correlation for 14 listening practices (> 0.3 is notable)	Listening principle with strongest correlation	Combined agree and strongly agree results for the outcome
1. Treats everyone fairly	0.43	Open mindset when listening to employee feedback	61%
2. Manages change effectively	0.41	Ensures senior leaders are effective listeners	56%
3. Generates good ideas on how to work effectively	0.40	Encourages a culture that values employee voice	66%
4. Cares about diversity	0.39	Encourages a culture that values employee voice	77%
5. Responds well to changing situations	0.36	Open mindset when listening to employee feedback	72%
6. Adapts quickly to unexpected new demands	0.32	Open mindset when listening to employee feedback	69%
7. Creates innovative new products and services	0.31	Encourages a culture that values employee voice	63%
8. Identifies risks	0.29	Open mindset when listening to employee feedback	79%
9. Focused on improving customer service	0.27	Open mindset when listening to employee feedback	84%

Figure One – how those who use data from listening to employees to drive operational performance differ from those who do not

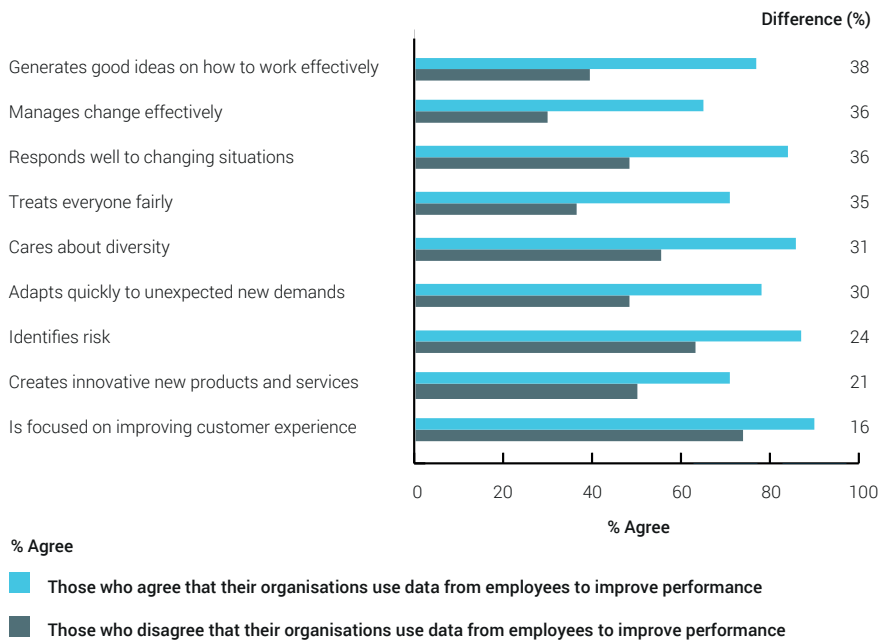


Table Three – listening principles associated with managing change effectively

Statements that describe my organisation	Correlations
Ensures senior leaders are effective listeners	0.48
Has an open mindset when listening to employee feedback	0.47
Plans carefully to ensure listening happens throughout the organisation	0.45
Values people's opinions regardless of role	0.44
Responds promptly to feedback	0.43
Encourages a culture that values employee voice	0.42
Ensures line managers/supervisors are effective listeners	0.42
Recognises the need for diverse voices to inform decisions	0.33

TREATING PEOPLE FAIRLY

During our interviews for our first report, we detected a theme of “social justice” underlying how they think about listening. Our survey results confirm a strong association between listening and “fairness”. Listening is important because for employees it signals that people work for an organisation that treats people fairly.

We know from neuroscience that fairness is a key motivator and its absence creates responses that reduce co-operation, openness and collaboration. Today’s increasing focus on diversity and inclusion emphasises its relevance and the data from this survey provides robust evidence of its importance.

WHY ELSE DOES LISTENING MATTER?’

Listening does not just lead to better change management, improved working practices and a sense of fairness. **Table One** provides a rich source of insights into why listening matters. The table highlights a summary of 228 responses to the open question: “What benefits does your organisation enjoy as a result of listening to its employees?” These responses represent one of the best ways of listening within the constraints of a survey method.

Nearly one in three participants talked about engagement, motivation or trust as one of the benefits for their organisation of listening to employees. Previous research (e.g., the Engage for Success movement in the UK) has established the importance of employee voice as a driver of engagement and the link between engagement and performance.

Table One highlights other significant benefits. These include the perception that listening:

- Increases organisational performance (engaged people are more productive and less likely to leave reducing replacement costs)
- Improves insights into how the organisation is (or is not) working through better understanding of customer and employee needs, what communication is effective, and what issues or concerns people have
- Creates alignment between employees and leadership providing more of a sense of shared ownership of goals or common purpose

RISK MANAGEMENT

It is worth highlighting that reducing risk is not as strongly associated with listening as other outcomes in our findings. Many leaders and corporate communication advisers talk about the importance of identifying risks within the organisation – activities or behaviours that might be unethical, illegal and/or which would damage corporate reputation if known publicly.

79 percent of our respondents said that their organisations were good or very good at identifying risk. However, although listening to employees is positively associated with identifying risk the association is not as strong as other outcomes such as treating everyone fairly and managing change effectively. This finding is reinforced through minimal mention of identifying risk as a benefit in open comments.



PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY AND TRUST

The importance of psychological safety for employees to speak out without fear of retribution has featured prominently in our previous two reports. In open comments in our survey, a number of people mentioned the value of anonymity which implicitly highlights the difficulty of speaking up in many organisations. One of our conclusions as to why anonymity was raised is that our respondents may be overlooking the importance of creating psychological safety to improve the value that listening can deliver. The challenge is the need to be able to speak truth to power. By definition, it is least likely to be easy to do this where it is most needed, and it is where it is most needed that leaders may be blind to the need. The ability of leadership to “listen up” involves self-awareness and skill in recognising the psychological barriers employees face in speaking up. It also requires leaders who believe that people should be heard regardless of their views. Communicators and other members of leadership teams need courage and moral fibre to bring unpopular realities to the attention of colleagues.

For communicators, the challenge is not only to help leaders increase their self-awareness but also to create forums and opportunities that enhance psychological safety. Anonymity has a part to play, but using it is an admission of a lack of psychological safety.



A culture where people can openly challenge without fear.



LOST OPPORTUNITIES FROM RELYING TOO MUCH ON SURVEYS AND IGNORING THE VALUE OF INSIGHTS FROM FOCUS GROUPS AND OPEN COMMENTS

The survey explored which listening methods were used and which delivered the most insights. **Figure Two** summarises the frequency with which different listening methods are used while **Figure Three** summarises those considered most insightful.

The “large-scale engagement survey” is used by 59 percent of respondents at least annually, and is mentioned most often as the approach delivering insights.

The results in **Figure Two** reveal a large spread of methods being used which suggests that organisations adopt individual approaches to listening as there is no established “good practice” formula for a combination of methods.

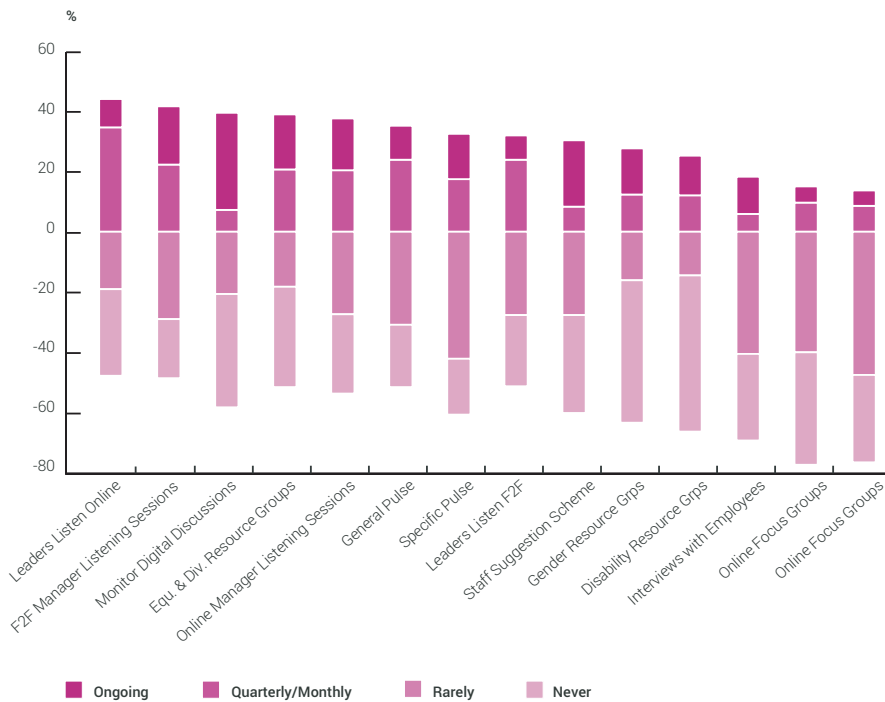
Although some organisations use online leadership listening events on an ongoing basis or quarterly/monthly, many others do not use them at all. There is a similar disparity with monitoring digital discussions and using equality and diversity resource groups. And although many organisations use pulse surveys on an ongoing basis in addition to large scale surveys, some organisations don’t use pulse surveys at all.

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The survey explored which listening methods were used and which delivered the most insights.

What is notable in **Table Two** is a very low level of the use of interviews and focus groups for listening. This suggests that many organisations rely heavily on a large-scale annual survey and pulse surveys, which may in some cases be supplemented with leader and manager listening. An over-emphasis on using surveys and an under appreciation of the insights that are generated in interviews represents a lost opportunity for deeper levels of understanding.

Figure Two – frequency of use of different listening methods



“ It is clear that surveys still dominate the way organisations approach listening to their people. **”**

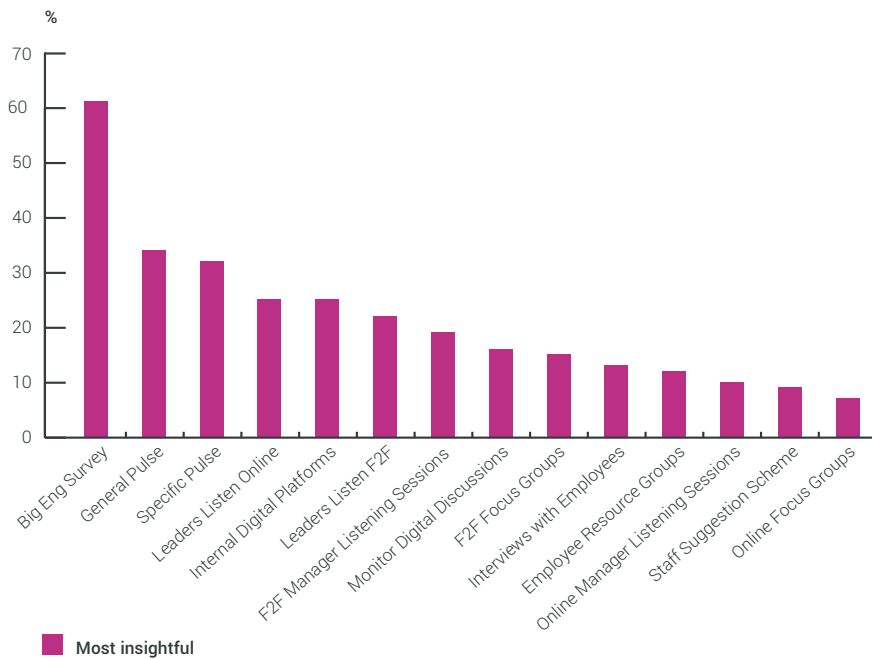
Note: This chart omits the “annual” option, and therefore the large scale survey, in order to provide a clearer view of how the use of different approaches varies.

It is clear that surveys – although they can feel impersonal - still dominate the way organisations approach listening to their people. All employee surveys provide a comprehensive overview of organisational opinion and enable comparative benchmarks within and across functions, areas and time. Differences or trends in opinion can be ascribed to events or processes which can be reviewed and changed or improved. Furthermore, measures of employee opinions can be credibly linked to welfare and performance. For leaders, surveys represent a useful tool to measure one aspect of organisational health and a well-designed survey and its analysis helps make sense of a common voice from what might otherwise be a cacophony. Surveys can highlight key issues and concerns and identify themes that can focus improvement around communication, performance or other topics. Anonymity can also be an important benefit of a survey, as discussed above, increasing opportunities for leaders to understand what is going on in their organisations.

One of the themes in our data was how the pandemic had created the opportunity and need to connect with employees during a very challenging period and how regular, focused surveys have become an important tool to stay in touch with employee concerns and help build cohesiveness and trust.

Figure Three reveals that respondents considered surveys to be the most insightful listening method. However, far deeper insights as to why employees think or feel the way they do about the organisation can come from qualitative listening methods such as interviews and focus groups. Less than 20 percent of respondents cited focus groups as an insightful listening method and this suggests either that focus groups don't work in their organisation or there is a wider under-appreciation of the value they can deliver.

Figure Three – listening methods that generate most useful insights (% = proportion of mention as most insightful method)



“*Regular pulse surveys were introduced earlier this year in response to the COVID pandemic. They've now become embedded and will continue in the longer-term. Internal communications (including frequency and content) have changed as a direct result of the feedback.*”

In summary, these findings highlight that:

- Surveys dominate the way organisations listen to their people. The large-scale survey is considered the most insightful listening method, and one that is used most (although more than one in four respondents said that they use this approach rarely or never). Other “pulse survey” approaches (more frequent, ‘finger on the pulse’, snapshots of employee opinion typically using a sample approach) – whether general or topic focused – rank 3rd and 4th in terms of insight
- Online listening events for leaders and internal digital platforms (e.g., Teams, Yammer) are also considered insightful
- Focus groups are little used but still receive a relatively high proportion of mentions in open questions for the insight they can provide

USING SURVEYS TO LISTEN

Table Four provides a snapshot of good methods cited by respondents in open comments

Table Four – recurring themes from open responses to what is one good example method used for listening to employees

Recurring themes	Frequency (mentions)
Survey/s	38
Leadership	33
Face to face/focus groups	17
Digital/online	16
Ideas/suggestions	11
Line manager	10

Table Four highlights that the survey as a listening approach still has much currency, despite some who feel it is unwieldy and blunt in the digital age. Many respondents talked about how regular pulse surveys had become important over the pandemic to stay in touch with how people were feeling and coping while working from home.

What emerges from our respondents is a trend to use the survey tool in a more focused way responding to the issues facing the organisation. COVID dominated responses at the end of 2020. In years ahead the issues will hopefully be more diverse and specific to different businesses. The lessons from this research are that the survey tool has mileage when focused, transparent, relevant and when people feel involved in the response.

But what also stands out from open comments and the data above is the importance of “face to face” interaction (it may be virtual or physical) in which employees can talk about their opinions and emotions – often with leadership there to hear and respond. These processes (focus groups, listening discussions, etc.) demonstrate a concern for the views of employees and generate insights provided by more open and free ranging discussion of peoples’ experiences. We were struck by how rarely the focus group appears to be used in comparison to other approaches.



What emerges from our respondents is a trend to use the survey tool in a more focused way responding to the issues facing the organisation.



THE POTENTIAL FOR DIGITAL LISTENING IS SIGNIFICANT

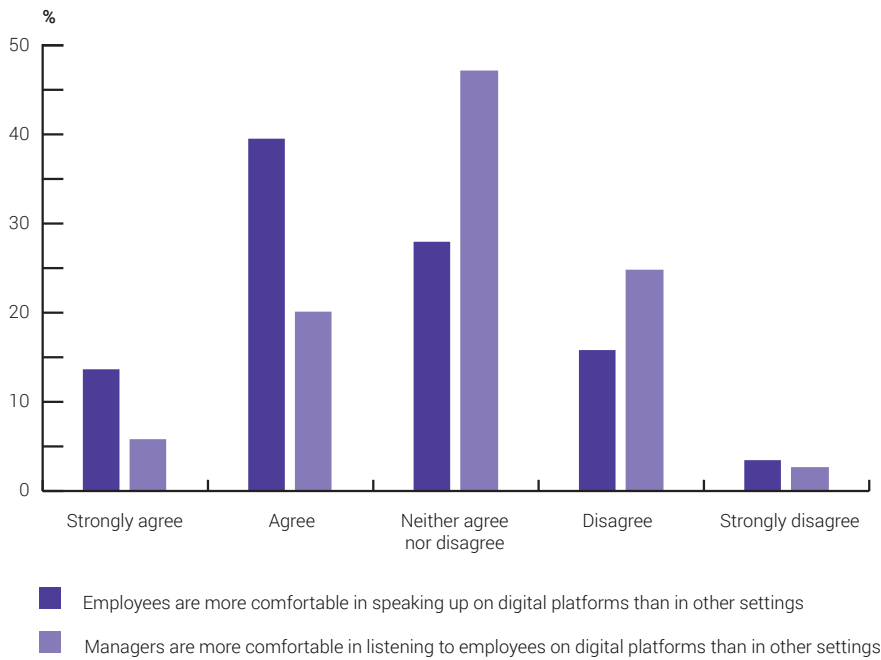
Over the past few years, the advent of numerous employee communication apps and the growth of enterprise systems has created a wealth of platforms that companies can use to listen to employees.

Frequently mentioned platforms that people use for listening are:

- Yammer
- Workplace by Facebook
- MS Teams
- Polling and meeting apps such as Sli.do and Mentimeter
- Survey Monkey
- Slack
- Intranets

Yet the data in **Figures Two – Four**, and **Table Four**, suggest that digital listening is both under-rated and under-used, relative to more traditional approaches. **Figure Four** plots responses to perceived comfort in using digital listening.

Figure Four – employees and managers comfort with digital platforms



“

53% of respondents said that employees are more comfortable speaking up on digital platforms than in other settings.

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I believe that when meeting on any online platform, staff are more encouraged to type or comment. Maybe they feel more comfortable to express their opinions.

Employees appear more comfortable in speaking up on digital platforms than in other settings. Yet 32 percent of respondents rarely or never use internal digital platforms to listen to employee perspectives and 58 percent rarely or never monitor discussions on platforms. So the method of listening that employees are more comfortable with using is the one that is used less often.

Figure Four also highlights that only 26 percent of respondents thought that managers are more comfortable using digital platforms. While many managers may prefer surveys and face to face listening, this still identifies the use of digital platforms as a significant opportunity for improved listening.

There is one further significant finding that highlights the potential of digital platforms to improve the way organisations listen to their people. **Figure Five** illustrates that digital platforms as a listening method used on an ongoing basis are positively associated with a range of outcomes, including generating good ideas on how to work effectively and creating innovative new products and services. It is worth noting that the four other listening methods used on an ongoing basis are all less strongly associated with outcomes.

Figure Five – correlations with digital listening and organisational outcomes

Correlations between monitoring discussions on internal digital platforms and five outcomes		The four other top methods used on an ongoing basis are:
Creates new products and services	0.27	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Face to face line manager/supervisor listening sessions 2. Online manager/supervisor listening sessions 3. Equality and Diversity employee resource groups 4. Staff suggestions schemes <p>Note: They all had much lower level correlations with outcomes.</p>
Cares about diversity	0.26	
Generates good ideas on how to work effectively	0.23	
Is focused on improving customer experience	0.21	
Treats everyone fairly	0.20	

Figure Five further underlines the potential for focusing more attention on using internal digital platforms for listening. To be clear, this is not ‘illicit listening in’ on employees, it is monitoring what they say in open forums on digital platforms in ways that provide useful insights. As organisations increasingly use automation and artificial intelligence inside organisations, digital platforms will no doubt evolve and incorporate greater listening capabilities. These represent a very significant opportunity both for employees to be able to express their views and for organisations to learn from employees. With these developments there is also the potential for gathering data about the ways that employees work and their thoughts and feelings that will require transparency from the organisation and agreement from employees.

Open comments suggest that digital platforms are most used for listening:

- During Town Halls, leadership webinars, virtual lunches, or other events where employees ask questions and interact via chat
- To track issues of interest, confusion or concern (e.g., semantic analysis can help gauge mood and morale)
- For ideas generation and brainstorming

With the increase in remote working accelerated by the pandemic it is clear that digital will play an important role in future organisational listening strategies. However, there are concerns with digital listening. These include:

- Low participation (often, significantly, including leadership) in online forums and discussions
- Ethical concerns that digital listening feels like eavesdropping if people are unaware that internal discussions will be monitored
- The problems of access being limited for some groups of employees because of the nature of their jobs



LEADERSHIP LISTENING IS MORE STRONGLY ASSOCIATED WITH POSITIVE OUTCOMES THAN LINE MANAGER/ SUPERVISOR LISTENING

In addition to exploring methods used the survey looked at how respondents described their organisation against a set of good listening principles and practices (**Figures 6a & 6b**)

Figure 6a – strongest listening principles and practices

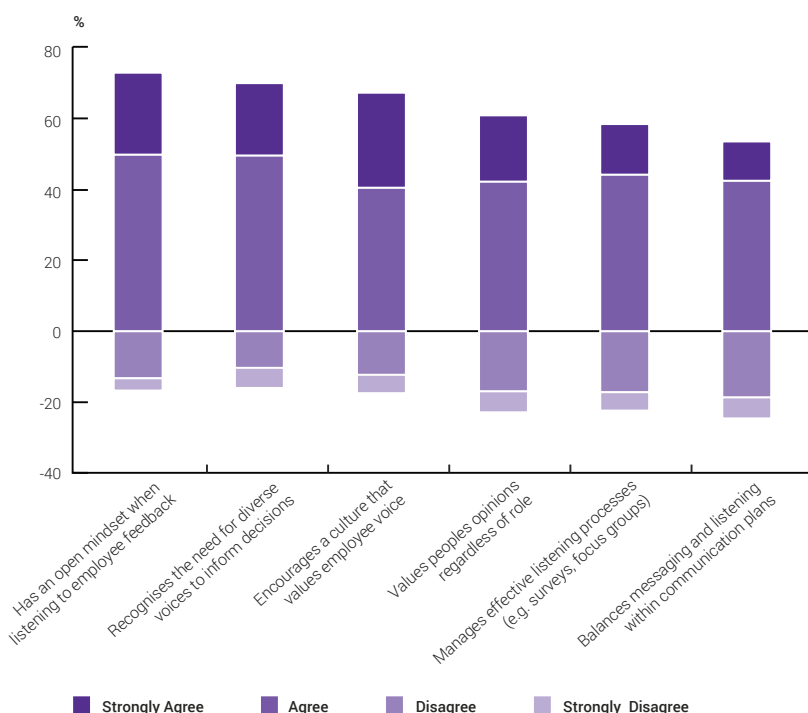
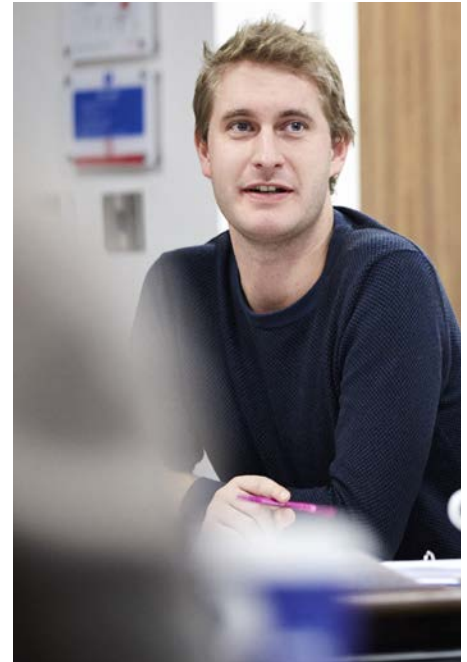
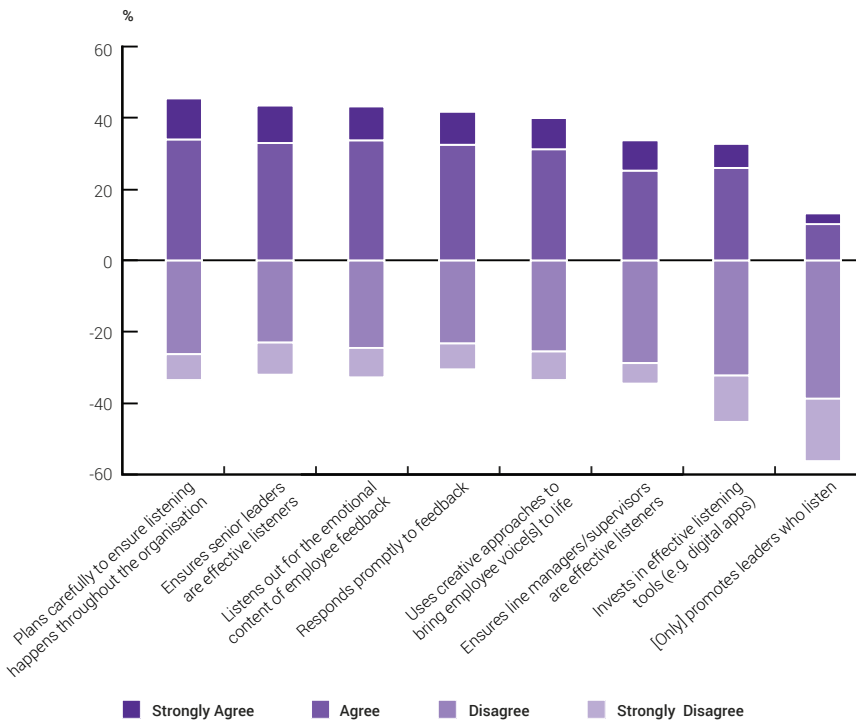


Figure 6b – less strong principles and practices



The results in **Figures 6a and 6b** indicate that many respondents perceive their organisation to have a wide range of good listening principles in place. More than 60 percent of respondents stated that their organisation has an open mindset, recognises the need for diverse voices, encourages a culture that values employee voice and values opinions regardless of roles. On the other hand, less than 35 percent of respondents stated their organisation ensures that line managers/supervisors are effective listeners, invests in effective listening tools or only promotes leaders who listen. Furthermore, only 42 percent of respondents stated that their organisation responds promptly to feedback – a critical aspect of effective listening.

There is also a pattern in which general statements about the value of listening rank higher than more action-oriented statements about how to develop and practice listening – see **Table Five**.

Table Five – contrasting perceptions about relative listening strengths and weaknesses

Column A: Principle statements	Column B: Action-oriented statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is willing to listen to what employees say (81%) • Takes what employees say seriously (73%) • Has an open mindset when listening to employee feedback (73%) • Recognises the need for diverse voices to inform decisions (69%) • Encourages a culture that values employee voice (67%) • Values people’s opinions regardless of role (61%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Uses data from listening to employees to improve performance (56%) • Measures how satisfied employees are with the way we listen to them (54%) • Plans carefully to ensure listening happens throughout the organisation (46%) • Ensures senior leaders are effective listeners (44%) • Responds promptly to feedback (42%) • Uses creative approaches to bring employee voice[s] to life (40%) • Ensures line managers/supervisors are effective listeners (34%) • Invests in effective listening tools (33%) • Only promote leaders who listen (13%)

Note Percentages are strongly agree and agree responses

There is a clear difference in what respondents consider their organisation to be like when it comes to general statements versus action-oriented statements. For example, 73 percent for ‘take what employees say seriously’ and 42 percent for ‘responds promptly’.

Maybe some of the responses are platitudes. That is, truisms or clichés that respondents have affirmed but which do not really describe the way their organisation actually works in practice. How can they when the more action-oriented responses are so much weaker?

It is all very well to say that ‘everyone’s voice matters’, but when it comes down to it this cannot be the case. It does not stack up. If less than half the organisations are:

- planning carefully to ensure listening happens;
- ensuring senior leaders are effective listeners;
- responding promptly to feedback; and
- investing in effective listening tools;

...then how can we be sure that they really do value everyone’s voice?



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There is a clear difference in what respondents consider their organisation to be like when it comes to general statements versus action-oriented statements.

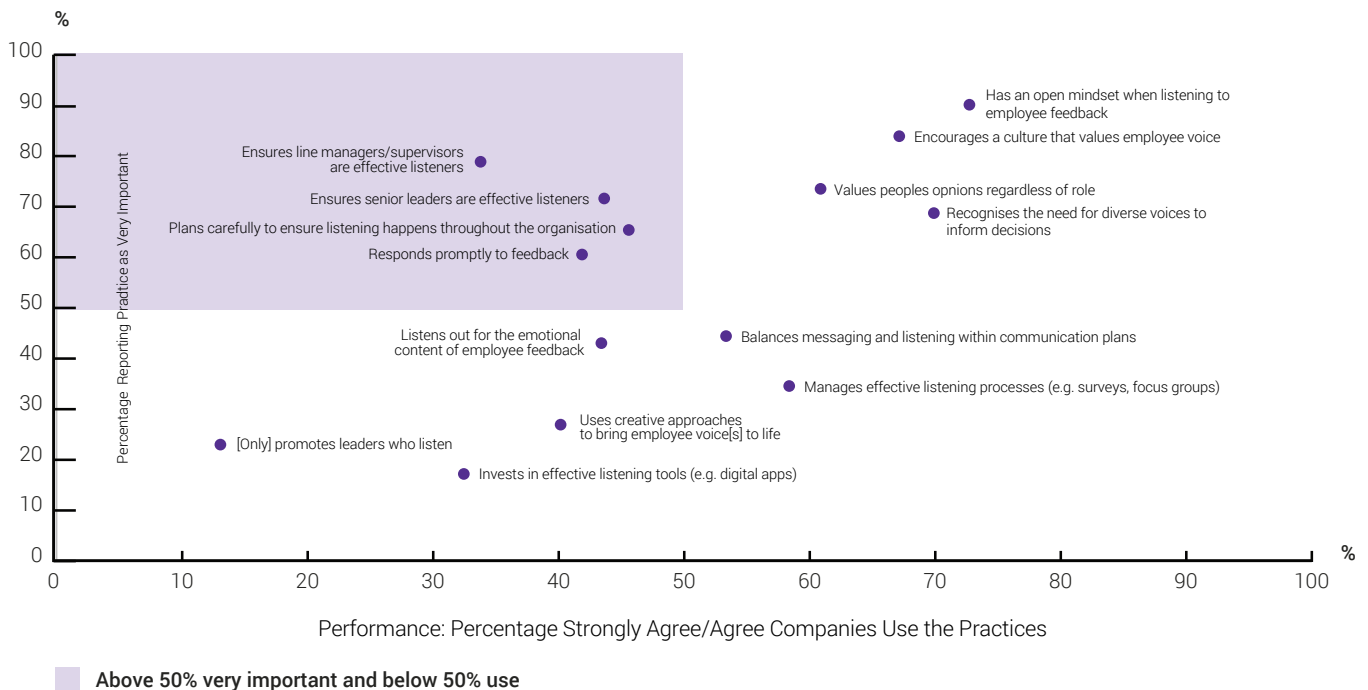
The highest scoring statements in **Table Five** are value driven cultural descriptors. Respondents view their organisation as one in which gaining input from diverse groups and keeping an open mind are valued highly. Yet culture and values are shaped by leaders who determine the assumptions people make about “how we do things around here.” Leadership role models are one of the strongest drivers of culture.

So, when we see that agreement is much lower (44 percent) that organisations ensure leaders are effective at listening and only 13 percent agree that listening is a required skill set for leaders, one wonders if one of the issues here is leadership. There is a gap between the view that we have a listening culture (open mindset, all voices matter, etc.) and the view that listening is a requirement of leadership.

Look at the pattern in **Figure Seven** which compares how respondents described what is really important in listening to what they agreed that their organisations do.

“**Respondents view their organisation as one in which gaining input from diverse groups and keeping an open mind are valued highly.**”

Figure Seven – listening Importance vs performance



All the cultural statements are in the top right but the key area is top left where the important things that shape listening are not delivered. Here we find:

- Ensuring line managers are effective listeners
- Ensuring senior leaders are effective listeners
- Planning to ensure listening happens throughout the organisation
- Responding promptly to feedback

This cluster points clearly to actions that will deliver better listening and, through that, more effective management of change and the generation of ideas and innovation that will improve working practices. If organisations desire these outcomes, here are the areas to focus on. Note that it is the leadership and management that matter, not the particular listening tools or processes.

There is however, a qualification to add to this. One might expect line managers to be more important than senior leaders in relation to delivering beneficial outcomes. Line managers have more direct and regular interaction with employees whereas senior leaders are less visible.

In fact, the opposite emerged from our findings.

Figure Eight shows that the differences in line manager and senior manager 'responding' correlations with a range of outcomes.



There is a gap between the view that we have a listening culture (open mindset, all voices matter, etc.) and the view that listening is a requirement of leadership.

Figure Eight – senior leader listening generates stronger outcomes than line manager/supervisor listening

	Senior managers at my organisation respond to what employees say	Line managers/supervisors at my organisation respond to what employees say
Generates good ideas on how to work effectively	.37	.24
Create innovative new products and services	.26	.27
Is focused on improving customer experience	.27	.23
Care about diversity	.44	.21
Treats everyone fairly	.47	.28
Identifies risks	.31	.24
Responds well to changing situations	.40	.27
Manages change effectively	.37	.26
Adapts quickly to unexpected new demands	.34	.21

Figure Eight reveals that correlations for senior manager 'responding' are higher than for line manager/supervisor 'responding' across all outcomes listed in our survey. In other words our respondents endorse the points made above about the importance of leadership listening which then shapes the culture for listening to employees more generally.

There is no doubt that line managers are also very important. The correlations with line manager 'responding' are positive. It is just that the strength of correlation is not as high as for senior manager 'responding'.



There is a strong pattern of difference between the UK and Europe that suggests that listening is viewed more positively in the UK.

VARIANCES IN RESULTS BETWEEN UK, NORTH AMERICA AND EUROPE

Although the number of respondents outside the UK is not large enough to draw robust conclusions about differences in the results, some notable variances are worth highlighting.

In general, many of the results show similarities between the UK and North America. However, as shown in **Table 6**, there are notable variations for some aspects of listening between UK and Europe.

Table Six – differences between UK and Europe

Statements that describe my organisation	UK	Europe
My organisation is willing to listen to what employees say	85%	70%
My organisation takes what employees say seriously	76%	60%
Has an open mindset when listening to employee feedback	76%	55%
Recognises the need for diverse voices to inform decisions	74%	46%
Encourages a culture that values employee voice	71%	53%
Values peoples opinions regardless of role	67%	40%
Manages effective listening processes (e.g. surveys, focus groups)	63%	45%
Responds promptly to feedback	45%	35%
Listens out for the emotional content of employee feedback	45%	28%

*Sample size is 242 for UK and 53 for Europe **Percentages are strongly agree and agree combined

There is a strong pattern of difference between the UK and Europe that suggests that listening is viewed more positively in the UK. However, the sample size for Europe is too small to draw any firm conclusions and further research is required to determine clear differences.



SO WHAT? -THE IMPLICATIONS AND NEXT STEPS FOR THOSE WHO WANT TO IMPROVE LISTENING

The findings in our research clearly illustrate that the employee survey remains the “go to” tool for listening to employees. Surveys can help measure the effectiveness of communication and highlight concerns and issues that require change. But for many they feel like a management tool rather than a platform for productive and meaningful conversations.

Our participants have shown that employees are a rich source of ideas and that listening is critical to manage change effectively. We believe there are a number of important implications for leaders and communication managers based on the findings of this report.

1. As we emerge from the global pandemic it will be important to listen to employees to navigate the way forward.

In a post-Covid world, there will be continuing changes in the workplace with more people working away from the office more often. This effectively changes the employee proposition and the nature of the contract with employees. It creates a new hybrid employment experience with the workplace divided between remote locations and the company site, and it potentially creates different categories of workers – those deemed critical for continuous site-based work and those with more flexible arrangements.

What goes on in the office will change too as the office becomes less a location for work to get done and more a hub for meetings and

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As comms lead, I've embedded listening in the comms strategy and I've just started to create two-way platforms and channels but we've got a long way to go. I have just a small group of leaders who get it and want to listen and use those insights to shape the business to deliver high performance but there's more old school types who want to command and control staff.



information exchange. As people work in these different ways, the way companies connect them to the purpose of the business and with each other will need to evolve.

As the data in this report clearly shows, listening is critical to help manage change effectively. Engaging people in activities to think about new ways of working and address the new challenges that emerge will prove essential to support the way forward.

2. The role of leaders in encouraging, supporting and being present in listening processes will become more critical for success. Our data provides overwhelming evidence that the role of leadership is critical. Key drivers like respecting the employee voice and being open to ideas are cultural factors shaped by leaders. No amount of investment in new listening tools and processes will help if the leadership team do not role model and champion listening within their organisations.
3. This report has not addressed the individual listening skills of leaders and managers but the need to invest in and develop listening capabilities goes alongside the need to develop appropriate listening processes.

The important message, is that to develop listening capability requires recognising that managers and leaders do not, and cannot, have all the answers. Good listeners know that their job is to ask relevant questions and to help others to articulate the problems and issues. More often than not in the implementation of change the good managers and leaders are those who can help the teams develop the way forward together.

4. Communication managers should reconsider their communication plans and check the depth and range of listening practices that are included. Managing change, generating ideas, creating new ways of working effectively and other desirable outcomes require a set of listening processes that go far beyond the survey or focus group. Forums, resource groups, digital channels (see below), Town Halls, leadership lunches, listening circles, structured conversation tools, team listening and so on represent some of the processes that can be used to generate more interaction and exchange between people at work. These processes may capture themes and trends but they are also potential components of toolkits that organisations can deploy to lead change efforts; and communication managers can play an important role in designing, developing and deploying them as part of their contribution.
5. The potential for digital listening is only just beginning to be understood. This report highlights the opportunities and benefits. Leaders, communication managers and IT managers should explore how to incorporate listening more within existing platforms and make preparations for the ethical use of Artificial Intelligence for listening.



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The role of leaders in encouraging, supporting and being present in listening processes will become more critical for success.

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Managing change, generating ideas, creating new ways of working effectively and other desirable outcomes require a set of listening processes that go far beyond the survey or focus group.

APPENDIX

Breakdown of respondents

Total number of responses **551**

Region	Number identifying	Percent of response
Africa	11	3
Australia	24	6
Asia/Pacific (excluding Australia)	12	3
Canada	20	5
UK	242	57
Europe/Middle East/North Africa (excluding UK)	53	13
USA	59	14

130 respondents did not complete this question

What is the size of your organisation (i.e. the one that you have been answering about)?

- Large (more than 250 employees) – 82%
- Medium (50-249 employees) – 10%
- Small (fewer than 50 employees) – 7%

I have been answering (please tick one)

- About the organisation I work in currently or until recently – 90%
- About an organisation I know well as a client of mine – 9%
- Neither of the above – 1%



AUTHOR BIOS

Howard Kraiss

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 in 2018 enabled Howard to raise this passion, declaring his term as a Year of Listening. Even with Howard serving as Past President this focus on listening continues to underpin IABC UK's activities as well as Howard's own 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.

2020/21 is Howard's sixth year as a Board Member of the IABC UK chapter. Now as Past- President he continues to support the Board 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.

continued

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. Clients include private, public and third sector organisations.

He is the Past President of the UK Chapter of IABC, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts, and an IAF Certified Professional Facilitator.

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 text book 'Exploring Internal Communication' published by Routledge. He is a past chair of CIPR Inside.