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### The Power of Listening at Work

Avraham N. Kluger,<sup>1</sup> Guy Itzchakov<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem School of Business Administration, Hebrew University of Jerusalem

<sup>2</sup> Department of Human Services, University of Haifa

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Avraham N. Kluger <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1910-7364>

Guy Itzchakov <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1516-6719>

#### Author Note

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Avraham N. Kluger, Jerusalem School of Business Administration, Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Mt. Scopus, Jerusalem 91905, ISRAEL Email: [avik@savion.huji.ac.il](mailto:avik@savion.huji.ac.il)

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**ABSTRACT**

Listening is associated with and a likely cause of desired organizational outcomes in numerous areas, including job performance, leadership, quality of relationships (e.g., trust), job knowledge, job attitudes, and well-being. To advance understanding of the powerful effects of listening on organizational outcomes, we review the construct of listening, its measurement and experimental manipulations, and its outcomes, antecedents, and moderators. We suggest that listening is a dyadic phenomenon that benefits both the listener and the speaker, including supervisor-subordinate and salesperson–customer dyads. To explain previous findings and generate novel and testable hypotheses, we propose the Episodic Listening Theory: listening can lead to a fleeting state of togetherness, in which dyad members undergo a mutual creative thought process. This process yields clarity, facilitates the generation of novel plans, increases well-being, and strengthens attachment to the conversation partner.

Keywords: Listening, Relationships, Performance, Workplace, Change

### The Power of Listening at Work

Considering the correlations between perceptions of listening and leadership, “the weakest correlation reported in the literature was  $r = .50$ ” (Kluger & Zaidel 2013).

#### INTRODUCTION

High-quality listening brings a cornucopia of positive outcomes for speakers, listeners, teams, and organizations. These benefits include superior job performance, better leadership, trust, intimacy, well-being, and reduced burnout. Surprisingly, though, listening and its potential outcomes have received relatively little attention within organizational psychology and organizational behavior. Moreover, while employers and recruiters prize workers and candidates with good listening skills, listening is mostly missing in management education. Therefore, in this review, we draw on evidence from diverse fields, including marketing, nursing, law, social work, social and clinical psychology, and education.

In what follows, we review evidence concerning listening in the work context. Our review reveals three main gaps in the literature. First, understanding of the antecedents of good listening, including its training, remains patchy. Second, most listening research lack consideration of boundary conditions—i.e., identifying the forces and costs that prevent people from listening well. Third, the existing theories do not take sufficient account of the dyadic nature of listening. We address these gaps with our proposed original theoretical framework. Our framework integrates existing theories and further suggests that listening facilitates the creation of a state (an episode) of togetherness. Togetherness is a property of the speaker-listener dyad. While in this state, dyad members are open-minded in a manner that facilitates creativity and change ([Figure 1](#)).

We first review definitions and operationalizations of listening. We then summarize the evidence for outcomes of listening in the workplace. Following this, we discuss the antecedents of listening and the boundary conditions for listening's effects. We then build on existing theories to propose a mechanism explaining why listening has such powerful organizational outcomes. We conclude with implications for theory and practice and a summary of open questions.

## **LISTENING: THE CONSTRUCT AND ITS OPERATIONALIZATIONS**

### **Definition**

The term listening can be used in so many ways that it is unhelpful to try and offer a single definition. Instead, scholars suggest that the construct be defined within the specific investigation context (Worthington & Bodie 2018). Accordingly, we focus on listening during conversations. This focus excludes listening to music, lectures, or instructions, listening while learning a foreign language, and hearing ability.

We take listening as encompassing three causally related constructs: (a) unobservable behaviors of the listener (e.g., comprehension), which influence (b) observable behaviors of the listener (e.g., gaze, eye contact, interruptions), which in turn inform (c) perceptions and evaluations of the speaker (e.g., feeling listened to). Each construct can help shape the understanding of listening, and so we define them all.

First, the set of listener's unobservable behaviors is, by itself, a multi-dimensional construct, comprising attention, comprehension, and benevolent intention (Itzchakov et al 2017, Rogers & Roethlisberger 1991/1952). We define these, respectively, as the degree to which the listener focuses on the speaker's message; succeeds in adopting the speaker's cognitive and

emotional frame of reference (Rogers 1951); and intends, without judgment, to help the speaker grow psychologically (gain insights and solve their issues on their own; Rogers 1951).

The better listeners' attention, comprehension, and intention, the more likely they are to engage in observable behaviors signaling good listening to the speaker. Overt signals of good listening include paraphrasing (Nemec et al 2017), reflecting feelings (Nemec et al 2017), asking relevant (and ideally open-ended) questions (Huang et al 2017, Van Quaquebeke & Felps 2018), and asking for clarification or repetition where needed (Lycan 1977). They may also include following a receptiveness recipe, such as hedging, that indicates a non-judgemental attitude (Yeomans et al 2020), keeping silent for a few seconds after the speaker complete their speech turn (Curhan et al 2021), and, perhaps, asking sensitive questions (Hart et al 2021).

Overt listening behaviors may also take the form of backchannel responses—verbal or nonverbal reactions signaling the listener's interest or attention without interrupting the speaker's flow (Bavelas et al 2000). These may be generic or specific, where the former simply encourage the speaker to continue (e.g., nodding, emitting expressions such as "Uh-huh," or orienting one's body toward the speaker (cf. "nonverbal immediacy," in Bodie et al 2014), while the latter convey understanding in a manner congruent with the speaker's narrative (e.g., wincing at an embarrassing story or laughing at a joke; Bavelas et al 2000). Overt verbal or nonverbal signals may also indicate poor listening: changing the topic, using a tone that conveys impatience, offering unsolicited advice, dual-tasking (e.g., looking at one's smartphone), physically disengaging from the conversation, or raising an eyebrow may be a sign of poor listening, signaling that the listener doubts the speaker and is already preparing a response, rather than focusing on the speaker's message. Note, however, that listening as overt behavior is a formative construct, where the sum of its elements defines the phenomenon. This is because no specific

overt behavior is necessary or sufficient to indicate listening. For example, failing to make eye contact and giving advice are considered signals of poor listening; but good listening can take place without eye contact (e.g., over the telephone), and timely advice may be construed as good listening (Zenger & Folkman 2016).

Finally, the listener's overt behavior influences the speaker's perceptions and evaluations of the listening received. We define perceptions and evaluations as speakers' holistic judgments of the listeners' behaviors and their impact on the speakers. This judgment ranges from poor to good<sup>1</sup>. Speakers tend to form a holistic judgment composed of both perceptions and evaluations, even though they may be able to differentiate between perceptions of listener's behaviors (e.g., eye contact) and their effect (e.g., "I felt understood").

The three listening constructs— unobservable listener behavior, observable listener behavior, and speaker perceptions—are strongly, positively, and causally related to each other, as discussed above, but are not isomorphic (for more details, see [Figure S1](#) in the Supplementary Material). Considering these three constructs facilitates understanding the antecedents of listening (e.g., anything that affects the listener's attention), the meaning of objective measures of listening, and listening-induced outcomes (e.g., customers' evaluation of a salesperson's listening may affect their purchasing decisions).

To complete the definition, we offer a few final thoughts. First, because listening in the present review takes place in the context of conversations, listening is distinct from related constructs such as empathy (Kellett et al 2006), perspective-taking (Lui et al 2020), rudeness

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<sup>1</sup> Such judgements are likely to be bi-polar. Thus, an assessment that someone's listening is not poor does not entail an assessment that the person's listening is good. For evidence, see [Table S1](#) in the Supplemental Materials.

(Porath & Erez 2007), feeling understood (Reis et al 2017), responsiveness (Reis et al 2017), and respect (Frei & Shaver 2002). These constructs co-occur with listening but can also occur outside the conversational context. For example, an employee may show empathy by hugging a crying co-worker or taking a colleague's perspective by buying them a present they desired. Second, because we focus on the context of spoken conversation, exchanges occurring in written form, such as via email or text messages, are beyond the scope of this review.<sup>2</sup> Third, listening is typically construed as an individual-level, or actually dyadic, phenomenon (e.g., a supervisor listening to an employee), and that is our main concern here. However, listening can also take place at the team or organization level, with responsive leadership creating a team-level (Johnston et al 2011) or organization-level (Macnamara 2015) listening climate.

Finally, our definition of listening should not be confused with Carl Rogers's active listening. According to Rogers, active listening is non-judgemental, empathic, and creative. Yet, the term active listening got co-opted by businesses to connote a set of techniques (e.g., paraphrasing) that lost the meaning implied by Rogers (Tyler 2011). Indeed, Rogers warned that the technique would not be effective if not based on a proper attitude (which we label intention). The essence of the attitude is that mere understanding of speakers that allows them to understand themselves and solve their issues (1951). Due to the misuse of the term active listening, we shun it. Note, however, the active listening techniques (e.g., paraphrasing) are subsets of observable listening behaviors, which are only one part of our definition of listening (see above and [Figure S1](#)).

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<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, conversations that take place via sign language or other forms of communication used by the deaf or hard of hearing do involve listening as we understand it. Nevertheless, listening in conversations may have many commonalities with responding to written exchanges, but this issue is beyond the scope of our paper.

## Measurement

Listening has been measured from three perspectives: (a) listener self-reports (e.g., “I was able to listen with an open mind”; Cho et al 2016); (b) objective coding of behaviors (e.g., “asking patient's opinion, checking their understanding, and comments such as 'Go on, tell me more.'”; Levinson et al 1997); and (c) speakers’ perceptions (e.g., "When my current supervisor listens to me, most of the time, s/he listens to me attentively"; Kluger & Bouskila-Yam 2018). Each method has advantages and disadvantages.

Measuring listening through self-reported behavior is useful when the goal is to understand the formation of self-perceptions of listening. Yet this method’s utility is limited because listeners may not know how the speakers perceive them (Bodie et al 2014). The second approach, coding listening behavior, has the apparent benefit of objectivity. Yet, it might be dissociated from the speaker’s perception, the proximal antecedent of organizational outcomes. Finally, the speaker’s perception of listening is relatively straightforward to measure and typically yields high reliabilities. For a review of listening scales used in work contexts, see [Table S1](#) in the Supplementary Material. Nevertheless, the discriminant validity of measures of perceived listening is yet to be established.

## Manipulations

Listening manipulations rely on listening instructions, distracting listeners, recruiting trained listeners, time-sharing, vignettes, and training employees in listening, where some training studies rely on quasi-experiments. Overall, the data indicate that it is relatively easy to manipulate listening by distracting listeners (e.g., Itzchakov et al 2017). In contrast, it is not clear how to create a better-than-average listening condition in the laboratory. To circumvent this difficulty, we used trained listeners (e.g., Itzchakov et al 2017), vignettes (e.g., Itzchakov et al



2020), recall (Hurwitz & Kluger 2017), and asking speakers to share a story versus a description (Itzhakov et al 2016). All the manipulations suffer from some validity threats. Distraction might be a manipulation of rudeness, employing trained listeners may reflect selection, vignettes lack ecological validity, recall might be biased, and asking speakers to share stories manipulates the speaker's behavior rather than the listener's.

The data also suggest that listening training effectively changes trainees' (listeners') behavior (e.g., Rautalinko & Lisper 2004). However, training evaluations did not show that speakers (e.g., customers, patients, subordinates) who interact with trainees notice any change. Attending to this concern, Joussemet et al (2018) proposed a protocol for testing the effect of training parents in listening by measuring perceptions of parents' listening among teachers and children. Similar protocols could become a gold standard for studying listening experimentally in organizations. Finally, a couple of non-training interventions have been shown to have the potential to create better-than-average listening perceptions among patients rating their physicians: physicians systematically scheduling time for consultations (Grimholt et al 2015) and providing physicians daily feedback on listening behavior (Indovina et al 2016). For more details regarding listening manipulations, see [Table S2](#) in the Supplementary Material.

## **CONSEQUENCES OF LISTENING AT WORK**

The quality of listening has powerful effects in the workplace. Here, we outline the main outcomes in the realms of performance, leadership, relationships, job knowledge, job attitudes, well-being, and other employee-focused outcomes (voice, engagement, and burnout). Most studies reviewed here were conducted in the United States. Where relevant, we highlight studies conducted in other countries to emphasize the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings.

When data is based on meta-analyses, or the effect sizes were surprising, we report exact  $r$  values; otherwise, when we report correlations, they are significant unless we indicate otherwise.

## **Performance**

Job-performance behaviors and outcomes are multifaceted. They include (a) the focal task or technical performance, (b) organizational citizenship behavior or contextual performance (c) counterproductive performance, and (d) proactive or adaptive behavior (Dalal et al 2020). We review each in turn, drawing on literature from different fields.

**Focal task or technical performance.** The role of listening in job performance has been frequently addressed in marketing. In a meta-analysis (Itani et al 2019),  $k = 16$ ,  $N = 3,780$ , the average correlation between listening by the salesperson and sales volume was  $\bar{r} = .38$  and  $\bar{p} = .47$  (corrected for unreliability). The majority of these studies were based on the salesperson's self-reported performance. However, one study correlated listening and (unspecified) quantitative sales as a performance measure, and reported  $r = .50$  (Bergeron & Laroche 2009). Another study, not included in the meta-analysis, reported  $r = .26$  between employees' perceptions of listening in their manufacturing plant and the percentage change in the plant's net income (Johnston & Reed 2017). Both studies suggest that listening is positively correlated with financial performance. Similarly, a qualitative study of several start-up ventures in Brazil noted that conflict is inherent in those companies, but that "ventures in which at least one of the founding partners didn't actively listen ended up resulting either in the departure of one of the entrepreneurs or the failure of the enterprise" (Sarfati et al 2020).

**Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB).** Studies in Germany have found that employee perceptions of how well their supervisors listen to them positively correlate with their OCB (Lloyd et al 2015). This effect was preserved even after controlling for potential extraneous

variables (Schroeder 2016). Also, Israeli employee perceptions of how well their teammates listen to them positively correlate with helping OCB (Kluger et al 2021).

**Counterproductive performance.** Poor listening is associated with various indicators of undesirable organizational outcomes. In one study, listening quality, coded from patient-physician interactions, negatively correlated with malpractice lawsuits for primary physicians; A similar but not significant correlation was found for surgeons (Levinson et al 1997). In another study, teenagers working in retail or service industries were asked, “Did you get any of these injuries at work?” (including cut, scrape, burn, bruise, a broken bone, infection, and head injury). Those who answered affirmatively were more likely to report that their supervisor does not listen well to them (Zierold 2016). Japanese courts’ likelihood of convicting physicians for malpractice was higher when there was no evidence that the physician listened or provided explanations to patients and families (Hagihara & Tarumi 2007). However, this report did not tease out the roles of listening and explaining.

Looking broadly at workplace climate, Israeli nurses’ perceptions of the listening climate at their workplace correlated negatively with their reports of exposure to disruptive behaviors at work, including negative remarks, verbal insults, humiliation, and sexual harassment (Shafran-Tikva et al 2019). Also, German employees’ perceptions of their supervisor’s listening are negatively correlated with turnover intentions (Lloyd et al 2015). Finally, using a longitudinal design, Kriz et al (2021) showed that managerial listening predicts lower levels of affective job insecurity among employees in a company going through layoffs, where the effect is mediated by perceived control.

**Proactive and adaptive behavior.** A quasi-experimental study on the effect of training psychiatric nurses in listening showed that during shifts of trained nurses, relative to controls,

physical restraining of patients was reduced by 26% (Gonzalez 2009).<sup>3</sup> We think this outcome reflects proactive behavior because the nurses found ways to calm the patients without physical force.

Moreover, across five studies,  $N = 744$ , the average effect of listening on creativity was  $\bar{r} = .39$  (Castro et al 2018). These studies included a laboratory experiment showing that listening improves fluency, originality, and flexibility in generating ideas. Two of the studies, conducted in Israel and Germany, showed positive correlations between employees' perceptions of their supervisor's listening and self-reported creativity.

One of the studies included in the meta-analysis of listening and sales mentioned above (Itani et al 2019) hints that listening is related to adaptive behavior. In that study (Giacobbe et al 2013), a latent variable indexed, among other measures, by self-reported listening predicted a latent variable indexed, among other measures, by salesperson's adaptive selling behavior assessed by their supervisor. However, the study did not test whether the supervisor's assessment of the salesperson's adaptability correlates with the customer's listening evaluation.

A set of studies by Curhan et al (2021) suggests that silent pauses after one conversation party speaks increase value creation in bilateral negotiations, which is a form of proactive and adaptive behavior. Curhan et al. used two methodologies: observational studies in which the duration of silent moments was objectively recorded; and experimental manipulations in which participants were instructed to wait 20 seconds after their partner finished speaking. They found

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<sup>3</sup> While that study's author concluded that the effect was not significant, our consideration of the low statistical power and a recalculation of the reported frequencies suggest otherwise.

that extended silences increase value creation “by interrupting default, fixed-pie thinking and fostering a more deliberative mindset.”

The evidence reviewed above for the association of listening with job performance has two implications. First, listening leads to positive performance outcomes for listeners, speakers, and consequently, the organization. For example, as we have noted, good listening is associated with higher sales, or lower malpractice suits, indicating that a good listener is a good performer. Good listeners also improve the performance of the speakers interacting with them. For example, subordinates whose managers listen well demonstrate higher OCB, higher creativity, and lower turnover intention (preceding perhaps actual voluntary turnover, detrimental to the organization).

The second implication is that listening is arguably a facet of job performance, even if it is not perceived or measured as such by organizations. According to one definition, job performance includes the “things that people actually do, actions they take, that contribute to the organization’s goals” (Campbell & Wiernik 2015, p. 48). Among the things employees do on the job is to communicate. Regretfully, the prevailing view of communication as job performance (Campbell & Wiernik 2015) seems to focus only on sending messages (i.e., talking), ignoring the fact that communication is a two-way process. Indeed, both listening and talking contribute to people’s interpersonal influence (Ames et al 2012).

Taking this idea a step further, our review might suggest that listening may be mapped to the adaptive behavior facet of job performance. Aguinis (2019), in a taxonomy of adaptive performance, argues that it includes (among other things) demonstrating adaptability in the interpersonal, cultural, and physical domains. Interpersonal adaptability, in turn, pertains to listening and being open-minded (Aguinis 2019). These ideas await closer scrutiny in future job-performance research.

## **Leadership**

Listening coupled with question asking has been theorized to be a primary predictor of leadership effectiveness (Van Quaquebeke & Felps 2018). In multiple studies, perceptions of a target's listening yielded positive and high correlations with perceptions of the same target's leadership. This is true even in studies that controlled for same-source bias. For example, in one study, communication undergraduates who did not previously know each other worked on a team project for at least six meetings. Then, each team member was randomly selected to rank all others on either listening or leadership. The rankings were correlated at  $r = .50$  across 23 teams (Bechler & Johnson 1995). In separate studies, those researchers found correlations exceeding  $r = .70$  between perceptions of listening and leadership when they employed coders to observe communication within teams (e.g., Johnson & Bechler 1998), suggesting that listening contributes to leadership emergence. Interestingly, Ames et al. (2012) found that people who were rated highest on interpersonal influence were perceived both to speak well and listen well, such that listening augments the benefit of speaking well.

Iranian managers' perceptions of their supervisor's listening were correlated at .56 with their perceptions of their supervisor's transformational leadership (Sharifirad 2013). A similar result was found among Israeli employees who rated their supervisor on leader's consideration (Kluger & Zaidel 2013). That study differentiated between constructive and destructive listening (Kluger & Bouskila-Yam 2018) and found that constructive listening was the best predictor of leader's consideration,  $r = .71$ . Thus, across cultures and designs, perceptions of listening covary strongly with perceptions of leadership.

## **Relationships**

Listening also seems to be a precursor of various relationship outcomes, such as trust, intimacy, and relational satisfaction.

**Trust.** Studies of various organizational relationships have linked listening with trust, including subordinates and supervisors (Stine et al 1995), patients and physicians (Keating et al 2004), customers and salespeople (Bergeron & Laroche 2009), and mock theft suspects and Dutch police-detective interviewers (Beune et al 2009). However, we found only one experiment suggesting that good listening increases trust (Korsgaard et al 1995). Yet, trust may also lead to better listening, making the causality reciprocal.

**Intimacy.** While intimacy is not usually thought of as a feature of work, it is relevant to all contexts, including work (Kluger et al 2021). Kluger et al (2021) found among Israeli co-workers that perception of listening, but not speaking ability, predicts intimacy. Thus, unlike influence that appears to be codetermined by speaking and listening abilities, intimacy depends mostly on listening. Importantly, this effect was also found when listening was reported by one teammate and intimacy by another.

**Relational satisfaction.** Listening is positively associated with relational satisfaction, as reported by customers, patients, and employees. Customers' ratings of their salesperson's listening correlated with their satisfaction with the salesperson (Aggarwal et al 2005). Salespeople's self-reported listening is also associated with their perception of the quality of their relationship with their customers (Drollinger & Comer 2013). Patients' ratings of their physician's listening are also positively associated with their satisfaction. One study with over 58,000 patients and covering 28 medical specialties found a strong positive correlation between perceived physician listening and patients' global evaluations of the physician (Quigley et al 2014). Another study, with a nationally representative sample of ~71,000 patients, found that this

effect remains when controlling for a host of other predictors, including thoroughness and carefulness in the physician's examination and treatment (Tak et al 2015).

Arendt et al (2019) operationalized employees' ratings of their supervisor's listening as mindful communication (e.g., "In conversations my supervisor first listens to what I have to say, before forming his/her own opinion"). This measure correlated at  $r = .60$  with relational satisfaction with the supervisor. However, an experimental effect of a leader's listening on satisfaction with the leader was found only among American but not among French and Moroccan participants (Es-Sabahi 2015), hinting that listening effects may be moderated by culture.

### **Job Knowledge and Cognitions**

Most existing quantitative studies of the association between listening and job knowledge lack rigor; they rely on self-reports prone to bias. For example, in one study, nurses' self-reports of listening to people, as opposed to listening to facts (see footnote 6), were associated with self-reports of knowledge of domestic violence and hospital policies (Chapin et al 2013). However, the potential effects of listening on knowledge can be gleaned from observations, quantitative studies in non-work domains, qualitative work, and theory.

Physicians have observed that "If you listen, the patient will tell you the diagnosis" (Holmes 2007). Kraut et al (1982) suggested that the more listeners transmit verbal and non-verbal signals of listening—backchannel information—the more speakers adapt their speech to increase listeners' understanding. Thus, listening increases the amount of information conveyed and the extent to which the listener understands the speaker's intention. In the realm of education, learning to listen well may involve "unlearning" processes of knowledge that the



teacher has internalized. This, in turn, may lead, paradoxically, to improved learning on the part of the teacher. For example,

Henderson (1996) reported on his undergraduate teaching that: ‘At first I was surprised— How could I, an expert in geometry, learn from students? But this learning has continued for 20 years and I now expect its occurrence. In fact, as I expect it more and more and learn to listen more effectively to them, I find that a larger portion of the students in the class are showing me something about geometry that I have never seen before’ (Arcavi & Isoda 2007).

Good listeners may also learn ways to avoid trouble. According to the emotional broadcaster theory, listeners gain valuable knowledge for protecting themselves by learning how to avoid errors committed by the speaker. Moreover, an updated version of the emotional broadcaster theory suggests that good listeners enable speakers to get to their own story’s emotional core and address the story’s violation of preexisting beliefs, leading to an emotional reaction and knowledge gain (Harber et al 2014). Thus, listening increases the listener’s knowledge and the speaker’s insight.

According to theory and experiments, listening also promotes the cognitions of the *speaker* by improving memory, self-knowledge (Pasupathi & Hoyt 2010), balanced point of view (Itzhakov & Kluger 2017, Itzhakov et al 2017), and reflective self-awareness (Itzhakov et al 2018). Building on Bavelas et al (2000) and others, Pasupathi (2001) theorized that listeners and speakers co-construct a conversation such that the co-construction changes the speaker’s memory of the narrated experience and, in turn, shapes how speakers think about themselves (i.e., their identity). Put differently, good listeners induce speakers to recall more elements of their narrated event, which eventually becomes part of the speakers’ self-knowledge. Poor

listening, on the other hand, constrains the materials the speaker will share. This constraining causes the speaker's self-knowledge to become fragmented and possibly disconnected from the narrated experiences.

Finally, listening may improve the speaker's cognitive flexibility. Dōgen Zenji, a 13th-century Buddhist monk, observed, "When you say something to someone, he may not accept it, but do not try to make him understand it intellectually. Do not argue with him; just listen to his objections until he himself finds something wrong with them." (Suzuki 1995). Indeed, in a series of experiments, Itzhakov et al (2017) found that Israeli speakers who experienced good listening considered both pros and cons of the same attitudinal object (e.g., their fitness to become managers in the future), and exhibited more complex and less extreme attitudes. Another study found a similar effect among Israeli employees reporting their attitudes towards their supervisors (Itzhakov & Kluger 2017). According to Carl Rogers, such complexity is adaptive in that it allows the person to "establish realistic and harmonious relationship with people and situations" (Rogers & Roethlisberger 1991/1952). Along these lines, Israeli engineers' perceptions of their mentor's listening correlated positively with their sense of role clarity and negatively with confusion (Cohen 2013).

### **Job Attitudes**

Perceptions of listening are positively and strongly associated with two fundamental job attitudes—job satisfaction and organizational commitment. Field studies suggest that managers' listening behaviors positively correlate with their subordinates' job satisfaction (e.g., Tangirala & Ramanujam 2012) and commitment to the organization (e.g., Tucker & Turner 2015). In an experimental study, Korsgaard et al (1995) found that leaders' active listening behavior increased their subordinates' commitment to their leader's decision.

**Well-being**

There is abundant evidence that people's well-being improves when others listen well to them. For example, nurses' perceptions of their manager's listening were positively correlated with their self-efficacy and sense of empowerment (Tangirala & Ramanujam 2012). Several experiments showed that Israeli speakers who conversed with good listeners saw a rise in psychological safety (Castro et al 2018, Castro et al 2016, Itzchakov et al 2016) and a decline in state-social anxiety (Itzchakov et al 2016, Itzchakov et al 2018, Itzchakov & Kluger 2017, Itzchakov et al 2017). Managers' active listening behavior and psychological safety mediated the effect of transformational leadership on Iranian employees' well-being (Sharifirad 2013). Caregivers of patients with a terminal illness who reported that the physicians listened to their needs and views about the patient's illness or medical treatment were less depressed than those who said they did not listen (Emanuel et al 2000).

Other important outcomes of listening are reduced burnout and its proxies. The perceptions of listening were negatively correlated with burnout in samples of Israeli, Arab, Hungarian, and North American students (Pines et al 2002). Swedish managers' good listening behavior predicted less emotional exhaustion among their employees (Theorell et al 2013). Finally, Japanese employees who worked under managers with high listening skills reported less stress than employees whose managers had low listening skills (Mineyama et al 2007).

Another aspect of well-being promoted by listening is work engagement. Icelandic managers' listening positively predicted higher work engagement among their employees, particularly in the dedication dimension (Jonsdottir & Kristinsson 2020). Another study found reduced work engagement among employees who perceived their managers as distracted by their smartphones when in the employee's presence, a phenomenon termed "boss phubbing" (phone

snubbing). Boss phubbing's effect on employee engagement was mediated by reduced psychological safety and trust (Roberts & David 2017).

Interestingly, there is evidence that when people listen well, their own well-being also improves. For instance, people with a chronic disease who were trained to support their peers through active listening reported a significant improvement in self-esteem and self-efficacy, with even stronger effects for the trained listeners than those who received their support (Schwartz & Sendor 1999). Similarly, customer service employees who participated in listening training reported decreased state anxiety and an increased sense of competence when dealing with difficult customers (Itzhakov 2020). Relatedly, negotiators perceived mediators who used active listening techniques as having higher efficacy than mediators who used other methods (Fischer-Lokou et al 2016).

Moreover, the practice of listening may change the listener, as found in research on the Listener scheme in the UK—a peer support program to reduce suicide in prisons (Perrin & Blagden 2014). Prison inmates who volunteer to become listeners receive several weeks of training from the Samaritans, a suicide-prevention and mental health charity. They then provide supportive listening to their peers, who can request listening any time of the day, including through a “Listener phone” during nighttime hours. Interviews with the listening volunteers suggest that the program promotes their well-being, sense of meaning, and purpose, empowers them, and provides them with a positive shift in identity (Perrin & Blagden 2014).

### **Voice Behavior, Inclusion, and Diversity**

Ample evidence supports the importance of promoting voice in organizations. Tangirala and Ramanujam (2012) found that managers' listening behavior positively correlated with employees' voice, or sense of their influence at work. Moreover, executives' willingness to listen

was one of the two most frequently mentioned contributors by middle managers when deciding to share new strategic ideas with their top management (Dutton et al 1997)

We did not find studies of the role of listening in inclusion and diversity in work settings. Hence, we extrapolate from findings in social and political psychology. Itzchakov et al (2020) found that speakers reported less prejudiced attitudes towards various outgroups when listeners exhibited high-quality (relative to moderate-quality) listening. Specifically, listening increased speakers' self-insight and openness to change when disclosing prejudiced attitudes. These effects were observed in speakers from both the United Kingdom and Israel. Consistent findings were observed by Kalla and Broockman (2020); conversations characterized by non-judgmental listening reduced exclusionary attitudes towards illegal immigrants and transgender people compared to conversations that contained arguments. Furthermore, the effect lasted for several months.

## **ANTECEDENTS OF GOOD LISTENING**

An important question is what leads to good listening, or, conversely, what prevents people from listening well. Variables that have been identified as antecedents of listening include the availability of attention resources, training, and authenticity or genuineness.

**Attention.** Listening requires a scarce resource: attention. Therefore, any stimuli competing for or exhausting the listener's attention will reduce the quality of listening. These include distractions, stress, and speech content that is hard to process.

Both distraction and stress are well-established antecedents of poor listening. Potential sources of distraction can be external, such as flickering screens (Castro et al 2018, Itzchakov et al 2017) and text messages (Itzchakov et al 2018, Lopez-Rosenfeld et al 2015), or internal, as when trying to listen while performing a cognitive task (Pasupathi & Hoyt 2010, Pasupathi &

Rich 2005). Stress, too, can make it difficult to listen effectively. However, the negative effects of stress can be reduced. For instance, psychological detachment from work predicts active listening on the following day (Mojza et al 2011). Mindfulness, which has been shown to help people regulate negative emotions, correlates positively with listening (Jones et al 2019).

Listening to some content is less demanding in terms of attention and cognitive resources. A speaker's perception that a specific teammate listens well to them correlates positively with that teammate's perception of the speaker's speech quality (Kluger et al 2021). Speakers who share personal stories enjoy better listening than speakers who share descriptive content (Itzhakov et al 2016). Listeners may listen with more attention when the content addresses their needs. For example, the need to belong motivates people to listen to emotional self-disclosures, but not to descriptive self-disclosures (Hackenbracht & Gasper 2013).

Some organizations have experimented with ways of increasing organizational-level attention. For example, Richards (2014) reports on an initiative by Radboud University Medical Centre in the Netherlands to appoint a listening officer, whose job is to listen to patients and family members about their concerns, fears, and uncertainties. Listening officers can devote their full attention to patients and families. They do not attempt to solve patients' problems but instead share their insights with department heads, who often institute new procedures to address patients' recurring concerns. Richards (2014) also found that being listened to is itself therapeutic. Macnamara (2015) notes that to improve listening at the organization level, organizations need to construct an "architecture of listening" containing specific policies, structures, technologies, and resources devoted to listening, and to ensuring that listeners have the time and mental space to listen with attention (Macnamara 2015).

**Training.** Listening training improves listening according to the results of experiments and quasi-experiments, reviewed in Table 2 in the Supplementary Material. For example, Spanish nurses trained for 25 hours in relaxation and communication skills, including listening and empathy, showed increased listening abilities, empathizing, non interrupting, and emotion regulation (Garcia de Lucio et al 2000). The drawback of all the available data is that it is unclear whether speakers interacting with trainees notice any change.

**Authenticity.** As Rogers (1951) observed, authenticity is critical for effective listening. This may be difficult in the work context, where individuals and organizations may have to listen to numerous people, including customers, stakeholders, and citizens. Often, listening in such contexts becomes instrumental, aimed at serving the organization's goals and interests instead of conveying an attitude of genuine caring, openness, and curiosity (Tyler 2011). In an effort to address this problem, organizations may be tempted to call for so-called "active listening" in a mechanistic way that betrays Rogers's intention (Tyler 2011). To avoid this trap, organizations need to facilitate a climate of autonomy and openness (Itzhakov & Weinstein 2021). As Lipari (2004): "listening to the alterity of the other involves giving the other meaning-making rights by renouncing one's own inclinations to control and master ... make space for the difficult, the different, the radically strange." However, to date, there are no empirical studies about the effect of authenticity on listening.

Yet, authenticity may be faked effectively by computers programs that paraphrase the communicator. Such programs can lead the communicator to believe that the computer understands them, as ELIZA showed in the 1960s (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/ELIZA>). Computer avatars mimicking the users' body language, as opposed to avatars producing random movement, increase the users' speech fluency and engagement (Gratch et al 2006). These

observations suggest that actual authenticity may be less predictive of listening effects than perceived authenticity. Moreover, these results indicate how some relatively simple listening rules, coded into computers, produce the listening people desire. Interestingly, humans appear to struggle with applying these rules. We are not advocating to replace listeners with computers, but instead, turn next to consider why it is so hard for people to listen.

## **MODERATORS AND BOUNDARY CONDITIONS FOR POSITIVE EFFECTS OF LISTENING**

The pervasive positive effects of good listening on organizational outcomes raise questions about why and when listening may fail to produce the expected benefits. Potential answers fall into two main groups of moderators or boundary conditions: those originating mainly in the speaker and those originating mainly in the listener (“mainly,” in both cases, because any conversation will involve an interplay between the two parties). We consider each in turn.

### **Moderators Originating Mainly in the Speaker**

Individual differences moderate the benefits of listening. Castro et al (2016) found that listening increases speakers’ psychological safety on average, but not for speakers with an avoidant attachment style (i.e., who do not feel comfortable with intimacy). People with an avoidant attachment style are resistant to the intimacy created by listening. By contrast, the effect of good listening on attitude structure was augmented for speakers high in trait social anxiety. Participants high in dispositional social anxiety experienced more complex and less extreme attitudes than speakers low in social anxiety following effective listening (Itzchakov et al 2017; Study 4).

### **Moderators Originating Mainly in the Listener**



Several possible moderators originate mainly in the listener. The first involves social status concerns. Listening entails a social status trade-off: good listening grants the listener higher prestige. Yet, it reduces the perceived power disparity within the speaker-listener dyad, and thus dilutes the listener's status based on dominance (Hurwitz & Kluger 2017).

Consequently, individuals who base their status on dominance might not be good listeners.

Second, effective listening seems to require a delicate balance between offering the speaker validation, supporting the self's stable parts, and challenging the speaker to change (for the conflictual speakers' need for stability and change, see Pasupathi 2001). In general, people resist change and seek out supportive (i.e., non-challenging) listeners if given a choice (e.g., Itzchakov et al 2014). But the most effective listeners may be those who can strike the right balance between validation and challenge. Baer et al (2018) found that employees who talked to a colleague about perceived unfairness felt angrier, less hopeful, and engaged in less OCB than colleagues who did not have such conversations. However, these adverse outcomes were nullified when the colleague helped speakers reframe the unfair situation by offering suggestions (i.e., challenged the speaker to change). Similarly, Behfar et al. (2020) found that when speakers were angry, listeners who challenged the speakers' thoughts and feelings were more helpful for problem-solving than purely supportive listeners. Finally, whereas giving advice is typically considered an indication of poor listening, it seems that managers perceived as excellent listeners know when and how to give advice (Zenger & Folkman 2016).

Listeners, too, may resist change. Rogers (1951) proposed that the core reason people often avoid listening is fear, sometimes out of awareness, that listening might expose areas in which they, too, would benefit from change. Change poses a threat requiring courage to overcome (Rogers & Roethlisberger 1991/1952). This fear may be why individuals engaged in

an argument often fail to listen but instead spend their non-speaking time thinking of counterarguments (Itzchakov & Kluger 2018). One more reason to resist listening altogether is the risk of being exposed to second-hand trauma. Specifically, a meta-analysis suggests that the more a worker (e.g., social worker) is exposed to traumatic stories (e.g., rape vs. cancer), the higher is their self-reported stress,  $k = 49$ ,  $N = 8,118$ ,  $\bar{r} = .15$  (Michelson & Kluger 2021).

Another potential moderator of listening is the belief that listening, in and of itself, will help the speaker to resolve an internal conflict. Listeners who do not believe in the power of listening may be too quick to provide unsolicited advice or feedback, and thus irritate speakers and reduce their sense of autonomy. In contrast, those who believe in the power of listening may lead speakers to draw their own insights with little or no advice or feedback. Such listeners frequently witness speakers gain insight and feel invigorated merely by being listened to. Witnessing speakers gain insight and vigor may protect such listeners from the dangers of second-hand trauma.

## **EPISODIC LISTENING THEORY**

Various theories in social psychology, clinical psychology, and anthropology describe the processes induced by listening and its effects. These theories, in concert, suggest that being listened to creates psychological safety (Rogers 1951),<sup>4</sup> facilitates the co-construction of narratives (Bavelas et al 2000), improves speakers' memory and self-knowledge (Pasupathi 2001), and raises perspectives previously outside of awareness (Gilligan 2015, Rogers 1951). These processes, in turn, influence well-being and fuel change in speakers (Rogers 1951) and listeners (Perrin & Blagden 2014). We integrate these theories but claim that listening might be

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<sup>4</sup> Rogers called this state an "atmosphere of safety."

better understood as a behavior addressing conflictual human needs and construed as a dyadic phenomenon (Kluger et al 2021) occurring at the episodic level. Multiple dyadic listening episodes are postulated to accumulate and lead to the outcomes reviewed above. Our theory adds to existing theories in three ways: (a) incorporation of conflicts predicting the forces that prevent listening; (b) a formal emphasis on the dyad as the proper level of analysis, and (c) focus on the listening episode. The advantages of our theory include its ability to predict when listening is likely fail, the boundaries of its effect on change, and focus on micro-processes that are more amenable to refutation and updates. That is, we build on existing theories to propose a mechanism that can offer parsimony and novel predictions.

### **Human Conflicts**

Humans evolved while constantly navigating between two sets of conflicting adaptation strategies: competition vs. cooperation and preservation vs. change. Another human can pose both the most dangerous risks for survival (e.g., a robber with a gun) and the most helpful resource to guarantee survival (e.g., a physician). Between these extremes, other people can generally detract from or support one's well-being. Therefore, humans evolved to detect and predict the consequences of interacting with others and decide accordingly to compete or cooperate. This conflict makes speakers very sensitive to the listeners' behavior. For example, a listener offering unsolicited advice may signal the speaker that the listener sees them as incompetent. This "supportive" listener may be seen as asserting superiority, threatening the speaker's social status. In contrast, a good listener "invites" the speaker to collaborate in finding ways to address the speaker's needs. This invitation is not stated explicitly but underlies the behavior of a good listener. If the speaker feels safe enough to accept this invitation, the two can go on to deal with the second set of conflicting adaptation strategies: preservation versus change.

In contrast, if the speaker does not feel safe enough to accept the listener's invitation, none of the benefits of listening enumerated above are likely to happen. Thus, any construct that reduces the speaker's psychological safety will nullify the potential benefits of listening. Such constructs may include the speaker's avoidance-attachment style, power differences between listener and speaker, and listeners' low dispositional intellectual humility.

Preservation of cognitions and routines conserves energy. As such, it makes sense for people to use habitual patterns of thought and action that have already proved themselves in keeping them alive. However, if they never change these patterns, people risk failing to adapt to a changing environment, reducing their survival fitness. Again, between these two extremes, people calibrate instantly when it is advantageous to change and when it might be dangerous. At times of threat, the safest strategy is to use habitual routines, as Rogers and others have observed. In contrast, when safety is guaranteed, people are more disposed to test their perspectives non-defensively. A good listener creates the safe condition required for change and growth. This condition is a property of episodic and dyadic interaction. Yet, because change conflicts with stability and both are important for survival, our theory predicts that the opposing force of stability will limit listening-induced change.

### **Dyadic Phenomenon (Levels of Analysis)**

Listening is dyadic in that it involves one or more pairs.<sup>5</sup> Dyads can be viewed from two perspectives: (a) how each partner relates to or interacts with the other—e.g., how Alan behaves in Beth's presence, and how this behavior is reciprocated by Beth (Kenny et al 2006); and (b)

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<sup>5</sup> Listening can also occur in a group where one speaker draws the attention of many listeners, as in Listening Circles (Itzhakov & Kluger 2017a).

constructs that influence or are generated by the two partners—e.g., the environment that Alan and Beth share, or the harmony of their relationship (Ledermann & Kenny 2012). The first perspective is captured by the social relations model (Kenny et al 2006). Listening is dyadic, according to the social relations model because each instance of listening between dyad members is unique (Kluger et al 2021). The second perspective is captured by the common-fate model (Ledermann & Kenny 2012). Building on the common-fate model, we propose that perceived listening engenders common relationships and cognitive states which come to characterize the dyad's behavior ([Figure 1](#)). Both perspectives (social relations model and common-fate model) differ from individual-level concepts, whereby one person's traits and behaviors predict either the self's or other's outcomes. For example, a listener's chronic agreeableness may affect how any speaker perceives that person's listening behavior.

We propose that perceptions of high-quality listening can fuel a cascade of events leading to organizational benefits. The perception of listening is formed through a unique match between speaker and listener. Consider this example: Alan perceives that Beth listens exceptionally well to him. This perception may reflect any of four causes: the listening climate in their work team; Alan's general perception of how people listen to him; Beth's tendency to elicit a perception of listening (i.e., her listening trait as perceived by others); and Alan's unique perception of Beth's listening that cannot be attributed to any of the preceding three sources. More formally, differences in listening can be derived from differences between teams in average perceptions of listening; differences between raters (e.g., the difference between Alan, Beth, Chuck, and Debra in how they perceive listening on average in their team); differences between ratees; and differences between unique dyads (Alan may perceive Beth as an exceptional listener, but neither Chuck nor Debra concurs). Our research involving 910 dyadic ratings of listening in Israeli work

teams found that when we decompose the variance in listening ratings, differences between teams, raters, ratees, and unique dyads explained 8%, 24%, 12%, and 42% of this variance respectively (the remainder, approximately 15%, is error variance). These data imply that about half of the explained variance can be attributed to unique dyads (Kluger et al 2021).

Moreover, listening perceptions are not reciprocated at the individual level,  $r = -.01$ , but are reciprocated within dyads,  $r = .46$ . For example, Alan may perceive everyone in his team as good listeners regardless of how everyone perceives him (no generalized reciprocity). In contrast, if Alan perceives that Beth listens exceptionally well to him, she is very likely to perceive that Alan listens exceptionally well to her (dyadic reciprocity).

Perceptions of listening, whether to self-disclosures, work-related ideas, or both<sup>6</sup>, can be chronic (“My boss generally listens well to me”) or episodic (“Wow, she is really paying attention now”). We focus on the episodic perception of listening because it is at that level where work outcomes are produced, although these can be cumulative. Specifically, we propose that perception of listening creates psychological safety (Castro et al 2018, Castro et al 2016, Itzchakov et al 2016) because it engenders a perception that the listener is non-judgmental and has benevolent intentions.

Once a speaker experiences psychological safety, they are more likely to self-disclose (Weinstein et al 2021) and speak authentically (Ryan & Ryan 2019). The authenticity of the

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<sup>6</sup> Several listening and communication theories differentiated between types of communication contents, and listener’s preferences to listen to one or another, see Bodie GD, Winter J, Dupuis D, Tompkins T. 2020. The ECHO listening profile: initial validity evidence for a measure of four listening habits. *International Journal of Listening* 34: 131-55, and summary of the four sides (ears) of Schultz von Thun ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four-sides\\_model](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Four-sides_model)). We recognize that this may be another moderator of listening effects, but given space limitation and the little empirical evidence for the predictive validity of this construct, we do not discuss it further.

speaker may then start a positive spiral. As the speaker shares more authentic content, the listener's interest may increase. This increase in listener engagement is then likely to further build the speaker's sense of psychological safety, encouraging more interesting discourse (e.g., stories versus descriptions; Itzchakov et al 2016) and better speaking quality (Kluger et al 2021), which will trigger even better listening quality. As the process of listening, perceiving listening, and authenticity spirals up, a state we label togetherness may be created. The state of togetherness is a common-fate dyadic phenomenon, as it is a property of the dyad that cannot exist within one person. Empirically, though, it could be assessed as a latent variable of togetherness indexed by the reports of the dyad members.

### **The State of Togetherness**

We define the state of togetherness as an episodic experience of “chemistry” (Reis et al in press) and high-quality connection (Dutton & Heaphy 2003), in which partners co-experience a meeting of minds, where the feeling of time is suspended, and both parties are immersed in each other's world or a newly co-created mutual space. This mental state was recognized by the philosopher Martin Buber as the state of I–Thou, as opposed to I–It, and by Emmanuel Levinas as the encounter with the Other (Lipari 2004). Listening scholars have characterized this state as transcendence—“absorption in the unfolding conversation where participants experience a sense of insight, creation, and a feeling of connection, or ‘sharedness,’ that could only be achieved via interaction with another” (Greene & Herbers 2011).

Togetherness can be characterized by three main features. The first is shared attention—“a unique psychological state in which the self perceives the world from a collective standpoint, and hence constitutes a cognitive state that is inherently social” (Shteynberg 2018). The second is a shared reality—“the experience of sharing a set of inner states (e.g., thoughts, feelings, or

beliefs) in common with a particular interaction partner about the world in general” (Rossignac-Milon et al 2020). The third is positivity resonance, which incorporates shared positive affect, mutual care and concern, and behavioral and biological synchrony (Major et al 2018). Note that, within the state of togetherness, attention may be focused either on a common goal (e.g., an organizational aim, such as improving the branch earnings rate) or on the speaker’s concerns (e.g., dissatisfaction with one’s current assignment). The experience of togetherness can be expected to generate positive emotions, even if the content of the conversation involves negative emotions, because it addresses cooperation and change needs of the dyad members.

### **The Effect of Togetherness on Cognitions**

When a pair of people are in a state of togetherness, their minds are free to engage in divergent thinking to a degree rarely experienced outside this state. This thinking occurs through two complementary processes. First, foreign cognitions of the other penetrate and influence the self’s cognition (Rouse 2020). The unique social form of the dyad provides an opportunity for heightened psychological safety and intimacy, such that “dyads might provide a context that benefits creativity in ways that working alone or in a group cannot.” This intimacy changes the interpretation of divergent ideas from a threat into an opportunity. Moreover, in this intimate space, the partners elaborate on each other’s suggestions and criticize them in a manner perceived to advance the ideation and not attack the other (Rouse 2020).

Second, the state of togetherness expands the accessibility of conflicting cognitions (Itzhakov & Kluger 2017, Itzhakov et al 2017, Rogers 1951). In the words of Rogers (1951), ... in this atmosphere of safety, protection, and acceptance, the firm boundaries of self-organization relax. There is no longer the firm, tight gestalt which is characteristic of every organization under threat, but a looser, more uncertain configuration. He [the



speaker] begins to explore his perceptual field more and more fully. He discovers faulty generalizations, but his self structure is now sufficiently relaxed so that he can consider the complex and contradictory experiences upon which they are based. He discovers experiences of which he has never been aware, which are deeply contradictory to the perception he has had of himself, and this is threatening indeed.

Translating Rogers's account to present-day terminology suggests that listening-induced togetherness increases the speaker's objective attitude ambivalence—the co-presence of opposing emotions and cognitions concerning a given topic (Itzchakov et al 2017). Thus, the listening-induced reduction in threat to the self causes the speaker to become aware of—and tolerate—conflicting aspects of their thoughts<sup>7</sup> (Itzchakov et al 2018, Itzchakov & Kluger 2017, Itzchakov et al 2017).

In sum, togetherness facilitates divergent thinking, novel perspectives, and cognitive change. Yet, togetherness is short-lived because the change which it induces threatens satisfaction of an opposing need, namely for stability (Pasupathi 2001). We predict that the conversation partner that reaches their threshold for change will terminate the state of togetherness by excusing themselves, changing the topic, or cracking a joke. Thus, any construct increasing resistance to change would decrease both the likelihood of the occurrence of togetherness and its longevity. For example, if one dyad member is high in resistance to change, they are less likely to engage in togetherness, and if they do, they are most likely to be the one who terminates this state. Nevertheless, in the wake of a togetherness episode, both conversation

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<sup>7</sup> A corollary of our argument is that listening would reduce or even annul the cognitive dissonance phenomenon.

partners emerge changed and are more likely to repeat a togetherness experience once their processing of the change is complete.

### **The Outcomes of Togetherness**

Participation in the togetherness experience leaves both conversation partners with clarity, novel plans, new knowledge, heightened well-being, and strengthened attachment to each other. Clarity is produced by togetherness because it facilitates reflective self-awareness (non-defensive introspection). Supporting this notion, Itzhakov et al (2018) found that feeling listened to increased speakers' attitude clarity—the subjective sense of truly knowing one's attitude on a topic. Listening-induced clarity increased speakers' willingness to self-disclose their attitudes to others without increasing their drive to impose their views on others. This state of inner clarity also helps to generate novel and more adaptive plans (Cohen 2013).

Togetherness contributes to the well-being of the parties via multiple routes. First, the complex cognitions that arise during the encounter are adaptive. According to Rogers, listening allows individuals to “establish realistic and harmonious relationship with people [beyond the specific partner involved in the encounter] and situations” (Rogers & Roethlisberger 1991/1952). Second, the encounter satisfies both epistemic needs (Rossignac-Milon et al 2020) and belongingness, or relatedness, needs. Satisfaction of these needs is likely to foster the well-being of the dyad members.

Finally, listening-induced togetherness reinforces the connection between the speaker and the listener. Therefore, in some organizational contexts, future listening episodes could further build relationships between the dyad members (e.g., supervisor-employee, teammates, and salesperson-customer). This improved relationship can translate into chronic benefits for the dyad and the organization.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND THEORY**

Cultivating listening in organizations may be a cost-effective way to improve numerous organizational outcomes. Consider the outcome of job satisfaction to reduce turnover and attract prospective employees. One means of increasing job satisfaction is raising employees' pay. Yet, the meta-analytically derived correlation between pay and job satisfaction is only .15 (Judge et al 2010). In contrast, consider the high correlations found between perceived listening by supervisors and employees' job satisfaction (e.g., .43 in Tangirala & Ramanujam 2012). The return on investment from raising pay could, in theory, be negligible relative to that of training supervisors in listening. Listening to employees may also mitigate the potential damage of employees' tendency to react defensively to feedback and performance appraisals (see Kluger & Lehmann 2018). Through listening, with its concomitant improvements in outcomes such as job satisfaction, organizations can also increase diversity and tolerance and encourage voice behavior. Finally, listening is a critical skill in negotiations. Thus, developing organization members' listening skills can also improve their negotiating proficiency (Curhan et al 2021, Itzhakov & Kluger 2019).

From a theoretical perspective, we argue that listening is a hitherto unexplored antecedent of relational coordination at work. According to relational coordination theory (Gittell 2016), group members who feel genuinely listened to will feel respected, and will be more likely to coordinate with the group to develop shared knowledge and shared goals. Promoting listening within teams will enable group members to understand each other's perspectives and resolve disagreements in a way that is timely, accurate, and focused on problem-solving.

### **Listening Training**

A key question is how organizations can train their employees in listening. We find in our classes that many students resist the mechanical nature of paraphrasing used in active listening. Therefore, we use many tools in our instruction. For a selection of tools, their underlying assumptions, and research, if available, see [Table S3](#) in the Supplementary Material. As an example, we begin our listening instruction by instructing the listeners to invite stories from the speakers (e.g., “Could you please tell me an interesting story about your name?”). Students first share stories, in rotating pairs, with 7-10 students. As homework, they ask three people out of class to tell them three stories each and then write a reflection. We assume that inviting stories improves listening and experimental data support this claim (Itzchakov et al 2016). However, none of the methods we use were tested with more than a handful of studies each.

Due to the lack of research programs to test the effectiveness of listening training, insight might be gained from psychotherapy, where listening methods are standard and sometimes accompanied by a rigorous research program (see the footnote of [Table S3](#) in the Supplementary Material). One such method is motivational interviewing (Rollnick & Miller 1995). Consistent with our proposed episodic listening theory, motivational interviewing’s central assumption is that change should be freely elicited from within speakers rather than imposed on them. Specifically, the listener tries to understand the speaker’s perspective and paraphrases content that conveys ambivalence. This process allows speakers to explore internal conflicts and contradictions and increase their motivation to change (Rollnick & Miller 1995). Organizations can use motivational interviewing to help employees cope with work-related ambivalence, such as work-family conflict or managing conflictual work relationships.

Importantly, our observation of our university-level classes on listening suggests that experiential activities in which trainees learn what it feels like to be listened to, and reflect on

their experience, may be more effective than instruction-based training (see Hinz et al 2020). Making trainees knowledgeable about the benefits of listening is unlikely to change behavior by itself. Instead, experiencing firsthand the benefits of being listened to by others may motivate participants to put their learning into practice, first by reciprocating during the training and then transferring their new skills to other contexts.

We also concur with observations that listening should be taught before individuals even set foot within the organization. Professional education (e.g., medical and MBA programs) typically does not include listening skills. Brink and Costigan (2014) also point to a misalignment between the perspectives of employers and recruiters and the skills taught in most business programs, with listening being the most important aspect of communication in the workplace, but the aspect given least prominence in business classes.

## **LIMITATIONS AND OPEN QUESTIONS**

One significant and unresolved issue in understanding the construct of listening at work is its discriminant validity. Listening behaviors (see [Figure S1](#)) may be subsets of listening and, as such, may be easier to define and manipulate than broader constructs, such as perceived listening. These behaviors may include asking questions (Hart et al 2021, Van Quaquebeke & Felps 2018), paraphrasing, and following a receptiveness recipe (Yeomans et al 2020). The drawback of defining and studying specific listening behaviors is that they do not capture the entire phenomenon. Defining listening as a holistic perception may provide the proper conceptual breadth but may be indistinguishable from constructs such as feeling understood (Reis et al 2017) and perceived responsiveness (Reis & Clark 2013). Also, it may be empirically hard to disentangle the perception of listening from listening outcomes such as empathy and

trust. Therefore, more theoretical and empirical research is needed to refine the construct of listening and demonstrate its discriminant validity.

Second, research is needed to establish whether perceived listening is a unipolar or a bipolar construct, which will shed light on the meaning of experimental manipulations of listening. Presently, if one manipulates poor, moderate, and good listening, it is unclear whether this is a manipulation of one latent construct or two (destructive and constructive listening). A third challenge is to understand the antecedents of listening perceptions. For example, some employees equated good listening with their supervisor accepting their requests for resources, even long after the conversation (Kriz et al in press). This lay perception of listening diverges from our definition. A fourth challenge is developing effective methods for training employees to listen, such that speakers notice the change. The assessment of listening training may benefit both from theorizing and measuring how trained listeners influence their social environment. Fifth, the field of listening reports only two meta-analyses (Itani et al 2019, Michelson & Kluger 2021), which were not based on systematic reviews. Systematic reviews coupled with meta-analyses will create the databases constraining future theories. Sixth, most existing research on listening seeks only to demonstrate its benefits. Yet, only by probing the boundaries (moderators) and the forces preventing people from listening may advance the field beyond the clichés of active listening.

Finally, the Episodic Listening Theory we proposed needs further clarification and details to become more refutable. For example, it is unclear from our model ([Figure 1](#)) how many iterations between the listener's listening and the speaker's authenticity are required to produce togetherness. Furthermore, the theory is mute about a host of individual differences that may

operate at the dyad level and impact the speed at which psychological safety will be produced or destroyed.

## **CONCLUSION**

We have summarized evidence that listening generates high-quality connections that improve a wide range of organizational outcomes. Therefore, managers and employees who cultivate listening will reap first the benefits of high-quality connections and togetherness. These then cascade into greater creativity, productivity, clarity, and well-being for the listener, the speaker, and the organization. To cultivate listening skills, we suggest that focusing on one episode at a time may be more productive than attempting to become a better listener in general. In practicing listening, the focus should be on cultivating the Rogerian belief that mere listening sparks the cascade of desirable events. Finally, we delineated the research approach that may advance the field of listening. It includes caution in separating listener and speaker effects, studying them from a dyadic perspective, and applying appropriate statistical methods. We pointed out the challenges facing listening research at work. Overcoming these challenges will help understanding ways for creating more humane and productive organizations.

**FUTURE ISSUES LIST**

1. Establish discriminant validity for the construct of perceived listening, including determination of whether the construct is unipolar or bipolar.
2. Establish discriminant validity for listening manipulations.
3. Creating robust manipulations of better-than-average listening.
4. Develop a theory of listening training and test the effects of training on people interacting with trainees.
5. Perform systematic reviews and meta-analyses of the various effects of listening.
6. Advance understanding of the forces that prevent people from listening, and demonstrate more boundaries (moderators) of listening effects.
7. Refine the Episodic Listening Theory as to present more specific, and refutable, predictions.



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Figure 1

Episodic Listening Theory

