Building a Next Practice Listening Strategy

The emerging listening paradigm

Just as consumers increasingly demand personalized products, services and experiences from companies, those same consumers are also employees. Many companies understand more about their customers than they do about their employees, and investment dollars have poured into programs and technology to understand consumer needs and behavior at scale. While CEOs and HR professionals understand the high cost of acquiring and retaining employees, the programs and technology to understand and act upon employee needs has not kept pace. A new paradigm for listening and understanding employees is emerging, and every HR professional should understand the significance of this advancement.

The Emerging Listening Paradigm

Leading-edge organizations are shifting from traditional annual survey programs to a new listening paradigm focused on the "voice of the employee," in which input is collected from structured employee feedback and free-form text comments related to an employee's experiences as a member of an organization. This shift in emphasis has come about in response to four common problems:

1. For many organizations, employee engagement measurement has not been strategic.

Almost every organization surveys and collects opinion data from employees, but there are few opportunities to listen directly to employee concerns due to the limits of standard survey methods, and therefore diminishes its value as a meaningful source of information related to organization ef-

fectiveness, talent adequacy for strategy implementation, and managing talent risk.

2. Dissatisfaction with focusing on engagement as the dominant measurement paradigm.

While engagement is important, it merits inclusion as only one aspect of an organization's listening strategy. A more robust and complete listening approach positions engagement as one valuable measure of overall organizational effectiveness rather than as an end in itself.

3. The traditional employee survey approach is outdated.

With the bulk of employee survey methodology developed in the last century, the standard multiple-choice survey is ill-fitted for the world we live in today. New technologies
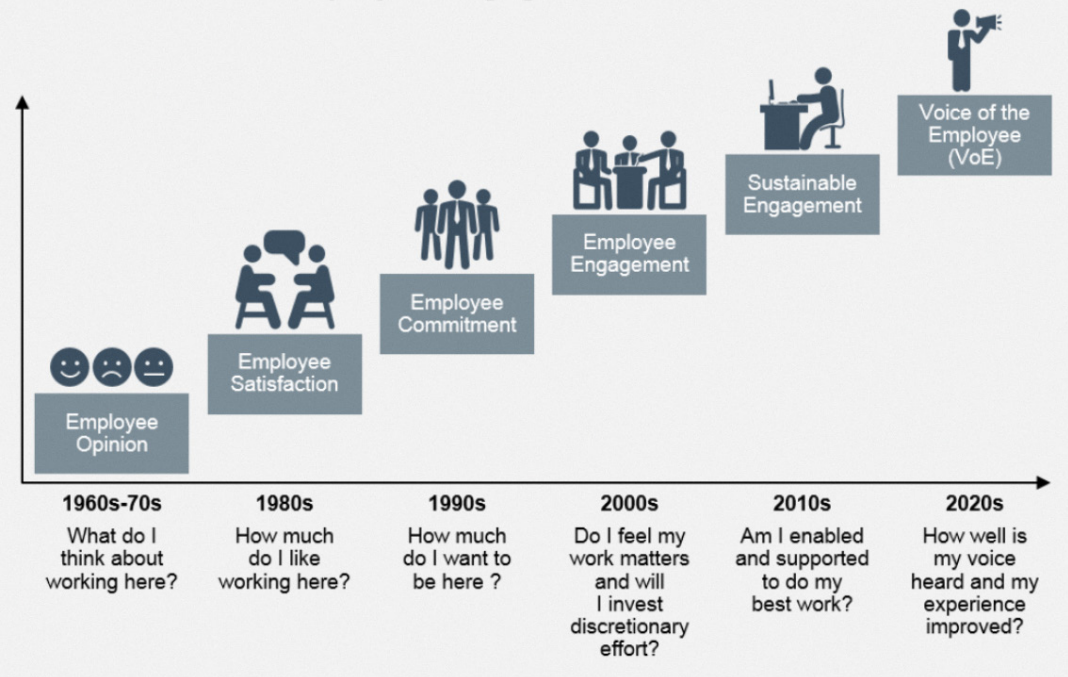
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for listening—especially artificial intelligence (AI)-based approaches to natural language analytics and sentiment analysis—are key features of a contemporary listening strategy.

ence. Research conducted by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp) shows many organizations are dissatisfied with the value and use of survey data to drive action.

4. Need for a better way to respond to employee voice.

Listening without responding is wasted effort and detrimental to the employee experi-

A recent report by the Gartner Group shows the evolution from measuring employee satisfaction toward an employee voice-centered listening program. (January 2018)

Listen–Learn–Act: The Listening-to-Action Cycle
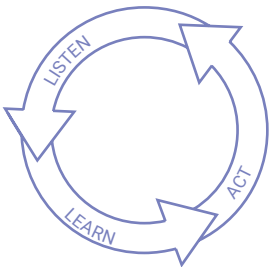
Voice of the employee listening programs should follow a phased "sense and respond" approach to gathering and using employee input. As the phases are repeated, they form a virtuous cycle, in which the effect of actions taken create a new current state, setting the stage for the next round of data-gathering and analysis. The "listen" phase is critical to finding the top concerns of employee population(s), so that targeted learning and action steps can be enabled.

The three phases of the listening-to-action cycle and their characteristics:

Listen Phase

Gathering responses to structured questions in addition to free-form comments provided in response to open-ended comment opportunities.

Characteristics:

a. Multiple channels are used for continuous data-gathering.

b. Structured input is gathered around specific interests (e.g., engagement) and employee

experience touch points (onboard, new hire, exit, stay).

c. Planned and ad hoc pulse surveys collect reactions to issues, actions taken, events, organization changes, announcements, etc.

d. Unstructured input formats are used to gather the natural voice of the employee, including "always on" listening and sentiment monitoring of qualitative input

e. Social site monitoring is used to obtain and outside/in view of the employee experience.

Analysis is done on each body of data collected, as well as integrated together to produce a cross-channel view.

Learn Phase

Aggregate, tabulate, and format input to provide understanding of employee responses and comments. Analyze data to produce useful information, providing reporting and identifying meaningful issues within the organization context.

Charactertistics:

a. Artificial intelligence-enabled qualitative (open-ended comment) analysis and insights.

b. Analysis includes pre-determined indices, such as engagement, inclusion, innovation, collaboration.

c. Quantitative and qualitative analysis of data is conducted for the enterprise and or important workforce segments – demographic groupings, high-potentials, etc.

d. Analysis includes examining important relationships in the data to highlight impactful correlations and predictive measures

e. Analysis and insights include considerations of unintended consequences.

f. Integrated, cross-channel reporting and analysis produces insights in areas related to talent risk, project viability, and organizational health.

Act Phase

Remedial and opportunistic steps taken in response to the insights derived from analysis of the employee input.

Characteristics:

a. Top-down, executive and chartered team-led change initiatives.

b. Agile-inspired response approaches to produce high-involvement, employee designed change.

c. Emphasis is given to recognizing and nurturing or sponsoring employee experience (EX) movements that benefit capability development and the employee experience.

d. Create dialogue—promote organizational learning and capability-building.

e. Measurement of results includes metrics and sentiment-sensing—engagement, retention, energy, health & wellness, employment brand feedback, net promoter score (NPS).

f. Actions are taken on issues, opportunities, trends, with an emphasis on acting quickly in response to input

This listening-to-action cycle can be applied to a single data gathering activity such as a pulse survey, or applied to several data collection activities that have been integrated to form a broader body of input and area of examination.

Modern software platforms such as Rapport™ are designed to capture and integrate data from many touchpoints along the employee experience journey, including narrative inputs. Comments from employees are processed by AI, allowing for rapid processing and reporting of employee driven insights.

Connecting Listening Strategy to the Business

Many organizations have an employee engagement program but struggle to connect their engagement survey results with the organization's business goals. Ultimately, business success depends fundamentally on mastering three core business competencies, shown below.

1. Strategy – Having the right product or service, right customer, right price.

2. Operations – Delivering the product or service at a high-quality level, at the right cost to make a profit, satisfying customers' buying preferences.

3. People – Ensuring the business has people with the right skills and motivation, available when and where they're needed, to design and deliver products or services and flawlessly.

STRATEGY

OPERATIONS

PEOPLE

Successful Organization Model

Performance Capability Measures

Capability measures are indicators of organizational support for effective employee performance. Employees may bring tremendous personal commitment and enthusiasm to their jobs and possess high levels of engagement, but these attributes alone are not enough to ensure successful organizational performance.

Performance capability measures examine:

- Alignment with organization vision and values

- Management and leadership practices

- Skills

- Organization design

- The layout of the workspace

- Employee access to tools and information needed to perform

- Organizational norms around important topics like collaboration and innovation.

- None of the listed performance capability factors are under an employee's direct

control but are key factors that affect their ability to contribute.

Employee Experience Measures

Employee experience (EX) is a broad measurement concept that focuses on how employees experience the organization, including their feelings about their interactions with policies, practices, and activities in the organization. A favorable employee experience is motivating, while an unfavorable employee experience is demotivating.

Employees who are satisfied with their EX are more likely to respond favorably on Net Promoter Score assessments (NPS), have higher levels of engagement and commitment to the organization, and represent a lower retention risk. Organizations want to provide a positive employee experience because having an overall favorable EX combined with strong performance capability is the path to high performance.

Employee experience measures examine:

- Engagement level

- Employee NPS

- Personal development and career advancement prospects

- Relationships with peers and supervisors

- Work/life balance

- Pay and benefits

- Reactions to organizational policies and practices

Sources of Employee Feedback and Comments

Modern listening programs have three goals:

1. Monitor what employees are thinking on topics the organization cares about

2. Understand how employees feel about their work experience and other topics they care about

3. Respond appropriately as an organization to issues and opportunities, including using listening and response forums to shape the narrative in support of organizational value and goals.

How do we get data on performance capability and employee experience? The obvious answer is that we get it largely from employee input—after all, that's what a listening strategy is intended to do. Looking deeper, we gather this information through social or employee lead communication, and by asking employees to contribute through two types of input: structured and unstructured answers to survey questions.

Structured Input - Structured input produces employee responses to questions provided by the organization through surveys, polls, exit questionnaires, etc. Structured listening approaches have the advantage of focusing employee input on topics the organization cares about. There are many times when structured input is appropriate and response to a scaled or multiple-choice question is useful. Structured feedback lends itself to quantification, for example, "65% of respondents selected …".

While structured approaches are useful (and still popular), they have some disadvantages. The main flaws of structured listening approaches are that they presume the

questions asked cover the most important aspects of a topic and that responses received to the questions completely and accurately capture what employees have to say on the subject. Plus, the wording of structured questions often biases the response, for example, a survey question that asks "How can we improve our …?" implies there needs to be improvement (or it wouldn't be asked about in the first place) and may provoke responses that are critical or of negative sentiment.

Unstructured Input - Unstructured input is provided when employees have the opportunity to voice their views free of the organization's direction as to topic or sentiment bias. This approach produces a more pure employee voice. Until recent advances in text analysis and natural language processing, the effective analysis of free-form comments at scale was very difficult. Today, AI-driven applications make using unstructured input both practical and reliable, with measures of sentiment and reporting that rivals structured input reporting in terms of quantification and ability to analyze input by topic and demographic.

Common sources of input include:

- Engagement surveys

- Onboarding surveys and new hire surveys

- Stay interviews and surveys

- Exit surveys

- Alumni surveys

- Interviews- one-on-ones, skip-level interviews

- Focus groups

- Polls

- Upward feedback/360 feedback

- "Always on" channels that allow employees to initiate feedback or respond to broadcast response opportunities

- Journey-mapping feedback

- Social site analysis

The Capability-Experience Listening Model

For many organizations, demonstrating how listening strategy connects to the business is difficult. Understanding the relationship between listening and success requires constructing a 2X2 matrix based on two superordinate talent strategy goals – (1) equip people to effectively accomplish business goals, and (2) create an employee experience that compels people to stay and allows them to thrive.

The X axis—performance capability—measures the strength of factors that influence employee capability to perform in ways that are required by the business, such as alignment with the organization's purpose and values, leadership behaviors, enablement and skills. The Y axis—employee experience—measures the degree to which the employee experience is viewed as positive (favorable) or negative (unfavorable), and includes measures such as engagement, job autonomy, culture, NPS, and supervisory practices.

The aim for the organization is to have a workforce that is strongly capable of making the business succeed and highly favorable of the employee experience.

Taking Action – A Better Way

In i4cp's 2016 study, Contemporary Practices in Employee and Organization Surveys, survey practitioners were asked to rate their satisfaction with the main phases of survey projects. For most aspects of projects—survey design, administration, data analysis, and reporting—satisfaction levels were quite high, ranging between 75 to 80% favorable. One area however—follow-up action planning— rated significantly lower at 47% favorable.

As part of this research, i4cp probed to identify reasons for the low levels of satisfaction with after-survey action-taking and found that practitioners cited common problems:

- Slow turn-around of data reports made the survey results feel outdated.

Successful Organization Model
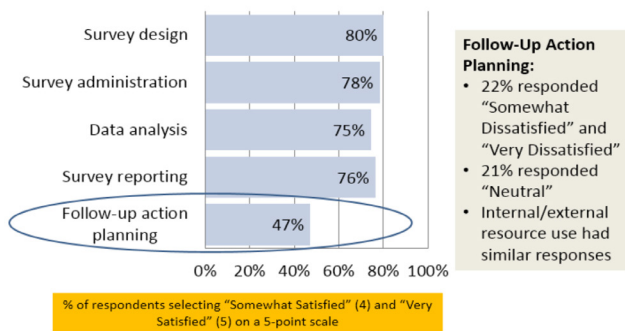
Capacity/Experience Listening Model
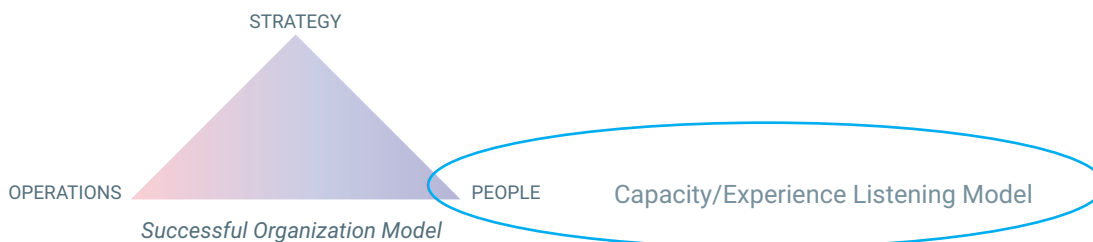
The Two Frameworks

The Successful Organization Model and the Capability/Experience Listening Model – interact to show the link between what the business needs to be successful and the results of an organization listening analysis.

Satisfaction with survey projects

Survey design	80%
Survey administration	78%
Data analysis	75%
Survey reporting	76%
Follow-up action planning	47%

0% 20% 40% 60% 80% 100%

% of respondents selecting "Somewhat Satisfied" (4) and "Very Satisfied" (5) on a 5-point scale

Follow-Up Action Planning:
- 22% responded "Somewhat Dissatisfied" and "Very Dissatisfied"
- 21% responded "Neutral"
- Internal/external resource use had similar responses

- Managers said they did not have the time to understand and act on the survey results.

- Focus and processes were too top-down, meaning the actions taken in response to issues did not really fit the situation on the front line.

- Localized team-based survey workshops were not good forums for addressing the most important issues facing an organization, resulting in many action plans that focused on local hygiene factors.

- Employees often had no role or only minor roles to play in the process of planning changes in response to important survey results, so they had little identification and ownership for them.

There are three keys to a better approach for listening:

1. The best way to make action-taking more effective is to ditch the notion of action-taking as the response to a big survey event
Listening needs to be continuous. Imagine a business that only listened to its customers once every year or 18 months as the basis for responding to their needs and interests! That's how many organizations time their listening and action-taking in response to employee input.

As the organization transitions to a next practice listening approach, it will use multiple channels to gather employee input data, some of which (like exit surveys, new hire surveys, external social site input, hot lines or warm lines, etc.), are always on. As listening becomes continuous, the approach to response and action-taking should also become continuous.

2. Speed up the process.
Get results out faster, so that insights are fresh—technology platforms make this much easier today than in the past, and get teams working on data analysis and action-taking right away. Set near-term milestones to review progress. Even if the eventual solution takes longer to achieve, by not reviewing progress towards results soon after they are available you run the risk of slow implementation and perceptions by employees that what they say doesn't really matter.

3. Be clear and concise
From the outset, set the expectation that employees and managers will work together to address issues by adopting a continuous, agile listening approach. For most organizations, a continuous listening program will be new. This means it must be explained, promoted and reinforced.
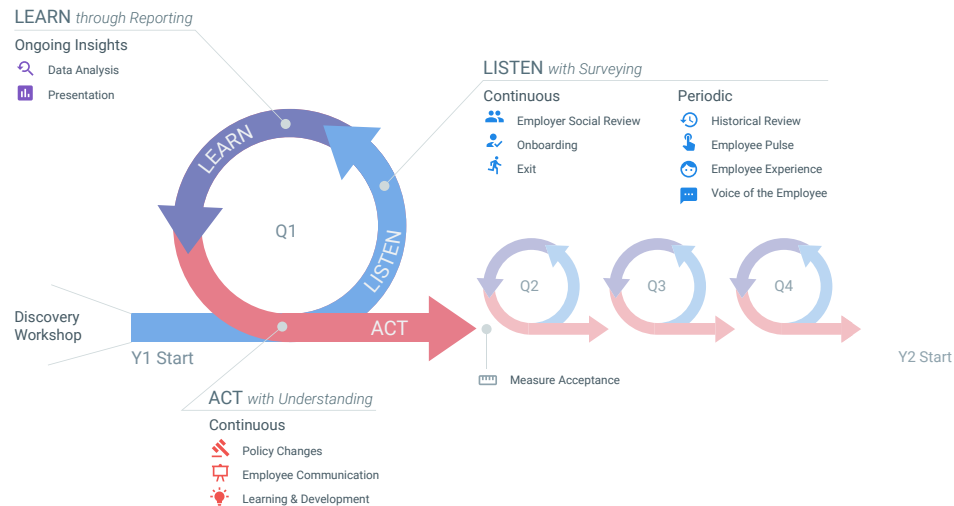
Developing a Listening Strategy

The most effective way to develop a listening strategy that fits organizational goals and values is to convene a design team and charge them to develop the listening strategy in a facilitated work session. The work session brings together HR leadership, and may include select business leaders to discuss, plan, and reach consensus on a new and more effective employee listening strategy and plan for their organization.

The agenda for a facilitated listening strategy planning session is as follows:

1) Describe the current state: "Where we are today"
Group input by planning team members to describe the current state of the organization's employee survey/listening strategy and practices, share aspirations for the future, and ensure linkage to business needs.

LEARN *through Reporting*
Ongoing Insights
- Data Analysis
- Presentation

LISTEN *with Surveying*

Continuous
- Employer Social Review
- Onboarding
- Exit

Periodic
- Historical Review
- Employee Pulse
- Employee Experience
- Voice of the Employee

Discovery Workshop

Y1 Start

Measure Acceptance

ACT *with Understanding*
Continuous
- Policy Changes
- Employee Communication
- Learning & Development

Y2 Start

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2) Present a listening program best practices overview
Share the latest in listening strategy approaches, survey technique, and practice. This presentation should include sharing ideas, research, and examples from experienced survey, communication and technology practitioners, and include illustrations of ways sentiment analysis platforms are used as one element of a robust listening strategy.

- The process of creating a new listening strategy greatly benefits from providing the design team with a broad exposure to available listening options and hearing examples of how others have successfully implemented their chosen approaches.

3) Develops Answers to Design Questions
The design group answers key listening strategy design questions:

- Goals - What are our listening program goals?

- Methods - What methods will we use for communication, data-collection, and response?

- Benefits - What's in it for the organization to make these changes? What's in it for employees?

- Plan - What will our high-level implementation scenario look like?

- Measures - How will we measure the effectiveness of our approach?

- Resources- What resources will we need?

- Readiness - How ready are we to implement? What are the barriers to change and how will we mitigate them?

- Next steps - What are our next steps to get started?

Agile Listening

1. Create a two-way conversation
Think of action responses as the result of a dialogue between the organization and the employee.

2. Focus on outcomes, rather than outputs to increase solution creativity and scope
Determining what the end product needs to be at the outset limits problem-solving creativity and confines possible solutions to a pre-ordained result. Instead, focus on the outcome—conditions to be met for the situation to be improved.

3. Embrace continuous change and continuous process
Iterative action-taking cycles keep the effort nimble and allows you to react quickly when circumstances change.

4. Break down silos and create collaboration
Most issues or opportunities that surface in organizations don't conform easily to lines on the organization chart. Embrace the notion that solution-finding actions generally require breaking down walls and getting all stakeholders involved.

5. Create a learning and development culture
Learn-it-all cultures (as opposed to know-it-all cultures) require openness, willingness to experiment, humility, curiosity, collaboration, and permission to fail.

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Summary

By choice or abstention, every organization has a listening strategy.

Those with an intentional listening approach carefully seek employee input, using tools such as surveys, polls, upward feedback, and social site messaging analysis to measure engagement levels, satisfaction with aspects of the employee experience, perceptions of the company brand, or reactions to an important event such as a merger or reorganization.

Those organizations without an intentional listening strategy and plan also receive employee input about aspects of the organization, though the expressions of that input may manifest as turnover, low levels of enthusiasm and commitment for the organization on a day-to-day basis or even lawsuits aimed at perceived workplace grievances.

High-performance organizations are much more likely to be intentional with their listening approaches. They invest in continuous employee-centric data gathering and analysis of factors such as leadership, strategy alignment, key skills proficiency, and job enablement to inform and influence their organization's level of capability to perform. Likewise, they seek and analyze factors like engagement levels, satisfaction with personal and career opportunities, relationships with management, etc. to better understand the employee experience. They strive to follow-up on what they learn from their multiple listening channels and then commit to an agile, learning organization approach to taking follow-up action based on what they learn.

By following these steps and developing an intentional program for listening, learning and acting, any company could join the ranks of other high-performance organizations.

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Your employees want to speak.
Rapport™ helps you listen.

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