

# Actions Speak Louder Than (Listening to) Words

*The Role of Leader Action in Encouraging  
Employee Voice*

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# Executive Summary

Unfortunately, this employee experience is far too common among today's workers. It should come as no surprise that listening is key to leadership. According to The World Economic Forum, listening is the skill most needed in the new world of work, a world marked by new working styles, different working preferences and the rise of a hybrid workforce (Davos, 2023). Numerous Harvard Business Review articles have expounded on various ways to be a better listener, highlighting 'good' listening skills. As early as 1957, communication scholars wrote that "the skill of listening becomes extremely important when we talk about 'upward communication'" (p. 89).

Upward communication, today known as *employee voice*, is a proactive employee behavior that takes the form of speaking up with ideas, concerns or criticisms, suggestions, and process improvements. Employee voice constructively challenges the status quo with the goal of improving organizational performance (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998). For leaders, understanding how to encourage employee voice is important because it is positively related to work process improvements, organizational innovation and creativity, and better decision making (Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Unfortunately, employees perceive that using their voice is risky, and there are valid career, reputation, and relational concerns about speaking up in organizations (e.g., Ashford et al., 1998; Burris, 2012; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Rather than voicing their ideas and suggestions, employees often remain silent – thereby depriving

**“My manager says to make suggestions but, when I do, it seems like my manager isn't listening to me.”**

leaders and organizations of critical information, ideas, and improvements.

Employees speak up because they want to make a positive difference in their organization. When employees consider whether to voice, they engage in a mental 'safety-efficacy' calculus (Morrison, 2011, 2014) in which they weigh the potential costs of speaking up against whether speaking up will make any difference (see Figure 1, next page). In doing so, certain leader behaviors may encourage (or discourage) employee voice (see Morrison, 2023 for a review) as employees look for signals as to whether speaking up will be worth the cost. One such leader behavior is listening (Dutton et al., 1997). Leader listening can send positive signals to employees about both safety and efficacy, which may increase the likelihood that employees speak up. However, do we really understand what leaders do that make employees feel listened to (or not)? What leader behaviors do employees pay attention to and how do leader behaviors influence whether employees speak up again in the future?



## FEAR AND THE SAFETY-EFFICACY CALCULUS

### Are there personal costs?

- Relationship conflict
- Career consequences
- Reputational damage
- Challenging the status quo

### Will anything change?

- Does it matter if I speak up?
- What is the likelihood of success?
- Will anyone above me do anything?

**FIGURE 1**

This Research Insights paper challenges the assumption that ‘good’ listening behaviors are sufficient to make employees feel listened to (which we refer to as *felt listening*, i.e., the holistic perception of feeling listened to). In Study 1, using 133 qualitative critical incidents, we explored leader behaviors that make employees feel listened to (or not) when they speak up to leaders at work. In Study 2, in an experiment with 187 employees, we examined the role of leader responses to employee voice on employee perceptions of felt listening and how leader responses influence employees’ intentions to speak up again in the future.

Overall, our findings augment some of the oft-given advice about how leaders should listen. We highlight four key findings:

1. **Action matters.** Overwhelmingly, how leaders respond (by taking action or not taking action) surfaced consistently as a critical factor in whether employees feel listened to. It’s not just how well leaders listen – it’s what they do about what they hear.
2. **Leader responses influence whether employees feel listened to and if they will speak up again in the future.** When leaders act on employee voice, employees feel listened to and are more likely to raise suggestions, concerns and ideas in the future. When leaders do not take action, employees do not feel listened to and are less likely to speak up again.
3. **Employee judgments of leader listening include longer term assessments of leader actions.** Employees view listening as a relational process. Their retrospective perceptions of leader

listening include both listening behaviors in the moment as well as later, longer term assessments about whether the leader took any action on what was voiced.

4. **Beyond action, leaders need to pay attention to demonstrating other listening ‘signals.’** If leaders want to elicit more employee voice but cannot act on the specific idea or suggestion, they need to send other signals. These can include validating employees, supporting or engaging with employee ideas and suggestions, endorsing ideas and concerns, and making time to listen.



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# Introduction and Framing

When employees speak up, many feel their leaders are not listening. As early as the 1930s, scholars in the field of communication began stressing the importance of listening as a critical communication skill (Adams, 1938; Borden, 1935 as cited in Bodie, 2011). Recently, the World Economic Forum rated [listening as the skill most needed](#) in the new world of work (Davos, 2023). In the past few years, management scholars have also begun research on workplace listening (e.g., Yip & Fisher, 2022).

Listening generally involves three components – sensing, processing, and responding – that happen almost simultaneously (Bodie, 2011; Drollinger et al., 2006). Sensing requires the listener to actively sense the words, the relational content of the message, and the speaker’s emotional needs. Processing involves integrating and interpreting the different parts of the message. Responding is when the listener signals to the speaker that they have been heard and understood. This last component includes traditional ‘good’ listening behaviors.

Such listening behaviors (Bodie, 2013) may include body language (e.g., head nods, leaning forward), verbal acknowledgements, summarizing points that were made, asking clarifying questions and sensing what is underneath spoken words (e.g., being aware of what is implied but not said; understanding how others feel). Unfortunately, not all leaders are good listeners and many leaders tend to overrate their listening abilities (Brownell, 1990). Listening can be a signal of receptivity, creating a safe environment where employees can share without feeling judged (Pasupathi et al., 2009). Listening may signal that the employee’s opinions and thoughts are important and that the leader is willing to invest time in order to understand the employee. Listening behaviors also demonstrate that what the employee is saying is important and worth remembering (Bavelas et al., 2000; Pasupathi & Hoyt, 2010). However, leaders should recognize that their formal role is often a barrier to getting the information they need (Morrison, 2014). To counteract their more powerful position, leaders can use listening behaviors to send signals to employees (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

In 1957, communication scholars wrote that “the skill of listening becomes extremely important when we talk about ‘upward communication’” (p. 89). Upward communication, today known as employee voice, is the “informal and discretionary communication by an employee of ideas, suggestions, concerns, information about problems, or opinions about work-related issues to persons who might be able to take appropriate action, with the intent to bring about improvement or change” (Morrison, 2014, p. 174). Employee voice has become an important research topic over the past few decades because employee voice helps organizations function more effectively. Employee voice is positively related to work process improvements, organizational innovation and creativity, and better decision making (for a review, see Bashshur & Oc, 2015). Not having employees speak up is problematic for many reasons – including giving organizational leaders the erroneous impression that all is well within the organization, restricting access to information, and reducing the ability to detect errors and problems (e.g., Ashford et al., 2009; Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

Because employee voice is an extra-role behavior that seeks to challenge and change the status quo (Van Dyne & LePine, 1998), employees often perceive it to be a risky behavior (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Edmondson, 2003). Indeed, employees have valid career, reputation, and relational concerns about speaking up in organizations (e.g., Ashford et al., 1998; Detert & Burris, 2007; Morrison & Milliken, 2000). For instance, Seibert, Kraimer and Crant (2001) found that employee voice was negatively related to salary increase and promotion. The authors pointed out that employee voice may be viewed as negative or critical, and, in turn, may instigate friction in interpersonal relationships. Although organizations say they want employee input, in reality employee voice may create more work and conflict, and employees who speak up may face repercussions (e.g., Burris, 2012; Fast et al., 2014). Rather than voicing their ideas and suggestions, employees often remain silent – thereby depriving leaders and organizations of important ideas, information, and improvements.

Employees speak up because they want to make a positive difference in their organization. However, a primary concern regarding voice is how it will be received by leaders. As such, employees assess the ways in which leaders respond to ideas, suggestions, and opinions (Detert & Burris, 2007; Dutton et al., 1997; Edmondson, 2003) when considering whether to voice. These perceptions then inform a mental ‘safety-efficacy’ calculus (Morrison, 2011, 2014) in which employees weigh the potential costs of speaking up against whether speaking up will make any difference (see Figure 1).

We know that leaders have an important influence on employee voice (see Morrison, 2023 for a review). Certain leader behaviors may encourage or discourage

employee voice. One such leader behavior is listening (Dutton et al., 1997). Leader listening can send positive signals to employees about both safety and efficacy, which may increase the likelihood that employees speak up. To encourage employee voice, it is critical to understand the factors that influence employee perceptions of leader listening. What is it that leaders do that make employees feel listened to (or not)? What leader behaviors do employees pay attention to and how do leader behaviors influence whether employees speak up again in the future?



# STUDY 1 Examining Incidents Of (Not) Listening



The goal of Study 1 was to understand leader listening (in the context of employee voice) in terms of behaviors that influence employee perceptions of leader listening. In service of this goal, we conducted exploratory research to answer the following research questions (RQ):

**RQ1:** What categories of employee voice arise in speaking up to leaders at work?

**RQ2:** What leader behaviors have the most impact on employee perceptions of leader listening?

## Sample, Procedure, and Analyses

Using a critical incident technique (Flanagan, 1954) that is frequently used by researchers studying event-based phenomena (e.g., Chen & Trevino, 2022), we recruited 150 worker-participants from Prolific (an online sample platform). Participants worked full-time, spoke English as their primary language, and resided in North America. The average age of participants was 33.5 years, 45% self-identified as female, and the average organizational tenure was 5.6 years.

We asked participants to recall two critical workplace incidents – one in which they strongly felt someone in their organization listened to them and one in which they strongly felt someone in their organization did not listen to them. Participants were asked to explain the experiences in as much detail as possible and to respond to specific question prompts. We also asked participants about the single most important factor

that made them feel listened to (or not). Participants completed questions about the organizational role of the person with whom they interacted (e.g., peer, direct report, direct supervisor, etc.). This data collection effort resulted in 148 ‘listened to’ incidents and 149 ‘not listened to’ incidents. We next assessed which incidents qualified as employee voice (e.g., speaking up to someone at a higher organizational rank with the intent to bring about positive organizational change). This yielded 74 ‘listened to’ incidents and 59 ‘not listened to’ incidents.

Data were analyzed by coding for themes within and across the two sets of incidents. These included broad categorization of the types of voice incidents (RQ1) and the specific leader behaviors that most impacted employee perceptions of feeling listened to or not feeling listened to (RQ2). For RQ2, some participants provided more than one behavior: for the ‘listened to’ incidents, there were 86 behaviors; for the ‘not listened to’ incidents, there were 69 behaviors.

## Types of Employee Voice

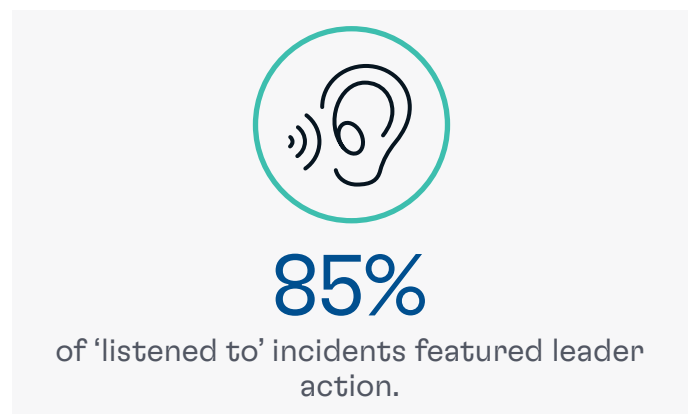
In the ‘listened to’ and the ‘not listened to’ incidents, we identified several categories of employee voice in the workplace. The two most common categories were suggesting process changes or improvements (42% and 54%, respectively) and raising a problem or concern (23% and 19%, respectively). For RQ1, see Table 1 for all categories of employee voice.

# STUDY 1 Examining Incidents Of (Not) Listening, *continued*

## Feeling Listened To (or Not)

In response to asking participants about the single most important factor that influenced their perceptions of feeling listened to (or not), there was some reverse symmetry between leader behaviors in the ‘listened to’ and ‘not listened to’ incidents. Among the behavior categories influencing the ‘listened to’ incidents, the four most important were: taking some type of action (39%); affirming the employee’s value (14%); providing support or engagement with the idea/suggestion (13%) and acknowledging/validating the issue or idea (10%). Among the behavior categories influencing the ‘not listened to’ incidents, the four most important were: not taking action/nothing changed (28%); a lack of support or engagement with the idea/suggestion (22%); invalidating the employee (16%); and not acknowledging/invalidating the issue or concern (14%). For RQ2, see Tables 2 and 3 for the full list of the most important behavioral categories and some exemplar quotations.

Given that the top factor arising in both sets of incidents was related to action (rather than to any traditional listening behaviors), we re-analyzed our data and simply re-coded all of the incidents for whether or not the leader took action. This led to perhaps our most important finding: In 85% of the ‘listened to’ incidents, the leader took some type of action.<sup>1</sup> In 98% of the ‘not listened to’ incidents, the leader took no action (i.e., nothing changed).<sup>2</sup>



## PERCENTAGE OF EMPLOYEE VOICE CATEGORIES

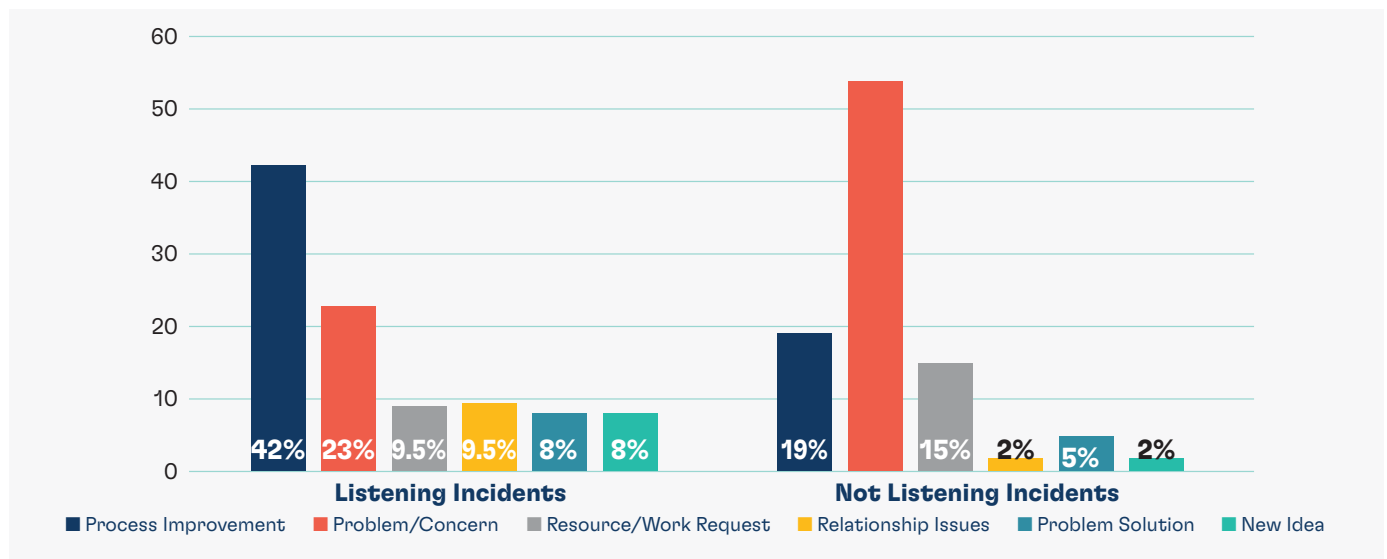


TABLE 1

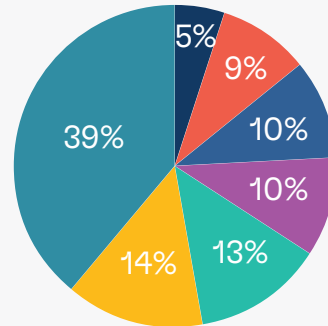
<sup>1</sup> The remaining incidents (15%) were parsed into the following categories: whether or not action was taken was unclear (11%); there was a promise of future action (3%) and the incident was not an actionable situation (1%).

<sup>2</sup> In the remaining incidents (2%), it was unclear whether action was taken.

# STUDY 1 Examining Incidents Of (Not) Listening, *continued*

## SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN 'LISTENED TO' INCIDENTS (STUDY 1)

### Specific Behavior



39%	<p><b>Took some type of action</b> (n = 33) (e.g., agreed to or authorized implementation idea; resolved issue or problem in a timely manner; worked to improve the situation; used resources for action; advocated to higher-up who could take action)</p> <p><i>"The head of the meeting ... actually listen[ed] to my suggestions and asked pertinent questions. After the discussion she agreed to let me implement the change." "He told me he would look into it and the next day it was fixed." "My boss liked my suggestion. He told me to form a team to create a formal recommendation and ... would try to get some funding for the project ..."</i></p> <p><i>"The executive ... said that I did a very thorough job gathering the facts and that he liked both proposals and saw the benefits to our organization. He wanted to ... move forward with implementing the changes ... which made me feel like I was making a difference."</i></p>
14%	<p><b>Affirming employee's value</b> (n = 12) (e.g., recognized employee in their role; positively acknowledged employee for raising a problem/catching error; affirmed employee's feelings; did not minimize concerns; responded respectfully)</p> <p><i>"My supervisor responded to my information ... they took me seriously and did not question the fact that I was not in a high level position." "She listened to be and affirmed my feelings. She said I should feel empowered to speak up in meetings ..."</i></p> <p><i>"He took me seriously and agreed with my data. I was recognized for catching the error before the machine broke ... I felt validated and like I was actually doing something to benefit the company in a significant way."</i></p>
13%	<p><b>Expressed support or agreement with idea</b> (n = 11) (provided positive verbal acknowledgement (e.g., 'great idea'); asked for suggestions; affirmed ideas about new way of doing things; provided feedback; suggested solution or implementation)</p> <p><i>"They promptly scheduled a meeting to sit down face to face and discuss the issues and proposed solutions. They listened ... and then asked questions. Not long after they followed up with me to say they agreed with me and were working to make my ideas happen."</i></p> <p><i>"She listened to my concerns, ... had me document my procedures along with my idea ..."</i></p> <p><i>"My boss agreed with me that my suggestion was a good idea and would make things easier for everybody."</i></p>
10%	<p><b>Validated or acknowledged opinion or idea</b> (n = 9) (e.g., agreed that there was a problem; gave verbal acknowledgement that employee idea or opinion was expressed; detailed responses to what was said)</p> <p><i>"... she made a point of bringing my point up in a ... memo ..."</i></p> <p><i>"... they listened to me as I talked and provided feedback to let me know that I was heard."</i></p> <p><i>"He was very engaged, and his responses to my comments were genuine and detailed in regard to specific things I was saying."</i></p>
10%	<p><b>Gave time and full attention</b> (n = 9) (e.g., scheduled a meeting or 1:1; took time to understand the problem)</p> <p><i>"She wanted to know more about the situation from my point of view."</i></p> <p><i>"It was a long talk, .... My District Leader listened to every word I said and was very attentive."</i></p>
9%	<p><b>Asked questions</b> (n = 8) (e.g., asked clarifying questions; wanted to know more about what was said)</p> <p><i>"They asked questions and were genuinely interested in my viewpoints and knowledge."</i></p> <p><i>"He asked questions to better understand ..., which made me feel like he was going beyond just 'hearing' what I had to say."</i></p>
5%	<p><b>Nonverbals</b> (n = 4) (e.g., took notes; used open body language, made eye contact, nodded, did not interrupt)</p> <p><i>"He maintained eye contact and he let me speak even when I stumbled through some of my wording."</i></p> <p><i>"She began making notes about what I was saying. This was when I knew she was hearing and feeling my concerns."</i></p> <p><i>"He did not speak until I was completely finished with what I had to say."</i></p>

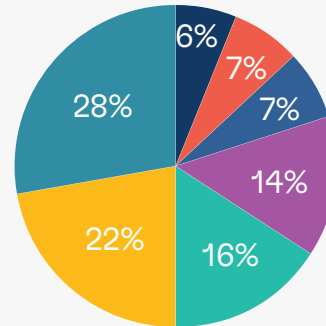
Notes: Participants (N = 74) were asked to identify the single most important factor that influenced feeling listened to. Some participants listed more than one factor. Excluding generic 'listening' responses, there were 86 discrete behaviors that comprise the total percentages above.

TABLE 2

# STUDY 1 Examining Incidents Of (Not) Listening, continued

## SINGLE MOST IMPORTANT FACTOR IN 'NOT LISTENED TO' INCIDENTS (STUDY 1)

### Specific Behavior



28%	<p><b>No action / nothing changed</b> (n = 19) (e.g., did not follow-up on issue; refused to make any changes; did not correct problem or issue; nodded head but took no action; was not willing to stand up to others; would not authorize solution or suggested changes)</p> <p><i>"The person said he would take care of it but, six months later, it's still a problem."</i></p> <p><i>"He just kind of gave me a 'uh-huh' and then did nothing to correct the problem. It felt like I was talking to a wall ...."</i></p> <p><i>"The leader said okay and he would see what he could do. I never heard anything about it ever again."</i></p> <p><i>"There was no immediate action taken. Instead, I was asked to 'prove' my claim with documentation."</i></p>
22%	<p><b>Lack of engagement or support for idea, suggestion or issue</b> (n = 15) (e.g., quickly rejected idea or proposal without considering it; made decision prior to discussion; did not explain why issue or concern could not be addressed)</p> <p><i>"The quick dismissal of my proposal. They did not spend much time making a decision."</i></p> <p><i>"I had prepared notes and talking points to present to him, but he dismissed me before I could even discuss them."</i></p> <p><i>"I could tell she wasn't really listening ... the fact that she had already made her decision before we discussed the proposal."</i></p>
16%	<p><b>Invalidated employee's value</b> (n = 11) (e.g., dismissed employee and their request; questioned expertise or recommendation; expressed no empathy or concern; minimized employee concerns (e.g., 'don't worry about it'))</p> <p><i>"In being asked to constantly verify with outsiders my own data, I felt that my own expertise was in question all the time."</i></p> <p><i>"She thought it was all in my head and didn't even want to look at the data to support my statement."</i></p> <p><i>"She told me that she has been here for many years and knows better how to run her department."</i></p>
14%	<p><b>Invalidated concern, issue or suggestion or did not acknowledge it</b> (n = 10) (e.g., did not acknowledge issue or proposal; invalidated points; ignored information; stopped responding; dismissed issue or concern as not being a problem)</p> <p><i>"He dismissed my idea and said that we have always done things a certain way, so we will continue to do so."</i></p> <p><i>"The person listened to me but dismissed my concerns and began to speak in generalities and not to the specifics of my problems."</i></p> <p><i>"They completely ignored me and went against my suggestions. There was no discussion."</i></p> <p><i>"My concerns were quickly dismissed as being a very small risk."</i></p>
7%	<p><b>Not given time or attention</b> (n = 5) (e.g., was distracted by external interruptions or phone/computer distractions; did not engage in dialogue)</p> <p><i>"That fact that he tried to rush me off.... I assumed he did not care."</i></p> <p><i>"He was distracted by his phone and computer while I spoke to him."</i></p>
7%	<p><b>Miscellaneous</b> (n = 5) (e.g., made excuses for lack of action; assigned blame to employee or others)</p>
6%	<p><b>Evidenced lack of understanding</b> (n = 4) (e.g., made inapplicable counterarguments or untenable assumptions; took wrong action)</p> <p><i>"The individual cut me off frequently as I was trying to explain, and then tried to tell the rest of the group what I had been saying. However, she got the information wrong and ... the problem itself wrong."</i></p> <p><i>"He ignored my warnings several times as though he was not absorbing the information ..., and then he was surprised when the thing that I warned about came to pass."</i></p>

Notes: Participants were asked to identify the single most important factor that influenced not feeling listened to. Some participants listed more than one factor. Excluding generic 'didn't listen' responses, there were 69 discrete behaviors that comprise the total percentages above.

TABLE 3

# STUDY 2 The Effects Of Leader Listening And (In)Action



In Study 1, our analysis of qualitative incidents identified the importance of leaders acting on employee voice as a key factor in whether employees felt listened to (we refer to this holistic perception of feeling listened to as *felt listening*). Here, in Study 2, the goals were to confirm the role of action in a quantitative study and assess whether there was a causal relationship between leader action and employee perceptions of felt listening and their future voice intentions. As such, Study 2 was designed as an experiment in which we manipulated whether the leader took action in order to assess the impact on employee felt listening and the extent to which employees were likely to speak up again in the future.

Listening is a relational process (Halone et al., 1998) that not only includes the classic listening behaviors that happen during a specific interaction, but also includes what leaders do *after* the interaction (i.e., how they respond to employee voice). We know that employees speak up because they want to see positive change. When leaders act on employee voice, employees are more likely to perceive they were listened to. In contrast, when leaders do not engage with voiced ideas, employees can feel a sense of futility about speaking up (Detert & Treviño, 2010). In the shorter term, this means that employees may be less likely to speak up again in

the future because they do not think voice will lead to constructive organizational change. However, when leaders act, employees may be more likely to continue to speak up with ideas and suggestions in the future.

Thus, we predict that:

*Hypothesis 1:* There is a positive relationship between leader action and employee felt listening.

*Hypothesis 2:* Employee felt listening mediates the positive relationship between leader action and employee future voice intentions.

## Sample, Procedures, and Measures

We recruited 205 U. S. participants from Prolific Academic (Pro-A; e.g., Aguinis & Bradley, 2014; Peer et al., 2017) who were paid for study participation. Following best practices (Buhrmester et al., 2018), we eliminated duplicate respondents and screened for lack of attentiveness, which eliminated 11 participants. We also excluded 7 individuals who failed the stimulus check (i.e., they did not accurately recall the presence or absence of leader action). Our final sample consisted of 187 participants. Participants averaged 35 years of age and 14 years of full-time work experience, 66% identified as female, and 90% as White.

We used an experimental design with a vignette

## STUDY 2 The Effects Of Leader Listening And (In)Action, *continued*



scenario describing a (fictitious) meeting between the participant employee and their (fictitious) manager. The vignette backstory is an upcoming department merger. The manager previously distributed the proposed merger plan to employees for review. The employee has requested the meeting with their manager to share some thoughts and ideas about how to improve the plan (see Appendix A for the full vignette scenario, manipulations, and study procedures). We used a between-persons factorial design in which we manipulated leader response (i.e., action, no action) to see the effect on future employee voice intentions. Action was manipulated by including information regarding whether the final organizational change plan incorporated ‘some’ (or ‘none’) of the participant’s suggestions.

Participants were randomly assigned to one of the two vignette conditions. After completing demographic

questions, participants read the vignette scenario describing a meeting with their manager and then completed the study measures.

**Felt listening.** Felt listening was measured using the following three items: “To what extent do you feel: your manager listened to you; your manager heard what you had to say; and your manager understood what you had to say.” Items were measured on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = *Strongly disagree* to 7 = *Strongly agree*.

**Action stimulus check.** We assessed participants’ recall of the action manipulation by asking whether “Some” or “None” of the thoughts that they expressed to their manager were incorporated in the final plan or whether the scenario did not specify whether their thoughts were incorporated into the final plan.

**Future voice intentions.** We measured voice intentions by adapting Van Dyne and LePine’s (1998) six-item voice measure to future tense (i.e., “how likely would you be to ...”). Participants responded to each item (e.g., “develop and make recommendations concerning issues that affect the organization”) using a 7-point Likert response scale (1 = *very unlikely*; 7 = *very likely*). See Appendix B for all items.

### The Effects of Action and Inaction on Felt Listening

Descriptive statistics and correlations for the study variables are presented in Table 4. Results showed that action had a significant positive effect on felt listening,  $t(148.212) = 18.77, p < .001$ .<sup>3</sup> Action increased the mean of felt listening from 2.88 in the no action condition to 6.27 in the action condition (based on the 7-point Likert scale), thus demonstrating a large effect size (Cohen’s  $d$  with Hedge’s correction = 1.23). Hypothesis 1 was supported (see Figure 2).

<sup>3</sup> As the equality of variances assumption was not satisfied (Levene’s (185) = 40.810,  $p < .001$ ),  $t$ -test statistics and Cohen’s  $d$  are reported with correction for unequal variances across groups.

# STUDY 2 The Effects Of Leader Listening And (In)Action, *continued*

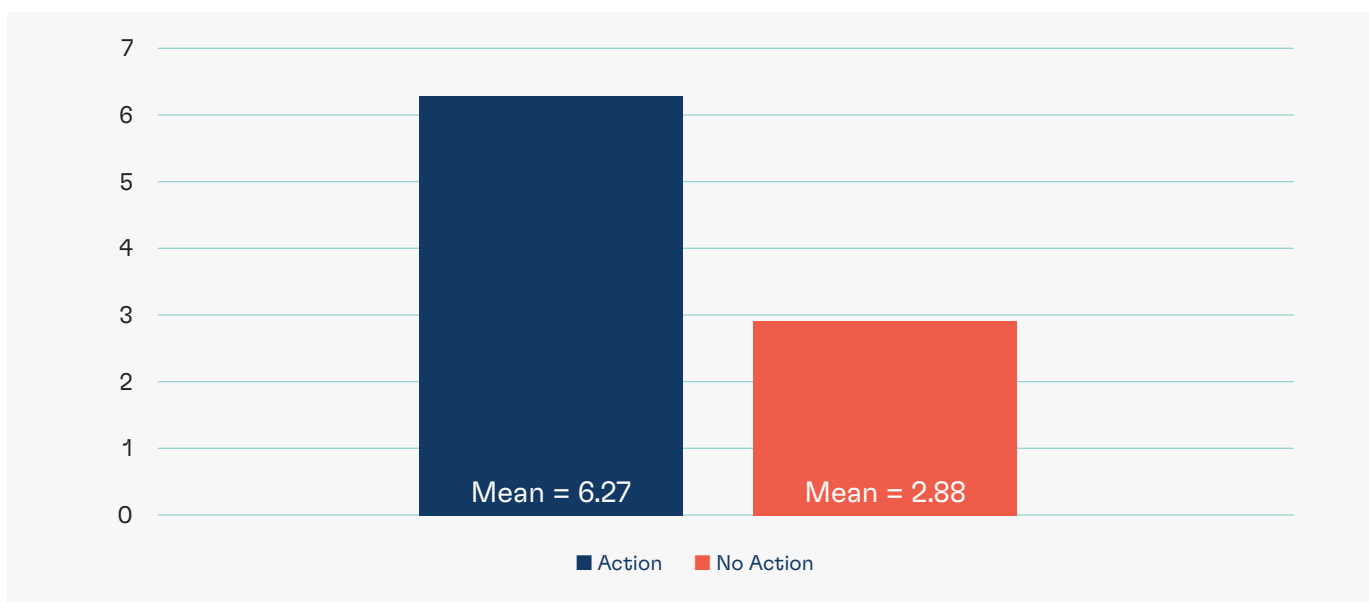
## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS (STUDY 2)

	Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2
1	Voice intentions	5.09	1.49	(.96)	
2	Felt Listening	4.60	2.09	.67**	(.97)
3	Action	.51	.50	.57**	.81**

*N* = 187. Reliability estimates (composite reliabilities) are on the diagonal. Coding: No action = 0, Action = 1.  
 \*\* *p* < .01, two-tailed

**TABLE 4**

## DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS AND CORRELATIONS (STUDY 2)



**FIGURE 2**

### Effects on Voice Intentions

We used structural equation modeling (SEM) in Mplus 8.0 (Muthén & Muthén, 2017) with maximum likelihood estimation (ML) and 5,000 bootstrapped samples to test our mediation hypothesis. Action explained 68% of the variance in felt listening, and action (as mediated

by felt listening) explained 49% of the variance in future voice intention. Felt listening fully mediated the positive effect of action on future voice intentions, thus supporting Hypothesis 2. See Appendix C for Study 2 mediation results.

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# What Leaders Can Do

Numerous [Harvard Business Review](#) articles have expounded on various ways to be a [better listener](#), highlighting ‘good’ listening skills (e.g., head nodding, asking appropriate questions). At least in the context of voice, our findings challenge some of this oft-given advice about leader listening. Across two studies, our results show that employees pay far more attention to the role of action in determining whether they feel listened to. That is, employees base their perceptions of leader listening on whether leaders actually do anything about the issue, concern, or suggestion that the employee raised.

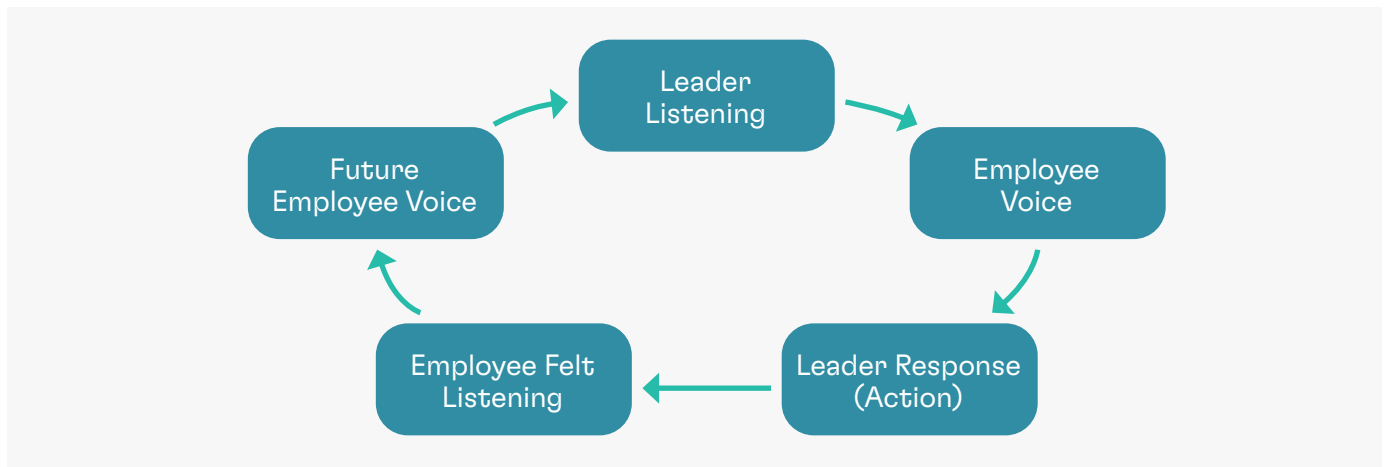
Collectively, our results lead to five important insights. First, it’s not just how well you listen – it’s what you do with what you heard. In both studies, our results clearly highlight the role of leader responses (action or inaction) in whether employees feel listened to. Leader action signals to employees that voice is not as risky

as they may perceive and that it is worthwhile to speak up at work (Morrison, 2014). When leaders do nothing, employees do not feel listened to and are less likely to speak up again in the future. In Study 2, leader responses (i.e., taking action or not) directly influenced employee perceptions of felt listening. This dramatic impact is evident in that perceptions of felt listening were more than twice as high in the action (mean of 6.27) compared to the no-action (mean of 2.88) condition (see Figure 2), an increase of 1.23 standard deviations above the mean. When voiced ideas are not acted upon, not only do employees experience feelings of futility about speaking up (Detert & Treviño, 2010), but other negative longer-term outcomes are also more likely to occur (e.g., lower performance, withdrawal behaviors and employee turnover, Bashshur & Oc, 2015).

Second, our Study 2 results show that leader responses (action or inaction) influence whether employees will continue to speak up in the future, with felt listening functioning as the explanatory mechanism. That is, when leaders take action, employees feel listened to and are subsequently more likely to speak up again in the future, resulting in an ongoing reciprocal exchange process (see Figure 3). Our results showed that action accounted for a significant portion of the variability in future employee voice, thus highlighting the criticality of leader action. These results should provide some comfort to leaders who tend to be impatient and who may not display socially-sanctioned listening behaviors (e.g., head nods, asking clarifying questions). By taking appropriate action on what employees speak up about, leaders may be able to override perceptions of being a poor listener.



## LEADER LISTENING AND EMPLOYEE VOICE AS AN ONGOING RECIPROCAL EXCHANGE PROCESS



**FIGURE 3**

Third, our research highlights one of the subtle challenges of leadership – the delicate balancing act between knowing and doing. That is, leaders need to be aware of what is happening within their organization while also prioritizing their activities. Employees bring up many new ideas, suggestions and solutions. In many cases, employees have already thought through their issues and developed a plan on how to address them, including the costs and benefits of their suggestions (e.g., avoiding reputational or legal damage or saving money). However, they do not always have information about the bigger picture and may not understand why their ideas are not acted upon. This highlights the importance of two-way communication and why leaders need to share the logic behind their decision-making.

Fourth, our work suggests that employee perceptions of felt listening are not solely determined within a specific listening interaction. That is, rather than viewing listening as a discrete event, it is better for leaders to view listening as an ongoing relational process (Halonen et al., 1998) that extends over time and includes pre- and post-interaction behaviors (Halonen & Pecchioni, 2001). In most of the Study 1 incidents, employees based their perceptions of whether they were listened to on actions that the leader took (or did not take) at a later point in time. Similarly, Study 2 found that what the leaders did after the hypothetical weeks-long lag had a strong effect on felt listening and future intentions to voice. Taken together, these findings suggest that

leaders need to be mindful that not taking action can override their good listening behaviors.

Finally, our Study 1 results suggest several other important ways that leaders can indicate they are listening to employees. Beyond the overarching criticality of leader action, leaders can acknowledge and affirm an employee's value. This means not minimizing their concerns, acknowledging their role, and validating the employee's feelings in a nonjudgmental and supportive manner. Leaders can also show engagement with, and support for, employees' ideas and suggestions. For instance, they can provide verbal acknowledgement of the idea or suggestion, give related feedback, and add other solutions or suggestions. Another way to indicate listening is to acknowledge and validate the issues or suggestions raised by employees. This may mean agreeing that there is a problem or issue, responding appropriately to what is said, or raising the issue to others. Lastly, leaders can make the time and space necessary to listen to and understand employee suggestions, ideas, concerns, and issues. This means creating a safe environment in which employees can openly share and discuss concerns and suggestions. These alternatives are important to understand because direct action is not always feasible – whether it is due to a poorly-conceived idea or to some other organizational constraint (e.g., lack of resources, other priorities, politics) which may prevent leaders from acting.



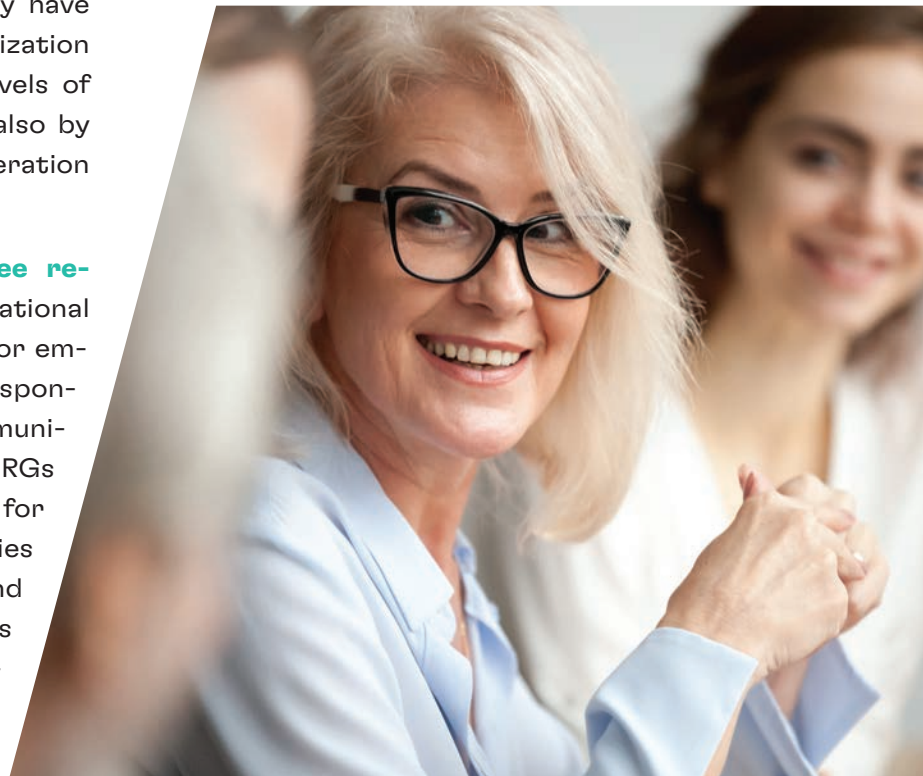
## Five Implications for People Leaders

1. **When possible, take action.** Action can be broadly interpreted as fixing the problem or issue, authorizing implementation of a solution, following up with the employee or advocating for higher-ups to act on the issue or suggestion.
2. **Make a concerted effort to foster employee voice opportunities.** Creating safe spaces for one-on-one conversations, specifically asking for input, and including employees in decision making discussions will increase the likelihood of employee voice.
3. **Identify alternatives to action that elicit future employee voice.** Clearly, leaders cannot act on every employee idea, suggestion and concern. To mitigate the negative effect of inaction, leaders can employ some of the other behaviors that make employees feel listened to (see Table 2).
4. **Clarify what is needed (but may be unspoken) in the listening interaction.** That is, ask questions to understand what the employee is seeking. Do they want a sounding board for ideas? Are they looking to vent frustration? Do they want advice? Or are they bringing up a problem or suggestion for which they want leader action?
5. **Be mindful of ‘third-party’ effects.** Employees can make assessments about listening from their own interactions with their leader, from watching (or hearing about) leader interactions with other employees, or from observing how the leader behaves in meetings or casual interpersonal interactions.

## Five Implications for Organizational Leaders

- 1. Foster a culture of employee voice.** Make ‘speaking up’ the norm rather than the exception. One way to do this is to institutionalize voice by formalizing specific practices that support it. For instance, Pixar has a [formal communication mechanism](#) in which employees candidly bring up problems and issues in order to problem solve. Other examples include formal structures such as listening circles, town halls and anonymous ways to gather feedback (Yip & Fisher, 2022). Note, however, that formal listening structures without action can be perceived as inauthentic and may foster resistance (Sahay, 2023).
- 2. Train people leaders on how to respond to employee voice.** Addressing this in formal training – including alternative responses when action is not feasible or desirable – sends a signal that such behavior is an important part of leadership. This may have ripple effects throughout the organization – not only in terms of cascading levels of voice (Detert & Treviño, 2010), but also by good role modeling for the next generation of leaders.
- 3. Establish action-oriented employee resource groups (ERGs).** At an organizational level, ERGs serve as a formal venue for employees to voice. Having an executive sponsor for each ERG ensures direct communication lines with the executive team. ERGs also provide a safe and private space for employees of different social identities to sense make, share information, and speak up as a collective (which is less risky than speaking up as an individual) to bring about change.

- 4. Conduct occasional voice ‘pulse checks.’** Assessing employee voice can be a way to identify problem areas within the organization or identify where additional training is needed. Because psychological safety is a key predictor of voice (e.g., Edmondson & Lei, 2014), lowered levels of employee voice may provide a leading indicator about safety and efficacy across identity groups and may head off longer-term issues of inequity, disengagement, and turnover.
- 5. Be mindful about what a lack of voice may signal.** The *absence* of employee voice can be what is known as a ‘countersignal.’ Although it may be tempting to interpret a lack of employee voice as a signal that all is well in the organization, chances are it signals the opposite.



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## A Caveat

The results presented herein are specific to *employee voice*. In such a context, leader action is important. However, listening – on its own – is an incredibly powerful act of leadership. We often see the world from our own point of view and putting our own views aside to see someone else’s perspective can be challenging (Rogers & Farson, 2015). When we stop and really listen to others, we develop stronger interpersonal relationships (e.g., Bodie et al., 2008; Comer & Drollinger, 1999; Drollinger & Comer, 2013) and convey to the other person that they are heard and understood (Finkenauer & Righetti, 2011). Employees are individual human beings and every

individual has a need to be seen as such. Listening provides a way to acknowledge people as individuals and not just as means to achieve the organization’s goals. Further, in some contexts, action may not be prudent. For instance, sometimes an employee needs to vent and be heard. At other times, action may not be possible, such as when an employee is dealing with difficult personal circumstances. In such instances, active empathic listening (Bodie, 2013; Rogers, 1980) is its own act of leadership.

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## Future Research Directions

Our study consisted of predominantly White U. S. employees. Future research could explore leader listening and employee voice in other contexts and with other populations (e.g., other racial and ethnic groups). For instance, our results may differ in other cultural contexts, particularly those in which expected power distances between leaders and employees are greater and in which employees may be less likely to speak up

(Botero & Van Dyne, 2009). Another area for future research is the content of employee voice. It seems that leader action may be more critical on ethical and moral issues (e.g., Chawla et al., 2021; McCleary-Gaddy et al., 2023) such as EDI and environmental issues. Finally, future work needs to focus on alternatives to action when acting on employee voice is not possible.

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## Action is Key

In conclusion, listening can be challenging in a world with numerous modes of communication, each barraging us with information and ceaselessly demanding our attention. The good news is that our results show that leaders do not always need to be stereotypical ‘great’ listeners in order for employees to feel they listen. The more important factor is that leaders act on what they hear.

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## Study 2 Vignette Scenario, Manipulation, & Study Procedure

### Listening-Action Vignette

Below is the vignette read by study participants:

*You recently found out that your department is going to be merged with another department. Your manager distributed the proposed plan so employees could review it. You thought the plan could be improved, so you set up a meeting to discuss your thoughts with your manager. In the meeting, you expressed your thoughts about the plan.*

*When you left, your manager thanked you for sharing your thoughts.*

#### **ACTION/ NO ACTION MANIPULATION:**

**Action:** *A few weeks later, you received an email from your manager with the final plan for the merger. When you looked at the final plan, you noticed that a number of your thoughts had been incorporated.]*

**No action:** *A few weeks later, you received a department-wide email from your manager attaching the final merger plan. When you looked at the final plan, you noticed that none of your thoughts had been incorporated.*

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After reading the vignette, participants completed measures of felt listening and the manipulation check. Participants then advanced to the second part of the scenario, which read:

*Over the next month, implementation of the merger plan began. You noticed some things that you believe could impact the success of the merger.*

Participants were then asked to rate their future voice intentions.

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## Additional Methodological And Analytic Detail (Study 2)

**Future voice intentions.** In addition to adapting Van Dyne and LePine's (1998) six-item voice measure to future tense, we also generalized one item and changed the scale referent from "work group" to "organization." The other five items were:

1. Speak up and encourage coworkers to get involved in issues that affect the organization;
2. Communicate your opinion about work issues to others even if your opinion is different and others disagree with you;
3. Keep well informed about issues where your opinion might be useful;
4. Get involved in issues that affect the quality of work life;
5. Speak up with ideas for new projects or changes in procedures.

The partial mediation model fit the data well based on the comparative and absolute goodness-of-fit indexes: Comparative Fit Index = .98 (good fit: CFI > .95, Hu & Bentler, 1999), Root Mean Square Error of Approximation = .08 (acceptable fit: RMSEA < .08, Steiger, 1990) and  $p$ -close = .03 (close fitting model,  $p$ -close < .05, Kenny, 2015).

We assessed mediation (see Appendix C) based on the indirect effect of action on future voice intention (Zhao et al., 2010) and report the direct effects with  $p$ -values and indirect effects with bias-corrected bootstrapped confidence intervals (MacKinnon et al., 2004). Support for full mediation was also evidenced based on model fit comparisons demonstrating no significant decline in fit from the partial to the full mediation model ( $\Delta \chi^2(1) = .118, p = .73$ ).

## Study 2 Mediation Results

	Felt Listening		Voice Intent			
			Direct Effect		Indirect Effect	
		<i>p</i>		<i>p</i>	Est	95% CI
Felt Listening			.67 (.15)	.00		
Action	1.65 (.09)	.00	.07 (.27)	.80	1.10	[.92, 1.43]
R <sup>2</sup>	.68		.51			

*N* = 187. Action is dummy coded (no action = 0). Est = Estimate, 95% CI = 95% confidence interval. The model was estimated using 5,000 bootstrapped samples. Unstandardized estimates are reported with *p*-values for direct effects and 95% confidence intervals for indirect effects.

### STUDY 2

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