

Although many have argued that listening is particularly important in organizations, few studies have examined listening and listening skills in this context. This study examined relationships between listening, communication related abilities, employee level in an insurance company, and upward mobility. The results indicated significant positive relationships between listening and other social cognitive and communicative abilities. While findings suggested that nonsupervisors tended to possess better listening abilities than supervisors, there was some evidence that better listeners were in higher levels of the organization and were more upwardly mobile.

Listening, Communication Abilities, and Success at Work

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Even though listening plays an important part in the communication process, it has received comparatively little attention from communication researchers. This is somewhat surprising given the attention it receives in standard textbooks across a variety of disciplines. Some argue that we spend almost half of our communicative day listening, and it is often considered one of the most important forms of communication behavior (Hirsch, 1979; Steil, Barker, & Watson, 1983; Weaver, 1972; Wolvin & Coakley, 1982). Yet we know less about listening than other communication abilities. While listening has been related to a variety of other communication abilities, few, if any, studies have examined the relation of listening to relevant social cognitive abilities. Still less attempt has been made to link listening to employees' success at work even though practitioners continually point out its importance to individuals and organizations.

Bostrom (1988) argues that our understanding of listening has increased very little in the last 20 years because researchers in speech communication have shown little real interest in listening. Much about the process "has eluded clear definition and understanding" (Bostrom & Waldhart, 1980, p. 221). Moreover, there is no one generally accepted definition of listening. Wolvin and Coakley (1982) argue that listening research is still in an exploratory state even though it spans the past four decades.

According to Bostrom (1988, p. 2), "early research assumed that the retention of information presented orally was the obvious operational definition of successful listening." Nichols (1957) challenged this idea and argued that, in fact, retention was dependent upon a number of variables (e.g., intelligence, motivation). A turning point in listening definitions occurred in the 1960s when Kelly (1967) charged that listening is not a unitary skill. He argued that previous listening tests had simply been measuring aspects of intelligence.

Weaver (1972, p. 12) took Kelly's ideas into consideration and defined listening as "the selection and retention of aurally received data." Following Weaver's lead there were numerous attempts to broaden the definition of listening, but most listening research continued to use the lecture-retention model (Watson & Barker, 1984). Bostrom (1988, p. 4) challenged: "if this activity is wholly dependent upon intelligence, as we would conclude from Kelly's data, the use of lecture-retention as a dependent variable in listening research cannot be defended." The conclusion, however, is that listening is not wholly dependent upon intelligence, it has come to be seen as a series of related skills.

Bostrom and Waldhart (1980) called for a functional approach to listening emphasizing situation and purpose. They argued for an incorporation of both short-term and long-term memory into listening definitions and research. Short-term memory "seems to consist of a brief component that can last as long as 40 seconds if there is an opportunity for 'rehearsal'" (Bostrom, 1988, p. 7). This rehearsal system prolongs the life of a stimulus in the short-term system (Weaver, 1972). Long-term memory is "not activated till at least 60 seconds after the presentation of a stimulus" and is what one generally refers to as memory (Bostrom, 1988, p. 7).

In an initial study, Bostrom and Waldhart (1980) laid the groundwork for The Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test which examines various aspects of listening including long- and short-term listening, and comprehension. Their findings indicated that short-term listening ability was more closely related to measures of oral performance, and lecture-comprehension listening was more closely related to measures of general mental ability.

As the test was refined and findings replicated, Bostrom (1988) concluded that a comprehensive listening test should measure at least five listening abilities. These are short-term listening, short-term listening with rehearsal, interpretive listening, lecture listening, and selective listening. These are the components of The Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test (available from the second author).

So while a good deal of progress has been made in developing and refining measures of listening ability, few investigations have linked listening to other communication related skills, and almost no studies demonstrate those relationships in perhaps the most obvious and relevant context — the organization.

While a number of authors suggest that listening is important in the organizational setting (Smeltzer & Watson, 1984; Steil *et al.*, 1983; Wolff *et al.*, 1983; Wolvin & Coakley, 1982), few actual studies confirm this. Most of what literature exists focuses on the relative proportion of time executives spend listening. For example, Steil *et al.*, (1983) contend that executives spend 63 percent of their day listening while workers spend just over 30 percent of their communication time listening (Wolvin & Coakley, 1982). Of equal importance is the finding that listening was mentioned most often in 25 studies focusing on critical employment skills (DiSalvo, 1980; Smeltzer & Watson, 1984; Wolvin & Coakley, 1985).

Perhaps because of the amount of time employees spend listening, organizations have become acutely aware of the importance of effective listening (DiSalvo, 1980; Downs & Conrad, 1982; Harris & Thomlin, 1983; Hunt & Cusella, 1983; Muchmore & Galvin, 1983; Rendero, 1980). Wolvin and Coakley (1985, p. 4), point out that managers “are beginning to realize that inefficient listening is costly to corporations — costly in wasted money, misused time, deflated morale, reduced productivity, and alienated relationships.” This recognition by management has led to the development of an assortment of training programs designed to improve workers’ listening skills, and not surprisingly, Papa and Glenn (1988) found that employee listening ability and listening training strongly influenced productivity with new technology.

An individual’s listening ability has implications for the effectiveness of his / her work group, the overall organization, and perhaps for the individual’s own success. Based on the importance of listening in the process of communication and estimates of its frequency, individual success in communicating, and in the organization, likely rests in part on possessing good listening skills. Listening, in addition to other communication abilities, is a likely predictor of who gets promoted, or who receives other relevant rewards such as status and power. Past research demonstrated a relatively strong relationship between various social cognitive abilities and success in the organization (Sypher & Zorn, 1986). The relationship between these abilities and listening has received only limited attention. In one study, Beatty and Payne (1984) reported a fairly strong relationship between cognitive complexity and listening comprehension. But the relation of listening to other related abilities such

as persuasion, perspective-taking and self-monitoring has not been examined. Each of the latter abilities evidenced a rather strong relation to the other in the Sypher and Zorn (1986) study. Investigations of the link between these abilities and listening and between listening and success at work, however, have been virtually ignored.

Thus, while listening has gained considerable recognition in discussions of communication behavior, particularly communication at work, few studies have examined its predictive ability in explaining work-related outcomes. This is due, for the most part, to the lack of attention listening abilities have received. The purpose of this study, therefore, is to examine listening as it relates to other social cognitive and communicative abilities, and to explore the relationship between listening and important organizational outcomes—the worker's level in the organization and upward mobility. The following research questions were posited:

RQ1: Is there a relationship between listening and other communication abilities?

RQ2: Is there a relationship between one's listening abilities and one's job level in the organization?

RQ3: Is there a relationship between listening abilities and upward mobility?

RQ4: Are there listening differences between supervisors and non-supervisors?

The goal of this research is to expand our limited knowledge on listening in organizations. The study is a follow up to Sypher and Zorn's (1986) longitudinal examination of communication related abilities and individual success at work.

METHODS

Participants and Organization

The participants in this study included 36 employees of a large insurance corporate headquarters located in the Northeastern United States. They were employed in a variety of jobs from maintenance and technical areas to system analysis and law. These individuals are a sub-sample of a larger group participating in an ongoing line of research (see Sypher & Zorn, 1986, for additional details). Study participation was voluntary and done on company time. The listening test was administered on site to employees in small groups of eight to ten people.

Measures

Listening. The Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test was used to measure listening. As previously discussed, this test measures five aspects of listening ability — short-term listening, short-term listening with rehearsal, lecture or long-term listening, interpretive listening, and listening with distraction (Bostrom, 1983). Results were examined for each component.

Cognitive Differentiation. A modified version (Sypher, 1981) of Crockett's (1965) Role Category Questionnaire (RCQ) was used to assess employees' level of cognitive differentiation. In this free response measure, study participants described a liked and a disliked coworker and total scores were generated from the number of distinct constructs embedded in each description. Employees with higher scores are considered more cognitively differentiated in that they have a more developed cognitive system for perceiving others. Intercoder reliability for this subsample was .97.

Self-Monitoring. Snyder's (1974) Self-Monitoring Scale, a 20-item true-false check list, was used to measure self-monitoring ability. Results in this study reflect scores on the overall measure, rather than scores on particular subscales. Higher scores indicate persons are more able to attend to social contexts when planning behavior. According to Snyder, they are more sensitive and responsive to situationally appropriate interpersonal cues than low self-monitors. Snyder reported internal reliabilities ranging from .60 to .70.

Perspective-taking. This communication related ability was assessed using Sypher's (1981) version of previous perspective-taking measures. In this measure, participants indicated the perspective (i.e., thoughts, feelings, and attitudes) of interactants in a hypothetical work situation. Each response was given a score ranging from 0 to 4 depending on how well the participant could maintain the requested perspective-taking level and provide complex and integrated descriptions of others' perspectives. Intercoder reliability for this measure was .90.

Persuasive Arguments. O'Keefe's and Delia's (1979) persuasive arguments task was used to measure employees' persuasive ability. This task required employees to write a letter convincing a rich Texas businessman to donate money to a needy group. Scores on this task reflect the total number of arguments generated by each employee. Intercoder reliability for this measure was .97.

Organizational Level. As part of a questionnaire, employees indicated their level in the organization; a subset of these responses were verified by company records. Within the organization, job levels ranged from 36

to 59. Salary, rank, and to some extent, status in the organization were dependent upon one's job level.

Upward Mobility. Study participants were asked to report the year they joined the organization and their initial job level. An upward mobility score was obtained by dividing the number of levels each participant had advanced by the number of years each had been employed by the organization. Calculating the score in this manner reflected the rate of movement up the organizational hierarchy. Thus, if two persons advanced the same number of levels, the one who had done so in the fewest number of years would get the higher score.

Supervisor. Respondents also indicated whether they held a supervisory role in the organization. This information was solicited by the question, "Are you a supervisor?"

RESULTS

These data suggest that listening is related to various other communication and communication related abilities. The results of Pearson product moment correlations revealed moderately strong positive correlations between various aspects of listening and each of the communication and communication related abilities (see Table 1, next page).

Selective listening produced significant positive correlations with all of the communication measures: cognitive differentiation ($r = .36$), perspective-taking ($r = .38$), persuasive ability ($r = .49$), and self-monitoring ($r = .49$). Lecture-listening correlated positively with cognitive differentiation ($r = .33$), persuasive ability ($r = .48$), and self-monitoring ($r = .52$). Short-term listening with rehearsal correlated significantly and positively with cognitive differentiation ($r = .45$) and the ability to generate persuasive arguments ($r = .39$). The strongest relationship was found between short-term listening and persuasive ability ($r = .64$). Short-term listening was less strongly, but significantly, correlated with self-monitoring. Interpretive listening evidenced the weakest relationship with all four measures of communicative ability.

A moderate positive correlation was found between one's level in the organization and short-term listening with rehearsal ($r = .35$). Correlations between level and two other subscales of the listening test approached but did not reach appropriate significant levels. Short-term listening with rehearsal and lecture listening also correlated significantly with upward mobility ($r = .43$ and $.32$ respectively).

The results also revealed significant differences between supervisors' and nonsupervisors' listening abilities. It was nonsupervisors, however,

Table 1
Correlation Matrix for Listening, Communication Abilities,
and Level in the Organization

	Short-term Listening	Short-term Listening with Rehearsal	Interpretive Listening	Lecture Listening	Selective Listening (Distraction)
Cognitive Differentiation	.08	.45*	.07	.33*	.36*
Persuasive Arguments	.64*	.39*	.05	.48*	.49*
Perspective- Taking	.23	.20	.04	.23	.38*
Self- Monitoring	.35*	.29	.26	.52*	.49*
Level in the Organization	.24	.35*	-.08	.19	.09
Upward Mobility	.18	.43*	.06	.32*	.19

$p < .05$

Note: Coefficients are Pearson product-moment correlations

who evidenced significantly better scores on short-term listening with rehearsal ($t = .351$, $p < .005$) and lecture-listening ($t = .351$, $p < .002$) than supervisors.

DISCUSSION

On numerous occasions, Bostrom has pointed out that listening has a variety of components. Its relation to the various communication abilities examined in this study help support this nonunitary perspective. While various aspects of listening correlated significantly and positively with both the cognitive and behavioral aspects of communication, short-term listening was more strongly related to the behavioral skills examined (i.e., the ability to generate persuasive arguments and self-monitoring ability). This finding is somewhat consistent with Bostrom and Waldhart's (1980) earlier results which showed that short-term listening was more strongly related to oral performance. A similar

finding resulted from the recent study of King and Behnke (1989). In their examination, compressed speech had much less influence on short-term listening than any of the other components of listening. The authors implied that interpersonal performance is more closely associated with short-term than long-term listening. Our data however, do not support this assumption. We found that lecture listening or comprehension also was positively related to the various behavioral and cognitive measures of communication, all of which are related to effective interpersonal functioning.

Bostrom and Waldhart (1980) also concluded that interpretive listening may be more strongly related to general intelligence. This assumption may be true based on our data. Interpretive listening consistently failed to correlate positively with any of the other communication related and communication abilities examined. Since interpretive listening is not related to cognitive differentiation, and cognitive differentiation is not related to intelligence (Sypher & Applegate, 1982), interpretive listening and intelligence may be linked. However, investigations of this sort are in order before any conclusion can be drawn.

This investigation produced somewhat mixed findings regarding the relationship between listening and job level. Only one listening subscale correlated significantly with job level; although other correlations were in the expected direction. Since the other communication skills examined in this study have evidenced predictive ability in terms of organizational level (see Sypher & Zorn, 1986), it was expected that listening would be yet another addition to this list. However, there is only limited evidence that employees in higher levels have better listening skills. But once again, it was short-term listening with rehearsal that was related to performance. Since employees' initial job level was determined in large part by training and education, how often employees are promoted may be a better indicator of how listening contributes to success at work.

A look at promotions over time helped us sort out this relationship. Two of the listening subscales (i.e., short-term listening with rehearsal and listening with distraction) were positively correlated with one's rise through the corporate hierarchy. These findings, in addition to those regarding listening and level in the organization, suggest that some aspects of listening can make a difference in who gets promoted. In effect, better listeners were more successful.

Even though better listeners tended to be in higher levels and were more upwardly mobile, they were not necessarily in supervisory positions. In fact, the results of this study suggest that nonsupervisors had better listening abilities than supervisors. Nonsupervisors may be better

listeners simply because they have to spend more time listening; supervisors are more used to being listened to, despite the findings which suggest executives spend more of their communicative day listening than employees. It seems we need to reexamine this finding. Replications of this study would give us more confidence that better listeners can reach higher levels in the organization faster. Such replication is especially necessary due to our relatively small sample size.

What we can conclude from this study is that listening is related to other communication abilities and to success at work. Better listeners held higher level positions and were promoted more often than those with less developed listening abilities. Short-term listening with rehearsal appeared to have the greatest effect on level and mobility. Certainly attaining higher rungs on the organizational ladder is one indication of success. We argue that the organizational realm is a particularly good place to study listening not only because it has been neglected for so long, but also because listening in this context seems especially relevant. It can enhance one's job performance, and perhaps promotions, raises, status, and power are more attainable for the better listener. Developing an understanding of the role of listening in organizations can only serve to increase our knowledge of organizational communication in general and its relation to important individual and organizational outcomes.

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