

**Listening as the Driver of Public Relations Practice and Communications Strategy Within
a Global Public Relations Agency**

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Abstract

Whereas the Organizational Listening Project (e.g. Macnamara 2016a, 2016b, 2018) focuses broadly on the concept of listening in public relations, this study fills the need for site- and case-specific inquiry regarding how listening occurs and supports strategy at a global public relations and integrated communications agency. From literature regarding listening and its support for communications strategy, this exploratory case study addressed how listening is utilized in a global public relations agency context and how listening supports public relations and communications strategy. Findings suggest that listening is used by individuals in an agency to become enculturated into agency life, develop relationships with colleagues and clients, and stay ahead of cultural and industry trends. Additionally, listening was found to promote public relations and communications strategy by facilitating the strategic planning process, facilitating respectful and diversity-centered communication, facilitating an excellent client experience, and cultivating agency-client trust.

Keywords: Listening, Public Relations, Trust, Strategy

Introduction

Of the challenges facing communicators in the 21st Century, how to listen and respond to stakeholders, how listening is a core workplace skill, and how listening affects organizational success are key concerns (Bentley, 2000; Burnside-Lawry, 2014; Flynn, Valikoski & Grau, 2008). Despite such concerns, society has traditionally placed little emphasis on effective listening (Wolvin, 2010a) and those who must effectively communicate on behalf of organizations hold little, if any, listening training or skill sets (Brownell, 1994). Listening has received scant attention in public relations theoretical or pedagogical research (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018) and is often poorly practiced (Macnamara, 2018). It is perceived as essential to effective business and strategic communication practice (Brunner, 2008), yet it has traditionally been theorized as a function of interpersonal communication, human resources, education, or counseling (Macnamara, 2018). To date, the only substantial study to explicitly address listening in public relations contexts has been the Organizational Listening Project (e.g. Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018), which has found that strategic communication practices center primarily on speaking instead of listening (Macnamara, 2016a).

The emphasis of public relations research and practice on environmental scanning, issues management, and relationship development implies a need for listening – to clients, colleagues, and diverse target publics - in order to ensure effective communication management and business survival. According to Grunig (1992), elements of research, *listening*, and dialogue foster relationships with publics and represent public relations in its most excellent form. Indeed, recent research by Vercic and Zerfass (2016) confirmed that the most excellent communication departments engage in listening practices, engage with their stakeholders, and “function as the ears and eyes of their organizations” (Vercic and Zerfass, 2016, p. 279).

Because public relations has failed to address listening, it has essentially failed to substantially develop its theories and models of dialogue, excellence, and relationship-building that promote ethical and participatory communication (Macnamara, 2016a, p.163). Therefore, this study aimed to further develop the line of research regarding listening in public relations to describe how listening is utilized in a public relations context and how listening supports excellent strategic communication strategy. Whereas the Organizational Listening Project (e.g. Macnamara 2016a, 2016b, 2018) focuses broadly on the concept of listening in public relations, this paper fills the need for site- and case-specific inquiry regarding how listening occurs and supports strategy at a global public relations and integrated communications agency.

Literature Review

Listening

Listening is defined as a complex function of affective processes (involving motivation to attend to others), behavioral processes (involving verbal or nonverbal feedback), and cognitive processes (involving attending to, understanding, receiving, and interpreting content and messages) (Bodie, 2016). It is described as the practice of giving recognition to others’ right to speak, acknowledging and understanding others’ views, paying attention to others, interpreting what others say fairly, and responding appropriately to others (Macnamara, 2018, pp. 6-7). After a message has been received, it is processed through an individual’s memory and perceptual and linguistic filters. Because listening is a highly complex process involving auditory, visual, and psychological functions (Wolvin, 2010c), it is possible for messages to be misinterpreted or changed depending how the listener encodes messages or assigns semantic meanings (p. 13). Message senders must also be mindful of their potential for error as they may misinterpret a listener’s or target public’s complex identities, needs and interests, or preferred channels of communication. In that regard, Burnside-Lawry (2012) suggests that communicators engage in listening that incorporates stakeholders’ own values, listens accurately, and attend to and responds to messages in an empathetic manner.

Substantial research has explored verbal and nonverbal behaviors associated with effective or competent listening. Competent listening involves attending to, comprehending, and interpreting the content of a conversation, engaging in conversational norms and politeness, empathizing with and supporting the speaker, and achieving the goals of a conversation (Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012; Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Cooper, 1997; Wolvin, 2010a). Nonverbal behaviors such as maintaining eye contact, using hand gestures, and head nodding as well as verbal behaviors such as establishing common ground and maintaining conversational

flow also embody competent listening, especially during initial interpersonal interactions (Bodie, et. al., 2012). Additionally, competent listening is best fostered by leadership that creates a trusting, transparent, participative culture, offers honest feedback, maintains eye contact with employees or stakeholders, listens and respond to stakeholder concerns in a sincere manner, and listens mindfully with respect for cultural differences (Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Purdy & Manning, 2015). Similarly, Maben and Gearheart (2018) assessed competent listening behaviors on social media to find that posing and answering questions, offering timely and personal responses, giving advice, and expanding upon discussion topics supports quality engagement. In contrast, poor listening is described as including behaviors such as condemning a speaker's subject as uninteresting, criticizing a speaker's delivery instead of the speaker's message, preparing to answer a point or question before comprehending it, faking attention, and allowing personal prejudices to interfere with listening (Nichols, 1948, as cited in Wolvin, 2010c, p. 9).

Several models and theoretical approaches have attempted to make meaning of the listening process. The skills-based HURIER model (e.g. Brownell, 1996, 2004, 2010), for example, illustrates listening as central communication function and a staged process. The six-stage model depicts listening as the process of first hearing, then understanding, then remembering, interpreting, and evaluating, and then responding. Inherent to the model are specific skills associated with the listening process. Hearing a message, for example, involves such skills as concentration, whereas understanding a message involves recognizing one's assumptions and listening to a message without interrupting. Interpreting a message involves being sensitive to nonverbal and vocal cues, whereas evaluating a message involves assessing the speaker's credibility, recognizing one's own personal biases, and identifying potential emotional appeals. Lastly, responding to a message involves recognizing appropriate response options and weighing the impact of each response option (Brownell, 2010, p. 148). Scholars have also modeled listening as a dialogic function (Floyd, 2010; Johannesen, 2002). Dialogic listeners minimize selfishness and the manipulation of others and engage in active involvement and attentiveness, authenticity and inclusion, and promotion of a spirit of mutual equality and support (Floyd, 2010; Johannesen, 2002). Thus, a dialogic listener attempts to accept the speaker "as a person of worth simply because he or she is a human being" (Floyd, 2010, p. 131).

Listening is needed to support professional workplace relationships, formulate policy, design programs that address constituent, organizational and community needs (Wolvin, 2010b). Listening in organizations is often mediated – meaning that it is asynchronous and does not take place in "real time among individuals" (Macnamara 2018, p. 3). It relies on "policies, systems, structures, resources, and a range of processes, technologies, and specialist skills" (Macnamara, 2018, p. 3). Listening in organizations has also been found to play a considerable role in how coworkers judge one another's competency (Haas & Arnold, 1995) and manager's competency (Brownell, 1990). Haas and Arnold, for example, found that 32% of all competency descriptors were listening-related (Haas & Arnold, 1995). Listening has also been found to affect the satisfaction, morale, and productivity of organizational members (Lloyd, Boer & Voelpel, 2017; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Reed, Goolsby & Johnston, 2016). Supporting previous work by Meyer and Herscovitch (2001), Reed, Goolsby, and Johnson (2016) found that a supportive workplace listening environment can enable a sense of togetherness, or "we-ness," among employees and are associated with stronger employee attachments to organizations. Similarly, Lloyd, Boer, and Voelpel (2017) found that listening fosters strong leader-employee workplace

relationships, influences employee attitudes and behaviors, and improves employees' feelings of job satisfaction.

Organizations often implement listening training in order to foster supportive listening environments and assess or develop listening skills of employees (Brownell 1994; Cooper, 1997; Rautalinko & Lisper, 2004; Wolvin & Coakley, 1991). In their classic study of listening training in Fortune 500 corporations, Wolvin and Coakley (1991) found that organizations implement listening training on improving listening skills, nonverbal communication, listening response and feedback, the importance of effective listening, listening for comprehension, and methods for removing barriers to listening. Similarly, current listening training programs, such as *The Listen First Project*, conduct organizational training to assess employees' listening styles, learn and practice effective listening techniques, and building positive organizational listening environments (listenfirstproject.org). In turn, listening training and the advancement of supportive listening environments have been found to increase employee trust and information sharing, improve employee mental health and self-image, inspire more direct and frequent communication, and reduce misunderstandings (Brownell, 2004).

Listening in Public Relations

Listening has received little explicit attention in public relations research, education, or practice. Early theoretical research from a cocreational perspective of public relations has explored concepts complementary to the process of listening, such as dialogue, relationship building, mutual understanding, and consideration of publics as equals in the communications process (Botan, 1997; 2018; Botan & Taylor, 2004; Kent & Taylor, 1998). When listening has been explicitly studied or practiced, it has been done so from an organization-centered focus (Macnamara 2016a, p. 153) often as part of social and market research, customer relations, or social media monitoring (Macnamara, 2018). Additionally, listening in public relations contexts, as noted earlier, is mediated, asynchronous (Macnamara, 2018), and is more complex than interpersonal communication contexts, as it typically involves large-scale systems of listening and communication to thousands of individuals at once (Macnamara 2013). Despite receiving little attention, listening in public relations contexts is assumed to foster positive organization-public relationships based on listening, trust, communication (Botan, 2018; Botan & Taylor, 2004; Brunner, 2008) and increased morale, loyalty, and retention of employees (Macnamara, 2018, p. 19). Additionally, Vercic & Zerfass (2016) found that communication departments incorporating multiple listening and research behaviors exhibited indicators of exceptional public relations and strategic communication.

The Organizational Listening Project (e.g. Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018), is one of the only studies to have mapped the concept of listening in public relations and strategic communication contexts. Via an extensive review of extant literature, interviews with public relations professionals, and case reviews, the study found that ultimately, the function of public relations revolves around an architecture of speaking supported by structures, tools and resources (such as emails, reports, video, and websites) that promote primarily asymmetrical systems of information distribution (Macnamara, 2016a). Practitioner interviews revealed that organizations typically engage in an 80:20 ratio of speaking versus listening, with many organizations confessing to engaging in a 90% focus on speaking (Macnamara 2016a, 2016b). Terms most commonly used to describe listening behaviors included "engagement," "listening,"

and “consultation,” whereas the terms used most often to describe speaking behaviors included “informed,” “talk,” and “content” (Macnamara, 2018, p. 10). Case reviews conducted as part of the Project indicated that strategic communication was typically utilized to deliver organizational information and messaging. If listening practices were utilized, they were done so selectively to promote the fulfillment of marketing needs, provide competitive data, identify methods to better promote and sell organizational products (Macnamara 2016b, p. 143). Illustrating the promotional nature of the practice, terms most commonly utilized by interviewees to describe their work included “disseminating,” “educating,” “telling,” and “distributing” (Macnamara 2016b, p. 144).

To counteract such a predominance on speaking, Macnamara (2018) suggests that organizations must have a culture and *architecture of listening* that supports listening, addresses the politics of listening, includes policies that require listening, involves systems that are open and interactive (and conducive to listening), uses technologies to aid listening, engages resources and staff and systems to do the work of listening, and articulates the voices of stakeholders and publics to decision makers (Macnamara, 2018, pp. 11-12). To promote listening that focuses on organizational publics themselves, Forman-Wernet and Dervin (2006) have suggested a listening approach that prioritizes publics’ use of their own terms to describe concerns and issues.

From the literature regarding listening and its support for effective public relations and communications strategy, two research questions were developed to guide the study:

RQ1: How is listening utilized in a specific public relations context (a global agency)?

RQ2: How does listening support public relations and communications strategy?

Method

To best explore how listening is utilized and drives excellent public relations and communications strategy, a case study method (Yin, 2003) was incorporated using a representative single public relations agency as the unit of analysis. The case study method was chosen for its usefulness in explaining or describing phenomena with a particular context and for exploring questions regarding “how” and “why” (Yin, 2003). Moreover, a method utilizing more qualitative forms of data collection and analysis were chosen, as they best illustrate the experience of listening, individuals’ own meaning making of listening, and how listening is performed in personal and professional contexts and as social, political, and cultural processes (Purdy, 2010).

Case Design and Data Collection – A single case design was selected, as it was believed that Agency NYC (pseudonym), a leading global public relations agency of more than 3,000 individuals headquartered in New York City, with more than 70 offices worldwide, whose leadership *prioritized listening*, would serve as an exemplary case study of listening in a public relations context. Additionally, a single case design was selected, as “Agency NYC” was assumed to serve as a representative case to “capture the circumstances and conditions” of a situation (Yin, 2003). Upon receiving IRB approval, data was collected at the agency’s New York City office in July 2017 in the form of a) documentation (organizational PowerPoints, research reports, training materials, emails, and website contents), b) in-depth semi-structured interviews (22 interviews with employees representing a diverse range of senior executive,

managerial, and entry-level positions – as well as gender and racial identities), and c) participant-observation and fieldwork (70 hours of observation with extensive note taking and journaling during the process). Interviewees were chosen primarily using a purposive method to gain representation from senior leadership representing the various practice areas of the firm. All interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded, and guided by a 16-question protocol including rapport-building questions (e.g. “Tell me what you love best about working at Agency NYC”), grand-tour questions to get an overarching understanding of listening in the agency (How would you describe the role of listening at Agency NYC?”), and more specific questions to ascertain the nuances of listening in the agency (How have you recently used listening to support your client?”). The resulting sample of interviewees included 11 women and 11 men, 10 of whom represented senior leadership or a chief executive position, and 12 of whom represented a junior or mid-level position. Interviewees ranged in tenure at Agency NYC from three years to 25+ years. All participants were assigned a pseudonym.

Data Analysis and Limitations – The data analysis strategy was to generate a descriptive framework (Yin, 2003) to understand how listening occurred and how it supported strategy in the agency. Thus, all observation notes and interviews were transcribed fully and compiled into a central Microsoft Word document for review. Additionally, all PowerPoint presentations, emails, and website text were collected, printed, and organized into a central file for review. Next, all data was read and re-read multiple times to create a list of commonly occurring themes and patterns– represented as groupings of key words or phrases (Hancock & Algozzine, 2016; Yin, 2003). Patterns and themes were then organized, narrowed down, and assigned to the two research questions and compared against extant literature. Additionally, the author strove to bracket biases (and previous experiences as an agency professional) and remain aware of how biases, experiences, or interpretations could influence the analysis process. Member checks (e.g. Lincoln & Guba, 1985) were utilized during the analysis process when the author was uncertain about or required clarification regarding a phrase or quotation under analysis. Most commonly, the author contacted interview participants via e-mail and asked them to review the section of the transcript under question or answer additional questions regarding their experiences.

Despite attempts to create a solid case study design based on multiple forms of evidence and utilizing “member checks” to check the validity, clarity, and representativeness of the quotations captured, limitations still exist. Limitations may be associated regarding differences in interview length (30 to 75 minutes in length), location (interviews at the office versus off-site at a park or café), or participant rank in the organization (junior individuals may have adjusted their responses to avoid identification or avoid perceived punishment for participating). To ease potential participant anxiety, the author ensured each participant that information would remain confidential and that the goal of the research was simply to listen and learn. Importantly, this case is not representative or generalizable to the public relations industry; however, it may offer beneficial insights for mapping the functions of listening in a public relations agency.

Findings

Upon analysis of the data, themes emerged to illustrate listening as a complex process incorporating both interpersonal and organizational forms of listening. Listening was defined by

participants as “understanding,” “paying attention,” “having a conversation,” or “inquiry.” “Understanding” was used most often by participants to describe listening as a larger process of, for example, “understanding how people are thinking and feeling,” “understanding different points of view,” and “understanding the needs of others.” Participants also described listening within the agency as leadership’s method of mentoring employees to “listen loudly,” yet be unafraid to respectfully speak up and offer exemplary client counsel. No matter how listening was described, agency members at all levels acknowledged that the evolving listening landscape in public relations is increasingly difficult to navigate.

From a broad perspective, Agency NYC’s architecture of listening (Macnamara, 2018) featured structural accommodations to encourage listening such as a bullpen office layout with long tables instead of cubicles in which colleagues see and hear each other easily; formal and informal meeting areas for breakout group discussions; and an open entry area to the agency with a coffee bar and meeting tables that invited informal engagement. The agency also emphasized programs and policies to support listening and dialogue, such as brownbag or “lunch and learn” sessions, afternoon happy hours, employee awards events, client relationship programs, global employee exchange programs, and an environmental scanning and listening work team. Such programs and policies were mirrored across agency documents and website content, as common keywords and values statements included the words: conversation, collaboration, voice, respect, engagement, truth, trust, and inclusion. Lastly, technologies and tools supported the listening environment via online collaboration and chat tools, teleconferencing tools and headsets, multiple employee listservs, and traditional and social media scanning tools.

Regarding the first research question, listening was used by individuals in Agency NYC to learn and become enculturated into agency life, develop relationships with colleagues and clients, and stay ahead of cultural or industry trends. Evidence describing each of these themes is shared below:

Enculturation into Public Relations – Participants described listening at Agency NYC as central to the agency culture and embodied by all levels of staff. The office layout featuring open and shared tables with very few closed offices facilitated listening and easy assimilation into agency culture. Heather, an account executive, described the overall listening support as, “I’d say that people are always open to hearing thoughts from all levels. Whether it’s the executives or at the very top levels of our company, whether it’s office managers, whether it’s practice leads, they’re open to listening.” Additionally, listening was described as the primary means by which new agency employees learn about their practice areas, client needs, and the nuances and expectations of agency work. Sam, an assistant account executive, explained, “Listening helps you to pick up on conversations between senior management and clients. You learn how to react during tough circumstances and how to handle difficult questions. It’s the open floor plan that helps you to learn, listen, and absorb all this...it makes the work more tangible.” Similarly, Kate, a senior account executive, shared, “you realize like there is such a learning curve, and you’re not actually ready to start giving counsel or something like that right out of college. I feel like I was just listening for, you know, six months at least. I started listening into every interview that my clients did.” Following suit, assistant account executive Marianne echoed the value of listening on client calls in order to learn the business of public relations and agency work. She explained that “you’re gaining really valuable insights on the topic and what the client thinks, so

I think that's really important. Also sitting in on interviews, even if I'm not staffing it. It's firsthand from our spokesperson's mouth on what they're thinking.”

Fostering Relationships – Participants also described listening as integral to forging relationships among themselves and with their clients. Heather, the account executive, cited the need to engage in conversations and listen to her colleagues across the agency. She explained, “One thing that I challenge myself to do is to go outside of my immediate group because we are all in different practices and to make those connections. If someone or if I ever needed anything or someone needed something from me, I could then make that connection point. So that's listening. It's asking and then remembering what other people work on, especially since that changes with different client needs.”

Although listening to foster relationships with colleagues was important, participants cited spending considerably more time listening in order to forge meaningful and trusting relationships with their clients. Duke, an executive vice president, explained that listening in support of relationship building is, “taking the time to get to know people and talk to them. Listening is going out to lunch with your client and not talking business for a few minutes. It's getting to know them.” Humorously, but emphatically, he further explained:

You have to actually *get off of your chair*, leave the office, go out among the people and things that you are covering, and talk to them. Just sitting around, you know, at the office reading media stories. That's not how you learn and you're not having a real dialogue with your clients. Then you don't build that relationship to the point that it is a strong business relationship. And, then you know...and if you don't have a good business relationship with a client, eventually you don't have a client.

Participants described the multiple methods they employed to actively listen to engage, understand, and strengthen relationships with their clients. Heather, the account executive, explained how she listens actively to first understand different client styles and nuances. “Different clients have different styles. Some are straight shooters, direct, and others are, they don't really know what they want until they see it in front of them. What does your client really want? And how do you get to understanding what they want? It's not just you hearing what they tell you, but it's the *undertones*.” Then, Heather described how she knows (and is satisfied) when listening supports a comfortable working relationship with a client: “It's when you get to know your clients on that partner-to-partner level and you know about their kids. They know you love *The Bachelorette* and you guys talk about these things. That's when you know you want to do right by them, and they're also going to do right by you when they give you that feedback.” Similarly, William, an executive vice president, explained his use of thoughtful listening and strategic questioning to develop strong client relationships. He said, “Clients like to know that they've been heard. So, to respond back and say, ‘You know, just so we're clear.’ Or, ‘What I'm hearing you asking for is this.’ And then I'll repeat the way I heard it. That's really effective to do that, you know, gut check. Because the client might say, ‘Well, no, not really.’ But if you get it right, then the client's going to feel confident and say, ‘Yeah, that's exactly what I meant.’”

Agency NYC executive leaders emphasized the critical importance of listening to maintain and support client relationships. William, the executive vice president, shared an example of how poor listening damaged a client's confidence in the account team and heralded the removal of the account lead from the client. He said of a recent client call when an account executive asked a question about something that they had literally just talked about: "You could hear the awkwardness from the client where you could almost hear them looking at each other. If you were listening to what the client was asking, you could have responded with more effective counsel, but when you get into that order ticker mode and you're not listening or you're just listening for who's going to say something next, or 'I'll have fries with that,' you've missed the nuance of the conversation and the nuance here was *clearly missed*." Ultimately, instances where listening is not used or taken for granted, it can alienate and insult the client, resulting in a damaged relationship and lack of trust.

Getting "Ahead Of" Trends – Participant comments indicated that listening in Agency NYC also revolved around identifying, understanding, and "staying ahead" of trends. Many interviewees cautioned the dangers of not listening in order remain on top of changing trends and news. William, an executive vice president, opined, "There's plenty of people who come here and they haven't listened to anything before they walked in the door. The newspaper has not been read. Maybe they listened to music on the way in and there's nothing wrong with that. But they have no idea what's going on in the world!" Similarly, Heather, the account executive, worried, "There is that greater conversation going on of things that are happening in the world. And it's a dangerous place to be when you're in an environment where people don't pay attention beyond that bubble. [Agency NYC] does a really good job of making sure that we're aware of things outside of our day-to-day."

Interviewees more consistently touted the benefits of listening to help them identify, understand, and remain adept at discussing cutting-edge trends, cultural phenomena, or emerging issues. Samantha, a senior vice president, explained that listening was even key to identifying issues internal to the agency and responding to them appropriately. She stated, "Listening is essential for prevention and risk management internally. It's getting ahead of the issue so that it doesn't get worse. Listening in my role here is like environmental scanning within the agency itself." Corinne, a chief executive, explained how listening also enabled her to identify trends that the agency should address, especially regarding how to cultivate thought leadership:

It's trying to be out ahead... So one of things is what kind of research can we do that's ahead of the wave? Listening is how it's done. I get asked a question from a client in a meeting or something and I've never thought of. I can't find the answer to. And if I hear one or two people ask me the same question, that's when I'll think, you know what? This may be something that no one's done or thought of. We should do it!

In order to listen "ahead of the trend," agency members engaged in forms of extended listening to diverse groups of individuals with insights or a stake in their client's business - including partners, customers, suppliers or clients of their clients. One chief executive, Laura, explained, how you must "listen in order to know who the *customer's customer* is." She described a trip she had taken to work in the groves of her client's suppliers "meeting with

growers and...and in shelling plants and really understanding their business opportunities and pain points.” In addition to extensive visits with diverse target publics, vendors, or partners, interview participants described an intense reliance on technology to facilitate listening and remaining ahead of the trends. News outlets, tabloid newspapers, industry websites, YouTube videos, and aggregators such as Reddit were key to identifying unique or important trends that clients had not yet identified. Mike, a creative lead, shared, “I’m constantly on aggregators to learn about what people are talking about, because that’s a nice way to get some sense of what’s the general zeitgeist around a story or a discussion point and then where is it going from there? Reddit primarily is the way to do that nowadays for all of its benefits and for all of its controversies.” Similarly, Steve, another creative lead, also shared how he actively listens for “what are the things that people are sharing?” He explained, “So, this is stuff like memes and stuff that is on Reddit. Like, all of the things that would get linked to and shared over and over again and we were just like, well what if we just like try to identify what those stories are and then have brands do awesome stuff that becomes part of the stories.”

Regarding the second research question, listening was found to promote public relations and communication strategy by facilitating the strategic planning process, facilitating respectful and diversity-centered communication, facilitating an excellent client experience, and ultimately cultivating agency-client trust.

Strategic Planning – Participants explained that listening facilitated excellent public relations practice - because and when - it is utilized as part of the strategic planning process. Listening is essential to identifying appropriate goals, objectives, and strategies to meet client needs. Duke, an executive vice president, explained how the process begins with listening to the clients’ goals. “When we work with clients, that’s where your listening comes in. Asking ‘What do you think? Where do you really want to go? What is your goal behind this?’”

Participants also explained that listening to clients via a formal process of inquiry (supported by excellent questioning) that facilitates excellent strategy creation. Laura, a chief executive, explained, “Listening is key, but so is asking, right? Inquiry is key. So, listening is only good if you are prompting the right questions. I am very proud of what the firm has done in this area because I think we put rigor and discipline into something that we typically sort of left to chance, you know?” Similarly, Mary, another executive vice president, echoed, “The first thing is understanding how to ask the right questions... We’ve driven a process around how do we go in to ask the right questions about what those business outcomes are. What audiences they really care about. Who are we trying to move and where are we trying to move them to? And then that sets us on a course of actionable recommendations that we can make.” Additionally, Mary explained that listening came full circle during the evaluation process to make sure her strategic recommendations did, indeed, meet the client’s objectives. She explained, “We do lots of literal discussions with our clients about did we achieve what you wanted to, right? There’s the business objectives that we’re mapping against for them, but there’s also did we help you out? Did we do what you needed us to do?”

Respectful and Diversity-Centered Communication – Participants also indicated that listening supports excellent strategizing by supporting respectfully engaging with diverse perspectives. Such a focus on ethical listening is embedded into the culture of the agency and supported by senior executives. Corinne, a chief executive, explained, “The leadership team are amazing people. They’re real listeners, and they’re very humble. They all listen and remember

what you say, and I think it does stem from the top. They're very ethical. They're very focused on the people here, and so it's just part of the ethos of the organization is good listeners trying to serve clients well." Similarly, Lewis, a chief executive, voiced how he also supports respectful listening with, "I always encourage people whether they are starting out in the profession or far along to step back, particularly in today's environment where things are so noisy and perhaps even uncivil, and listen and have empathy for different points of view." Illustrating this concept, Martin, an agency executive, described how Abraham Lincoln sought out and listened to different points of view. "Even though he knew going in they were antithetical to his belief system... but he was predicated on the input and that broad swath of different perspectives, and I think he had that emotional intelligence. He was a great example of listening - to how people were thinking and feeling from all different sides of a debate."

The agency is so committed to listening to diverse perspectives that it has instituted an employee exchange program. In turn, the listening to diverse perspectives enables the agency to provide the best counsel to its clients. Lewis explained, "we move [employees] to different offices for several weeks, and then they bring those experiences back to their home office and having that exposure to different cultures and different people....you're not just thinking about your own... you broaden your frame of reference because you're listening to people who have different points of view in different parts of the world dealing with different types of challenges.

Excellent Client Experience – Via listening, as part of the strategic planning process and embedded into a listening culture that emphasizes respect and diversity, the agency strives to provide excellence in the overall client experience it provides. Steve, the creative lead, explained, quite simply, that it's using "Listening to connect the insights to the client to ensure client success." Laura expounded upon the ways in which listening fosters an excellent client experience on multiple levels. She explained, "Our client experience is really driven by what our clients say is important to them. We talk to them all the time and aggregate those conversations. We listen to our front-line employees who are managing our clients. And, we even have a mechanism now when we have a real time feedback app. Some clients around the world where they can literally, on their phones, give us feedback immediately."

Additionally, participants explained that having listening structures in place (and gleaned information that is ahead of trends) facilitates excellent client experience by providing cutting edge, interesting, and timely insights. Calvin, a senior account executive, explained, "The way we listen that way is that we have a really, I think, strong structure for being able to pass information really quickly and get things done... Having that knowledge ready and being able to speak about it goes such a long way for our clients. They know that they have partners on the agency side." Such a listening structure has resulted in the agency being recognized as a leader in thought leadership on a variety of subjects and providing exceptional thought leadership support for their clients. Calvin added, for example, "So we really, really have to listen and be keyed in on what these CEOs and what these leadership teams care about. Because it's up to us to position the head [title] as a thought leader in that area."

Trust – Listening, when integrated into public relations strategy, ultimately develops a strong client relationship founded on trust. Trust, for participants, indicated that clients and agency have reached level of comfort – and the agency had achieved a level of excellence - where both parties were unafraid to listen to each other and sometimes "push back" when giving strategic counsel. Duke described this as, "The indication of trust is...is when the client asks you

to participate in existential work...if a client says, ‘Hey this is the most important thing that we have done. The whole company is riding on this.’” Laura explained that sometimes pushing back is needed as part of a trusting client relationship, based on how the agency has listened extensively to the needs of the client. “Trust is the highest sort of benefit that we are going for with our clients...and that means be willing also to push back and if we think that our clients are wrong, being willing to say you know we were going to do this, but it’s the wrong thing for the business... We have to always put [clients] first and bring higher order thinking for them.” Illustrating this, Mike, the creative lead, offered an example of how he pushes back with a client based on listening and evidence he has gleaned:

We are able to build a level of trust where they say, ‘Okay. We’ve seen from [agency] that they’re smart, that they get us, that they understand us, that we can work together and that if they do present something to that’s off or something we weren’t even focusing on they’ll have a good reason for it.’ I think first and foremost even if I have the evidence too, it’s just, a lot of the times we’ll hear just, ‘Well that’s what you think or we get that you think that’s cool, but that’s not about what we’re about.’ Then I say, “According to the outlets you want to reach, this is what people think is interesting and worth talking about.

Discussion

This case study of Agency NYC fulfilled the need for additional and site-specific inquiry regarding the concept of listening in public relations and its links to effective public relations practice and communications strategy. From this study, listening can be described as essential for learning about public relations agency and industry life, forging and maintaining relationships with clients, and gleaning insights that will benefit clients strategically and reputationally. Listening also promotes effective public relations when listening is included as part of the strategic planning process based on active inquiry, is included in agency communication as part of a respectful and diversity-centered culture, fosters excellent and unique client experiences, and ultimately fosters trusting and lasting client-agency relationships. Indeed, listening as a facilitator and indicator of *trust* was viewed as the highest order of excellence and achievement at the agency. When listening occurs, clients and agency consider themselves as partners in achieving shared goals. Such an approach complements the core values of dialogic listening (e.g. Floyd, 2010; Johnnesen, 2002) as well as cocreational approaches to public relations (Botan, 2018; Botan & Taylor, 2004).

Mirroring and contributing to the extant research regarding listening, this case study indicates that listening occurs as both a function of interpersonal (e.g. relationship building among colleagues and clients) and organizational (e.g. social listening, thought leadership research, respectful culture based on listening) communication. In alignment with the work of the Organizational Listening Project (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018) listening appears to be central to agency life and effective --- yet ultimately centered on enabling agency professionals and clients to *speak*. Although agency documents and participant comments illustrated examples of effective listening practices and strategies, most of these were done to fulfill traditional

asymmetrical public relations practices of information dissemination (to clients) or effective engagement (of client's target publics). In contrast, Agency NYC's vast community-building efforts (i.e. happy hours and awards nights), employee brown-bag sessions, global exchange programs that promote employee learning and dialogue, and agency emphasis on face-to-face engagement with client publics, indicates a strong emphasis on more symmetrical forms of dialogue and listening – especially among internal publics. Thus, this case describes a complex balance of listening and speaking in a public relations agency – that when done *together* – best deliver effective business strategy and public relations counsel. Learning how to appropriately navigate this balance appears to require significant amounts of industry expertise – and listening!

The balance of speaking and listening performed by agency professionals and their clients complements the cocreational model of public relations. This publics-centered perspective emphasizes the active creation of meaning that occurs as public relations professionals and publics are viewed as equal partners in the meaning-making process (Botan, 2018; Botan & Taylor, 2004). Prioritizing publics' perspectives and co-creating communications efforts may foster relationship-building and trust among publics (Botan & Taylor, 2004), improve publics' feelings of authenticity or inclusion, and improve customer service and product design (Combie, 2012). Future research should further situate listening as essential to the cocreational public relations perspective and develop specific insights regarding the process of meaning cocreation in public relations agency settings.

From this case study, the following practical recommendations and emerging theoretical statements can be made; however, extensive research and additional site-specific case studies are still required to fully understand how listening occurs in the public relations industry. Firstly, in a global public relations agency, listening involves navigating the complex, ever-evolving system of voices, technologies, and trends. Public relations professionals must engage in systematic and ongoing listening to learn and respond to multiple forms of dialogue. Therefore, listening must not be taken for granted – and should be taught and cultivated by agency management as a central aspect of client relationship building. Secondly, the practice of listening in an agency requires empathy and a considerable commitment to physically “put yourself in the shoes” of your client, vendors, or colleagues. Agency-based listening thus may involve physically traveling to listen to the “customers' customers” to identify needs, worries, and trends that will impact a client or target public. Thirdly, applying the HURIER model (e.g. Brownell, 1996, 2004, 2010), listening in a public relations agency centers on the elements of hearing, understanding, interpreting, and responding. Formal and informal methods of listening to understand and interpret trends, clients' needs, or relationship status cues were especially critical to agency success. Lastly, a key indicator that listening facilitates effective public relations strategy and practice is *trust*. When trust occurs, clients and agency professionals may best engage in communication that mirrors symmetrical communication. Individuals listen, speak, and engage in respectful “push back” to provide appropriate counsel to each other.

Specific Implications and Recommendations for Practice – Findings from this study suggest that agency-wide listening competency training is especially vital for assessing and developing employees' listening competencies at entry-level, management, and executive levels across practice areas. Listening training should be included as part of the on-boarding and enculturation process of new employees, then enforced by supervisors and agency leadership. In alignment with listening competency literature, training should hone nonverbal skills such as

sustained eye contact, head nodding, and hand gestures, as well as verbal skills such as maintaining the flow of communication, asking specific and thoughtful questions, and communicating empathy and respect for diverse perspectives (Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012; Burnside-Lawry, 2012; Cooper, 1997; Purdy & Manning, 2015; Wolvin, 2010a). Additionally, contextual public relations industry- or agency-specific listening skills must also be modeled, including a) listening to foster a trusting client experience and agency-client relationship, b) listening as a method of inquiry in which practitioners ask appropriate questions and re-state or repeat client statements to ensure accurate message comprehension c) listening to understand and evaluate client goals-based, strategic, and tactical needs and provide effective and appropriate feedback, and d) listen dialogically to engage the client with a spirit of mutual equality, respect, and support (Floyd, 2010; Johnnnesen, 2002).

Findings also suggest that facilitation of an architecture of listening (Macnamara, 2016a, 2016b, 2018) in public relations agencies is important for effective client management, relationship building among client and employee groups, and strategic and tactical development in increasingly complex global communications networks. Enforcement of listening training and provision of supportive listening infrastructures may especially support new employees as they navigate an agency environment where listening to leadership, diverse clients, and colleagues across multiple client teams is expected. Agencies must consider dedicating resources, policies, and specific listening-focused role designations that listen to external publics, current and potential clients, and employees across agency practice areas. Listening policies and specific role designations can foster excellent employee and client relationships by practicing elements of effective listening (with full attention, empathy, and objectivity), dialogic listening (in the spirit of authenticity and mutual equality). The comprehensive six-step HURIER model (Brownell, 1996; 2010) guides public relations professionals to actively receive, understand, remember, interpret, and evaluate all messages before responding. Simultaneously, agency infrastructure and technology use should adapt various professional tools and techniques to facilitate listening via electronic recording or notetaking devices, group chat applications, real-time conferencing or face-to-face feedback sessions.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study described how listening occurs and supports the development of business and communications strategy in global public relations agency environment. Despite limitations including U.S.-based practitioner perspectives and limited access to selected agency practice areas, this study provides a timely portrait of a listening architecture within an agency context. As research explicitly exploring listening in public relations is only just emerging, this study serves as a springboard of ideas for future research. Future research could broadly explore how listening can improve the overall satisfaction or sense of togetherness among public relations professionals (i.e. Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Reed, Goolsby & Johnson, 2016) and how listening can improve the perceived competency or effectiveness of agency leadership (i.e. Brownell, 1990; Haas & Arnold, 1995). Additionally, research could explore if and how listening supports the cocreational approach to public relations in which all individuals are equal partners in the meaning-making process (Botan, 2018; Botan & Taylor, 2004). Ultimately,

future research must continue to analyze, both quantitatively and qualitatively a) how practitioners define and practice listening in various public relations work environments, b) why listening, as indicated by this study, was primarily client-focused, c) which skills or competencies best enable practitioners to meet the needs of clients and organizations amidst complex strategic and business environments, and d) how listening can be emphasized within the public relations industry to foster mutual understanding, trust, and dialogue among agency members, clients, and diverse external publics.

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