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Managerial Listening as an Organizational Capability for Responsive Action

Santiago Morales^{1*}, Laura Rojas², Camila Vega¹, Diego Molina³

1. Department of Managerial Listening and Responsiveness, Faculty of Business, University of Buenos Aires, Buenos Aires, Argentina.
2. Department of Organizational Capabilities and Action, Faculty of Management, Pontifical Catholic University of Chile, Santiago, Chile.
3. Department of Employee Voice and Leadership, Faculty of Psychology, National University of La Plata, La Plata, Argentina.

Abstract

Organizations frequently invite employees to speak while leaving the reception, interpretation, and conversion of concerns dependent on individual managers. This arrangement confuses opportunities for voice with the organizational capacity to notice consequential signals and respond responsibly. This Original Conceptual Framework Article develops managerial listening as a proposed organizational capability rather than a personal communication behavior. The framework integrates five connected processes: sensing employee concerns across formal, informal, representative, and technology-mediated channels; interpreting ambiguous and conflicting signals without equating visibility, style, or status with merit; mobilizing authorized and resourced responses; closing feedback loops through acknowledgment, explanation, attribution, and status communication; and using accumulated response histories for organizational learning. The article proposes that listening becomes capability-like only when these processes are repeatable, distributed, supported by routines, and capable of altering ordinary decisions or practices. It further proposes decision principles concerning signal provenance, plural interpretation, response ownership, non-retaliation, reason-giving, and readiness for organizational reliance. The framework does not assume that every concern should be accepted, that employee perceptions establish organizational performance, or that listening produces causal improvements. Its principal limitations are the heterogeneous evidence base, incomplete multilevel validation, context-dependent voice dynamics, and the absence of a validated capability measure. Longitudinal, multisource, behavioral, and comparative research is therefore required to test, refine, or reject the proposed relationships. The contribution is an evidence-bounded architecture for connecting managerial attention to accountable responsive action.

Keywords: Listening beyond individual managerial behavior, Capability-based foundations, Sensing employee concerns, Interpreting ambiguous and conflicting signals, Managerial listening-capability framework, Capability development and assessment

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Corresponding author: Santiago Morales

E-mail ✉ santiago.morales@fce.uba.ar

Introduction

Managerial listening is often framed as an interpersonal competence: a manager attends carefully, signals understanding, and responds with empathy. Workplace listening research supports the importance of attention, comprehension, and acceptance for employee cognition, emotion, and relational experience [1]. Yet this dyadic framing becomes incomplete when a concern must cross reporting lines, compete with other signals, survive managerial turnover, obtain resources, or challenge established interests. An organization may contain attentive managers while remaining unable to recognize recurring concerns or convert them into consequential action. The central problem is therefore not whether particular managers can listen, but whether the



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organization can repeatedly preserve, interpret, and act on employee information without making responsiveness dependent on individual discretion.

Structured listening routines indicate that listening can be developed rather than treated exclusively as a stable personal disposition [2]. However, a facilitated listening intervention does not show that concerns will be integrated into ordinary decisions, escalated across levels, or revisited after a response. Development at the interpersonal level is consequently necessary but insufficient. The proposed shift is from listening as an episode to listening as a coordinated organizational process whose outputs include not merely felt acknowledgment but also traceable interpretation, responsible decision ownership, and feedback closure.

This shift also requires separating employee voice from managerial listening. Voice and silence are multidimensional, motivated, and context-sensitive phenomena; an opportunity to speak does not ensure that a concern receives consequential influence [3]. Silence cannot be interpreted as the absence of problems because voice and silence have distinct relationships with perceived impact, psychological safety, and strain [4]. Moreover, promotive suggestions and prohibitive warnings display different antecedent and outcome patterns, making undifferentiated “voice volume” an inadequate sensing criterion [5]. A listening-capability perspective must therefore attend to expressed concerns, suppressed signals, issue type, channel conditions, and the organizational response that follows.

This article develops an original, non-empirical conceptual framework for that purpose. It proposes managerial listening capability as the patterned organizational capacity to sense employee concerns, interpret competing accounts, mobilize proportionate responses, close feedback loops, and learn from response histories. The construct is proposed rather than validated. It does not imply that managers must accept every suggestion, that visibility equals quality, or that responsiveness can be inferred from policy statements. Its intended contribution is to specify the processes and boundaries needed to connect listening beyond individual behavior with accountable organizational action.

Capability-based foundations

Capability language is useful only when it adds more than a new label for desirable behavior. Dynamic-capability scholarship distinguishes higher-order capacities from isolated actions or ordinary routines and emphasizes the need to specify components, mechanisms, levels, and outcomes [6]. Applied cautiously, this distinction suggests that a manager’s attentive conversation is an event, whereas a listening capability would be a repeatable organizational capacity that coordinates multiple actors and modifies ordinary decisions or practices. The transfer remains conceptual: existing capability research does not establish managerial listening as a recognized or validated dynamic capability.

The relational foundations of capability are nevertheless important. Adaptive capacity may be energized by interaction, social coordination, and distributed agency rather than by formal routines alone [7]. Managerial listening similarly depends on the quality of exchanges through which employees frame concerns, managers ask questions, peers corroborate or contest claims, and responsible actors negotiate a response. The proposed construct therefore has relational microfoundations but an organizational referent. Relational quality may enable the process, yet it is neither sufficient nor universally causal; authority, resources, institutions, and power asymmetries remain alternative explanations for whether action follows.

Capability measurement offers a second foundation. Sensing, seizing, and transforming have been operationalized as connected but distinguishable capacities [8]. This decomposition informs the architecture developed here, but its measures cannot be transplanted as a listening scale. Sensing employee concerns is not equivalent to scanning markets, and mobilizing a response is not identical to seizing a commercial opportunity. Construct development must preserve the substantive domain, the employee–manager relationship, and the risks attached to dissent.

Finally, capability must alter ordinary work rather than remain ceremonial. Longitudinal evidence connects attention control and problem-solving with changes in ordinary organizational capabilities [9]. For managerial listening, this implies a demanding process criterion: concerns must be selected for justified attention, investigated, assigned, resourced, answered, or incorporated into changed routines. The proposed capability is therefore not demonstrated by open-door policies, survey administration, or reported managerial receptivity alone. Those practices may be inputs, while capability claims require evidence that coordinated listening processes persist across situations and produce traceable changes in organizational handling.

Sensing employee concerns

Sensing employee concerns refers to the proposed organizational capacity to detect, invite, preserve, and classify signals that may otherwise remain weak, private, dispersed, or suppressed. It includes unsolicited voice, structured solicitation, representative mechanisms, routine conversations, digital channels, and attention to patterned silence. Sensing is not a passive intake function. Managers may avoid seeking employee voice when personal control is threatened or short-term disruption becomes salient [10]. The proposed capability must therefore reduce overreliance on discretionary solicitation through protected channels, recurring prompts, escalation alternatives, and accountability for unexamined concerns.

Signal availability is also socially learned. Employees may develop voice self-efficacy by observing leaders who speak up, but the learning process can depend on leader–employee gender congruity [11]. This finding cautions against treating a formally available channel as equally usable by all employees. A sensing system should examine whose concerns enter the record, whose signals require intermediaries, and whether representation, status, identity, or occupational location changes access. These are diagnostic questions rather than evidence that any particular channel design guarantees inclusion.

Managerial states can further shape what becomes visible. Leader affective cues influence upward voice under identifiable conditions, suggesting that employees interpret a manager’s momentary receptivity when deciding whether to raise a concern [12]. Sensing quality may therefore fluctuate even when formal policy remains constant. Workload, task timing, issue severity, and local norms remain plausible rival explanations, so affect should not become a simplistic managerial prescription. The broader implication is that organizations need multiple opportunities and targets for concern expression rather than a single encounter with one manager.

Signals may also gain reach through amplification by colleagues or higher-status actors [13]. Amplification can help a neglected idea become visible, but repetition, sponsorship, and endorsement may alter provenance or transfer credit. The proposed sensing process therefore preserves who raised the concern, what was originally claimed, how it was relayed, and what uncertainty remains. Frequency and visibility are treated as properties of transmission, not as proxies for evidential quality.

Table 1 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for managerial listening as an organizational capability for responsive action.

Table 1. Definitions, constructs, and conceptual boundaries for Managerial Listening as an Organizational Capability for Responsive Action.

Construct or component	Definition	Problem addressed	Distinction from adjacent concepts	Proposed role	Uncertainty	Boundary statement
Listening quality	Attentive, comprehending, and accepting reception	Superficial hearing	Not agreement	Input condition	Context varies	Does not establish action
Voice and silence	Distinct ways concerns become expressed or withheld	False inference from silence	Not opposite endpoints	Expand signal set	Hidden concerns remain unknowable	No prevalence inference
Signal type	Promotive idea or prohibitive warning	Undifferentiated voice counts	Not equal urgency	Proposed classification	Categories may overlap	No universal priority
Organizational capability	Repeatable higher-order coordination	Trait-level framing	Not one manager’s skill	Proposed system construct	Transfer requires testing	Not validated
Sensing	Detecting, inviting, preserving, and classifying concerns	Manager-dependent access	Not passive availability	Proposed first stage	Legitimate non-solicitation exists	No motive assumption
Signal provenance	Traceable origin, relay, and alteration	Visibility mistaken for validity	Not popularity	Proposed safeguard	Informal relays resist documentation	No quality score
Responsive action	Authorized investigation, adaptation, escalation, implementation, or reasoned decline	Listening without consequence	Not endorsement alone	Proposed conversion stage	Outcomes remain context-dependent	No causal performance claim

Note: Evidence-supported definitions are cited. “Proposed” identifies this article’s conceptual synthesis rather than an empirically validated construct, threshold, or ranking.

Interpreting ambiguous and conflicting signals

Interpretation begins after a concern becomes visible but before a response is selected. The task is not simply to decide whether a manager “likes” an idea. Managers’ valuation of voice depends on both message content and identification with the employee who speaks [14]. This makes interpretation relational and potentially status-laden. The proposed capability therefore separates the concern, its source, supporting evidence, affected stakeholders, and decision consequences. Managerial endorsement remains one input; it is not an independent measure of objective merit.

Message form can also shape judgment. Voice directness and politeness influence endorsement partly through perceived credibility [15]. Such effects may reflect legitimate communication needs, cultural conventions, or bias toward familiar styles. A proposed interpretation protocol should therefore distinguish content quality from delivery style and record when style is

materially relevant—for example, when clarity affects operational safety—rather than silently allowing tone to stand in for evidence. No single communication style can be treated as universally optimal.

Identity and framing complicate interpretation further. Agentic and communal voice can receive different endorsement depending on the gender of the employee [16]. This evidence supports plural review, bias-aware questioning, and comparison of reasons across similar cases, but it does not show that standardized scoring removes inequity. Any organizational safeguard could itself privilege dominant definitions of credibility or relevance. Interpretation quality must therefore be examined through patterns of who is believed, whose evidence is requested, and whose suggestions are advanced.

Managerial judgments may also vary with audience and context, producing mixed signals about receptivity [17]. Some revision is legitimate because new evidence, resource constraints, or stakeholder consequences emerge. The capability problem arises when inconsistent judgments are unexplained, politically selective, or impossible to revisit. The proposed process consequently requires reason documentation, retention of dissent, and a route for escalation or secondary review. These practices are design principles requiring empirical testing; they do not prove that ambiguity can be eliminated or that consensus is always desirable.

Mobilizing responsive action

Responsive action is the proposed capacity to move from an interpreted concern to an accountable organizational disposition: investigate, adapt, implement, escalate, defer with reasons, or decline with reasons. Enactment research indicates that message quality and peer endorsement or opposition jointly shape whether managers act on voiced ideas [18]. This supports separating evidential assessment from social support. Peer agreement may reveal operational knowledge or implementation feasibility, but it may also reflect conformity, coalition strength, or status. The proposed action gate therefore records both the substantive basis for a decision and the social conditions surrounding it.

Favorable evaluation is not implementation. A multilevel social-network perspective shows that movement from endorsement to implementation depends partly on relational position and access to influence [19]. Formal approval may consequently remain symbolic when no actor has sufficient authority, resources, time, or cross-unit cooperation. Under the proposed framework, a responsive disposition must identify a responsible owner, the authority available, dependencies, a review point, and the employee protections required. These are proposed accountability devices rather than evidence that one network structure or assignment rule will work across organizations.

The channel through which employees speak also changes managerial stakes. Public and private voice can receive different endorsement because audience exposure creates reputational and relational pressures [20]. Publicness may increase accountability, but it can also provoke defensiveness; privacy may support candor, but it can conceal patterns and isolate the voicer. Responsive action should therefore be channel-sensitive without ranking one channel universally above another. High-consequence concerns may require protected escalation beyond the original manager even when the initial conversation remains confidential.

Action ownership affects whether a response is experienced as legitimate. Managerial credit claiming can weaken the benefits associated with endorsement by reducing employee respect and work-group identification [21]. The proposed capability distinguishes sponsorship, which can mobilize resources while preserving attribution, from appropriation, which obscures the employee's contribution. Attribution records, status communication, and non-retaliation protections are therefore treated as governance requirements. They remain unvalidated design principles and do not imply that every managerial reformulation constitutes credit theft.

Table 2 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in managerial listening as an organizational capability for responsive action.

Table 2. Proposed mechanisms, relationships, and organizational consequences in Managerial Listening as an Organizational Capability for Responsive Action.

Mechanism or relationship	Antecedent	Mediator or process	Moderator	Expected consequence	Rival explanation	Validation requirement
Evidence-to-enactment	Interpreted concern	Persuasion and feasibility assessment	Peer support or opposition	Proposed action selection	Conformity or politics	Field behavior and outcome tracing
Endorsement-to-implementation	Favorable managerial judgment	Resource and influence access	Network position	Proposed conversion into practice	Formal authority or budget	Longitudinal multilevel analysis
Channel-sensitive response	Public or private voice	Reputational and relational appraisal	Audience exposure	Different response pathways	Issue severity or culture	Within-organization channel comparisons

Attribution integrity	Endorsed employee idea	Respect and group identification	Managerial credit claiming	Sustained willingness to contribute	General leader fairness	Multisource attribution records
Proposed response gate	Interpreted signal	Accept, investigate, adapt, defer, escalate, or decline with reason	Consequence and uncertainty	Traceable disposition	Administrative burden	Comparative process evaluation
Proposed mobilization bundle	Chosen disposition	Owner, authority, resources, timetable, protection	Interdependence	Accountable execution	Informal coordination	Behavioral and archival implementation evidence

Note: Expected consequences describe proposed pathways, not demonstrated effect sizes or universal organizational outcomes.

Feedback closure and organizational learning

Feedback closure is the proposed process through which employees and affected actors learn what happened to a concern, why a disposition was chosen, who owns any next step, and whether the matter can be reconsidered. Voice-response congruence influences employee-initiated constructive change, indicating that speaking and managerial recognition cannot be treated as independent episodes [22]. Congruence need not mean agreement. A reasoned decline may provide closure when it accurately represents the concern, explains constraints, and preserves a route for correction.

Response histories also interact with hierarchy. The hierarchy-of-voice framework proposes that status shapes who speaks and that voice may recursively alter status [23]. This bidirectionality motivates longitudinal monitoring of whose concerns gain access, credibility, and influence after repeated responses. Yet changes in hierarchy may also reflect expertise, performance, alliances, or role transitions. The proposed learning loop therefore treats recurring asymmetry as a diagnostic signal requiring investigation, not as proof of discrimination or capability failure.

Employees may also interpret appreciation as evidence that speaking was worthwhile. Perceived voice appreciation helps explain when voice is associated with engagement, with emotional stability operating as a boundary condition [24]. Appreciation is consequently relevant to closure, but it cannot substitute for investigation, explanation, or action. Symbolic gratitude without substantive handling may conceal rather than resolve the organizational problem. Closure quality should be assessed through acknowledgment accuracy, reason clarity, status visibility, attribution integrity, and the availability of appeal.

Psychological safety is related to voice, learning, and performance-relevant constructs, but its associations vary across levels and contexts [25]. It should therefore be treated as a condition and possible consequence of response history, not as proof that an organization listens. Organizational learning occurs only when accumulated cases alter assumptions, routines, channel design, or resource allocation. The proposed cycle preserves unresolved dissent and failed responses as learning material. Whether such records improve future decisions remains uncertain and requires temporal, behavioral, and multilevel testing. At the organizational level, learning is proposed to occur when cases are aggregated without erasing their differences. Recurrence may reveal a structural problem, but repeated wording can also reflect copying, campaign activity, or a common external shock. The learning process should therefore compare issue content, source diversity, affected units, prior dispositions, implementation barriers, and subsequent recurrence. It should also preserve negative cases in which a concern was responsibly examined but no change was warranted. This approach separates learning from compulsory change and from simple accumulation of voice records. The relevant capability claim concerns whether the organization can revisit its own assumptions and handling routines when evidence justifies doing so.

Proposed managerial listening-capability framework

The proposed framework integrates direct, representative, formal, and informal voice mechanisms because employee voice is institutionally broader than individual discretionary speaking [26]. Its central construct is managerial listening capability: a proposed organizational capacity coordinating concern sensing, plural interpretation, accountable mobilization, feedback closure, and learning. “Managerial” identifies the distributed work of receiving and acting through managerial systems; it does not assign the entire capability to line managers. Employee representatives, human resource specialists, senior leaders, compliance functions, peers, and digital systems may participate, while legitimate authority and responsibility remain human and organizational.

Technology-mediated voice expands the architecture. Social-media affordances change persistence, reach, visibility, and audience boundaries, creating opportunities for weak signals to travel while increasing surveillance, confidentiality, provenance, and contextual-collapse risks [27]. The framework therefore separates technological capability from legitimate authority. A platform may collect or amplify concerns, but it does not determine merit, authorize action, or transfer managerial responsibility. Digital visibility is descriptive, not evidence of importance or performance.

Crisis conditions further expose whether the organization has coherent response arrangements. Human resource practices and human resource system strength may shape employee voice during crises by influencing the distinctiveness, consistency, and consensus of organizational signals [28]. The framework consequently proposes a high-consequence escalation path with redundant review and explicit protection. It does not specify validated thresholds or claim that consistency is always beneficial; coherent but unjust systems can suppress legitimate dissent.

Finally, contextual voice efficacy links prior response credibility to future voice and silence [29]. The framework treats this perception as a diagnostic outcome of the cycle, not as an objective measure of implementation. High efficacy may coexist with selective inclusion, while low efficacy may reflect failed action, poor communication, unrealistic expectations, or external constraints. Capability assessment must therefore compare employee experience with records of decisions, resources, actions, and closure.

The framework also proposes two decision boundaries. First, sensing and interpretation remain informational functions; they do not authorize action or transfer responsibility to employees, algorithms, or communication platforms. Second, responsiveness is assessed by justified handling rather than automatic acceptance. An organization may decline a proposal and still display a defensible process when it preserves the claim, examines relevant evidence, identifies the authorized decision maker, explains constraints, protects the employee, and permits review. Conversely, rapid implementation may reflect political convenience rather than capable listening. These boundaries prevent voice visibility, managerial agreement, implementation speed, or employee satisfaction from becoming standalone capability proxies. They also make failure analytically visible: a cycle can break through inaccessible channels, distorted interpretation, unfunded decisions, absent explanations, appropriation, retaliation, or failure to revise routines after recurrent concerns.

Figure 1 presents the original conceptual synthesis for managerial listening-capability framework, showing how the article's principal constructs, mechanisms, uncertainties, and decision boundaries are connected.

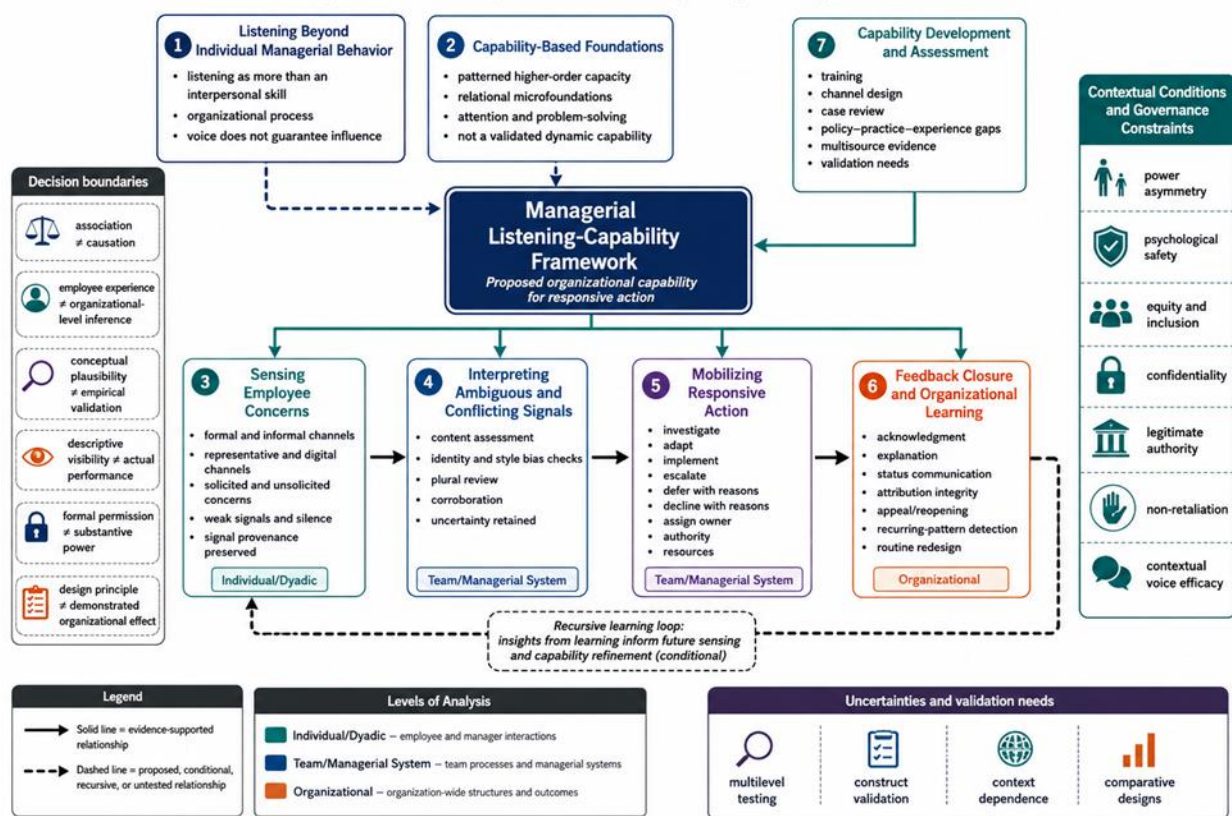


Figure 1. Managerial Listening-Capability Framework

Table 3 organizes the evidence, constructs, relationships, uncertainties, and boundary conditions required for testable propositions, evaluation criteria, and practical responsibilities.

Table 3. Testable propositions, evaluation criteria, and practical responsibilities.

Proposition or criterion	Unit and context	Observable indicator	Falsification condition	Organizational responsibility	Misuse risk	Readiness boundary
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Proposed channel inclusion	Employees across roles and channels	Distribution of concerns and access	Stable exclusion despite channel expansion	Human resource and operational leaders	Surveillance or token access	No reliance before privacy and access testing
Proposed interpretive fairness	Comparable concerns and decisions	Reasons, evidence requests, escalation patterns	Identity or style predicts handling after case controls	Decision owners and reviewers	Mechanistic scoring	No automated merit determination
Proposed mobilization capacity	Accepted or investigated concerns	Owner, authority, resources, status	Endorsement repeatedly ends without action or reason	Accountable executives	Responsibility diffusion	No capability claim from approval alone
Proposed attribution integrity	Employee-originated contributions	Recorded origin and acknowledged sponsorship	Systematic credit displacement	Managers and governance functions	Forced disclosure	Protection must precede traceability
Proposed learning recurrence	Repeated concerns over time	Routine, policy, or channel revision	Recurrence produces no review or justified stability	Cross-level governance body	Change for appearance	No universal change requirement
Proposed policy–practice–experience criterion	Organizational listening arrangements	Gaps among intended, enacted, and experienced practice	One source alone determines capability	Human resources, leaders, and employee representatives	Reputation management	Triangulation required
Proposed validation criterion	Organizations and teams over time	Convergent process and outcome indicators	Proposed dimensions fail discrimination or prediction	Independent researchers and organizations	Premature scoring	No readiness thresholds before validation

Note: Every proposition, responsibility allocation, and readiness boundary is proposed. Indicators are domains for empirical testing, not validated scales or performance standards.

Capability development and assessment

Capability development must address skills and systems simultaneously. Listening training may empower service employees through reduced anxiety and increased perspective-taking [30]. Such evidence supports interpersonal development, including attentive questioning, paraphrasing, uncertainty acknowledgment, and perspective-taking. Training alone, however, cannot ensure protected access, unbiased interpretation, resource mobilization, or closure. A proposed development portfolio therefore combines manager training with channel design, escalation practice, case review, attribution rules, and exercises that expose discrepancies between formal receptivity and enacted response.

Assessment should distinguish what the organization intends, what managers enact, and what employees experience. Human resource practice measurement research shows the importance of separating intended, implemented, and employee-perceived practices [31]. Applied here, policy indicators might document channels and responsibilities; enactment indicators might track solicitation, reasons, resources, and closure; experience indicators might assess perceived hearing, safety, efficacy, and fairness. None is sufficient alone. Employee perceptions may reveal inaccessible or symbolic systems, while archival completion may conceal poor acknowledgment or retaliation.

Methodological design is particularly important because a positive listening climate, reported managerial behavior, and employee outcomes may be collected from the same respondents at the same time. Common-method bias is widespread, complex, and not eliminated by one procedural remedy [32]. Validation should therefore combine employee, manager, representative, and independent ratings with event records, response times, documented decisions, resource commitments, implementation traces, and repeated measurement. Temporal separation can clarify sequence, while multilevel models can distinguish individual experiences from team or organizational patterns.

Research should begin with construct refinement rather than organizational ranking. Qualitative incident studies can test whether the proposed stages match lived processes; scale-development work can examine dimensionality and discriminant validity; longitudinal studies can test recursive effects; field experiments may assess particular safeguards where manipulation is ethical. Comparative studies should examine occupations, institutions, cultures, crisis conditions, and technology-mediated work. The framework should be revised or rejected when its dimensions fail to distinguish listening from voice climate, psychological safety, procedural justice, or implementation capacity.

Assessment should also permit falsification. Evidence against the framework would include stages that cannot be distinguished empirically, reliable handling that occurs without the proposed sequence, or listening-capability measures that add no explanatory value beyond psychological safety, voice climate, procedural justice, or implementation capacity. A credible program should test adverse cases, including organizations with high reported receptivity but weak action records

and organizations with low expressed satisfaction but consistent, justified handling of difficult concerns. Such comparisons would prevent the construct from becoming a favorable label applied whenever outcomes appear desirable. Until discriminant, predictive, and incremental validity are established, assessment results should remain developmental evidence rather than rankings, certifications, or managerial performance sanctions.

Conclusion

This article has proposed managerial listening as an organizational capability for responsive action rather than an individual manager's communication behavior. The framework connects multichannel sensing, interpretation of ambiguous and conflicting signals, accountable mobilization, feedback closure, and organizational learning. Its distinctive claim is not that listening automatically improves outcomes, but that organizational responsiveness requires coordinated processes capable of preserving concerns, explaining decisions, assigning authority and resources, protecting attribution, and learning from response histories.

The framework remains a conceptual contribution. Its relationships are not established causal pathways, its propositions are not validated decision rules, and its assessment domains are not readiness standards. Employee perceptions cannot alone establish organizational capability, formal permission cannot establish substantive influence, and visible activity cannot establish performance. Context, power, institutions, resources, technology, and issue consequence may alter every stage.

The value of the framework therefore lies in making the conversion from attention to action theoretically explicit and empirically contestable. Future research must determine whether its stages are distinct, whether the proposed safeguards improve handling, when alternative explanations dominate, and whether the capability construct adds explanatory value beyond adjacent concepts. Until such tests accumulate, the framework should organize inquiry and critical assessment rather than justify universal prescription or implementation claims.

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