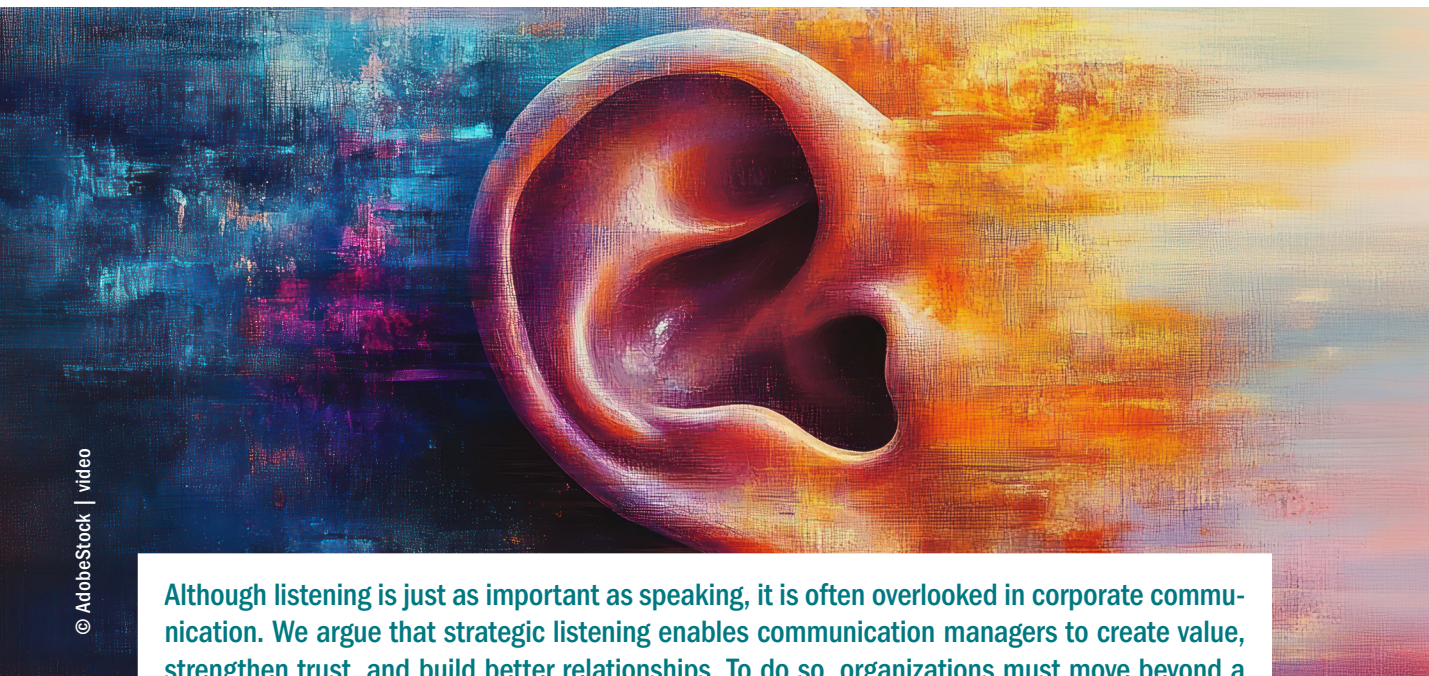


STRATEGIC LISTENING – A BLIND SPOT OF CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

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Although listening is just as important as speaking, it is often overlooked in corporate communication. We argue that strategic listening enables communication managers to create value, strengthen trust, and build better relationships. To do so, organizations must move beyond a sender-focused mindset and adopt a service logic that prioritizes understanding others. In this article, we introduce the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL), a practical tool that helps communication managers incorporate listening into their strategies to make corporate communication more effective and relationship-driven.

LISTENING IN A SPEAKING WORLD

It is rather peculiar that those who are experts in communication mainly focus on only one part, namely telling/informing/distributing/sending messages. However, communication is a matter of both telling (send) and listening (receive). So even if communication professionals value listening, they rarely make it a priority (Neill & Bowen, 2021). And most of us are guilty of this, whether in private or professional settings – we prefer to talk and inform others rather than listen. For example, think about what often happens during a dinner party: Individuals either talk and share their opinions or experiences or wait for their turn to talk. The New York-based author Fran Lebowitz (1981) ascertains: “The opposite of talking isn’t listening. The opposite

of talking is waiting.” In strategic communication research, it is well established that organizations seem to ignore the value of listening by instead focusing on broadcasting and sending out information to stakeholders. Below are some figures that clearly confirms the low interest in listening:

- > 80% of organizational communication consists of speaking and broadcasting information (Macnamara, 2022).
- > Managers use 90% of their workday to instruct and inform with only little effect (Elnäs, 2017).

Hence, there is a sender-focused approach among both organizations and managers, mainly aiming to deliver messages. Instead of genuinely listening to what stakeholders

need or are concerned about, organizations and managers too often concentrate on convincing people that their own views are correct.

We have identified a “Listening Paradox”, which means that it is easy to understand the value of listening more and listening better, yet it is difficult to put it into practice (Heide & Svingstedt, 2024). Why is that the case and how can an organization become a listening organization? Strategic listening is a blind spot of corporate communication, and we invite communication managers – the true communication experts of organizations – to develop organizational listening to achieve higher internal and external trust, better return, more learning, stronger relationships, and many other benefits for the organizations. In this article, we present the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL) that can help organizations, and especially communication managers, to strive for better and more effective listening.

THE BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC LISTENING

What is listening?

Listening is more than simply hearing. It requires attention, intention, and responsiveness, and it involves understanding the speaker’s perspective. In other words, effective listening means putting yourself in someone else’s shoes and actively trying to grasp what they think, feel, and prioritize.

Researchers have been studying listening for over a century. Early thinkers like the philosopher John Dewey and the business manager Dale Carnegie emphasized its importance in education and relationship-building. Over time, listening has been explored across multiple disciplines, including communication, psychology, philosophy, and sociology, making it a rich and evolving field. One influential concept is active listening, introduced by Rogers and Farson (1957). Active listening encourages being fully present, giving feedback, and building trust. Importantly, research shows that listening is not just a personal skill but also a key factor in strengthening relationships – whether with coworkers, managers, customers, or family members. Good listening can even create a state of togetherness, where the listener and speaker feel connected and understood.

Strategic listening

Despite decades of recognition, listening remains underdeveloped and undervalued in organizational contexts. Most research focuses on tactical aspects, and there is still little attention on listening as a strategic, value-creating activity.

Historically, early studies in the 1950s laid the groundwork. However, broader interest only emerged in the 1980s, when popular management books such as *In Search of Excellence* (Peters & Waterman, 1982) brought attention to the topic. Today, research shows that effective listening can enhance performance, creativity, leadership, and employee well-being. It is also critical for ethical engagement, democratic participation, and citizen-centered services (see info box below).

Yet many organizations still fall short. According to Lewis (2020), strategic listening is not about willingness alone – organizations often fail to recognize its value or lack systems to act on what they hear. Instead, they collect information without engaging meaningfully, a phenomenon known as pseudo-listening (Heide & Svingstedt, 2024). This leads to information graveyards: large amounts of underused data that could otherwise help organizations learn and develop. To address this, we propose a shift in managerial logic, moving from a traditional goods-focused approach to a service logic mindset.

KEY BENEFITS OF STRATEGIC LISTENING

- > **Better conversations:** When people feel truly heard, they open up. Genuine listening encourages honesty, deeper dialogue, and stronger connections. It is the foundation of meaningful communication.
- > **Trust and confidence grow:** Feeling listened to fosters a sense of appreciation. This not only boosts self-confidence but also strengthens trust between individuals – whether in the workplace or beyond.
- > **Greater job satisfaction, lower absenteeism:** In organizations where managers actively listen to their teams, employees report higher job satisfaction and show up more consistently. Listening creates a culture of respect and engagement.

- > **Boosted productivity and work quality:** Listening is not just polite – it is powerful. It helps individuals learn from others, expand their perspectives, and improve performance. The result? Higher productivity and better-quality work.
- > **Improved sales performance:** Salespeople who listen closely to their customers are more likely to close deals, increase sales volume, and deliver compelling presentations. Listening is a key driver of commercial success.
- > **Stronger relationships:** Managers who listen build stronger bonds with their teams. Likewise, customers gravitate toward salespeople who show genuine interest. Listening lays the groundwork for lasting relationships.
- > **More likable and trusted:** Good listeners are often seen as caring and trustworthy. Their attentiveness makes others feel valued, enhancing likability and deepening interpersonal trust.

RETHINKING VALUE CREATION: THE LIMITS OF GOODS LOGIC

In many organizations – both public and private – management practices are still heavily influenced by what is known as goods logic. This perspective, rooted in the manufacturing industry, takes a rational view of how people work, interact, and communicate. It assumes that value is something created internally by the organization, embedded in products or services, and then delivered to stakeholders as a finished package. The term clearly reflects the idea that value is pre-defined and tangible – something the organization produces and controls (Grönroos, 2023). Despite, or rather due to, its simplicity, goods logic remains dominant in management thinking (Vargo & Lusch, 2019).

This inside-out approach assumes that the organization knows best what stakeholders need. As a result, there's often little interest in listening to stakeholders' experiences, feelings, or perspectives. Communication becomes a one-way street, focused on delivering information rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue.

In practice, this means organizations often communicate to stakeholders rather than with them. Even though many managers recognize the importance of dialogue, most organizational communication still revolves around broadcasting messages (Heide et al., 2019). The underlying assumption is that communication should serve business goals like profit maximization.

Even when organizations seek stakeholder feedback, it is often with the aim of refining their own messaging – not genuinely understanding others' viewpoints. This approach aligns with the two-way asymmetrical model in public relations, where feedback is used to persuade rather than to learn or adapt (Dozier et al., 1995). As Grunig and Hunt (1984) put it, the goal is to “persuade publics to accept the organization's point of view,” not to engage in true listening.

In short, goods logic and its associated communication practices prioritize control and persuasion over empathy and learning. For organizations looking to build trust and create real value, it may be time to rethink this approach.

From goods to service:

A shift in how organizations create value

Service logic emerged as a response to the long-standing dominance of goods logic in marketing and management. Traditionally, goods logic has treated value as something produced by the organization and delivered to customers. But this view does not fully capture how value is actually experienced – especially in service-based organizations.

Early research highlighted the intangibility of products, as Levitt (1981) pointed out: Customers cannot fully evaluate products until they are used, which emphasizes the importance of understanding customer experience. Building on this, Berry (1983) highlighted the importance of long-term relationships with customers and the key role of employees in maintaining them. Over time, these ideas evolved into service management, emphasizing that marketing is not just the job of marketers, but happens throughout the organization. Everyone contributes, from salespeople to receptionists to managers, making marketing a strategic management issue.

A major turning point came with service-dominant logic (Vargo & Lusch, 2004), which sees value as created in use by stakeholders rather than in production. Value emerges through interaction and experience, not just through the product or service itself. Service logic adopts an outside-in perspective.

Goods vs. service logic

GOODS LOGIC		SERVICE LOGIC	
VALUE			
Produced by organization		Created together with stakeholders	
PERSPECTIVE			
Inside-out		Outside-in	
FOCUS			
Extracting value		Co-creating value	
COMMUNICATION			
Broadcast/top-down		Listen & co-create/bottom-up	
RELATIONSHIPS			
Transactional		Long-term, trust-based	
MINDSET			
Control		Collaboration & learning	

Source: Mats Heide & Anette Svinstedt

Organizations must actively engage with stakeholders – listening to their needs, understanding how they create value, and learn from feedback.

In other words, it is a bottom-up approach, in contrast to traditional top-down management thinking. In this context, communication also changes. It is no longer about broadcasting information, but about co-creating meaning. Communication becomes a way of shaping reality together. From a sensemaking perspective, reality is socially constructed through dialogue (Weick, 1969). This aligns well with the two-way symmetrical model of communication produced by the well-known PR guru James Grunig and his colleague Todd Hunt (1984). According to this model, organizations should genuinely listen to other perspectives and reflect on their own assumptions. With a goods logic, organizations are not interested in changing their assumptions and ideas. They are convinced that they are right, which is a ridiculous presumption. By listening to stakeholders and

customers, the organization provides them with a voice that is important and valuable.

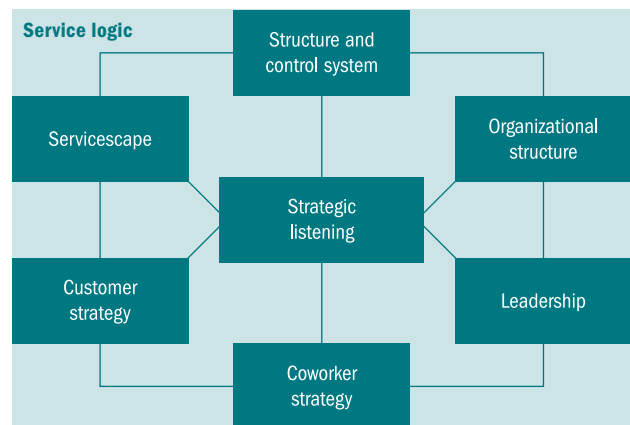
In short, while goods logic focuses on extracting value, service logic is about creating it – together with stakeholders. It is a shift from control to collaboration, from broadcasting to listening, and from delivering to co-creating.

A FRAMEWORK FOR STRATEGIC LISTENING FOR CORPORATE COMMUNICATION

Drawing from this service management research, we define strategic listening as follows: “Strategic listening is a relationship-driven, goal-oriented, and systematized organizational practice that adopts an outside-in perspective to foster value creation, operational success, and long-term sustainability” (Svinstedt & Heide, 2025).

This definition emphasizes that strategic listening is not just a communication tool – it is a mindset that should permeate the entire organization. To help communication managers put this into practice, we have developed the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL). The framework is based on a simple principle: To take listening seriously as a strategic tool, organizations and their management must adopt a service logic mindset. This mindset forms the foundation of the FSL, as illustrated in the figure below.

The Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL)



Source: Heide & Svinstedt, 2024

We see listening as a way to bring this mindset to life and actually put it into practice. The framework looks at strategic listening from a holistic perspective. It covers six key areas in an organization:

- > How things are structured and governed;
- > The organizational culture;
- > Leadership;
- > How coworkers approach listening;
- > How stakeholders are engaged; and
- > The servicescape (basically, the environment where services are delivered).

The different areas in the model have no hierarchical order. As can be seen in the framework, there are links between the different areas, as they are related to and interdependent on each other. A model is always a simplification of reality, but it can still help us better understand and manage a complex reality.

ADDRESSING THE BLIND SPOT

All of us who have taken academic courses in communication know, by heart, that communication is a matter of speaking (or informing) and listening. And this is actually knowledge that most know without any courses in communication. Still, the vast majority of organizations' and human communication happens in speaking, where they

take an inside-out approach. We tell others what we think, what others can learn, or what actions they should take. But there is less interest in understanding what others think, believe, understand, prioritize, and experience. Listening appears to be a blind spot in corporate communication, despite the potential for numerous positive outcomes, including increased trust and improved relationships, which are key objectives of corporate communication. We believe that it is time for communication managers to finally start facilitating and developing strategic listening in organizations. By focusing more on listening as a strategic value-creating activity, there is greater potential for an increased status of communication professionals.

We believe that the Framework of Strategic Listening (FSL) is a valuable tool to reflect on the communication practices of an organization, and then undertake different activities to gradually improve strategic listening. To become an organization that listens more is complex and takes time. It is therefore important to be realistic and set up smaller sub-goals such as improving internal meetings by letting go of the communication pattern to inform and instead start engaging the meeting participants by listening more.

In the future, we would also like to see more cooperation between different fields and expertise, such as communication, service management, and HR, to better understand the complexity of corporate communication and how it can become even more effective.

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MORE INFORMATION

A detailed description of the framework is available in Heide & Svingstedt, 2024, as listed above.