

# BE A LISTENING EAR

As we move to the next phase of the Covid-19 crisis, listening has never been more important.

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## **Openness, honesty – and listening**

As the UK lockdown eases and different arrangements are underway for the return to workplaces, it is clear that the challenges are becoming more complex. Anxieties are running high.

Encouraging open, honest conversations is going to be a vital part of maintaining trust in the organisation and overcoming concerns. And listening is critical to that.

# LISTENING TO COLLEAGUES' CONCERNS

At the time that IoC conducted its Covid-19 survey, 53% of respondents considered that health or personal and mental wellbeing were the topics of most concern for employees, with 25% saying that job security was the key concern.

More recently, a survey conducted on behalf of CIPD in early May shows that 44% of employees feel anxious about returning to the workplace because of Covid-19<sup>1</sup>.

These are fears that people are going to be talking about – either through formal channels, or between themselves via shadow communication or other means.

Ensure people have plenty of opportunity to raise questions and concerns, through open and honest two-way dialogue, in an atmosphere of psychological safety – so that they know that they will not be punished for speaking up.

So it's important to encourage senior leaders to role model so that, as employees raise issues, they are publicly respected, responded to and addressed.



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Ideally, listening can also be used to give people, or their representatives, a “part to play” in contributing views about what is needed to make local workplaces safe, as well as suggesting solutions to operational problems thrown up by “new normal” ways of working. This will tap into that local knowledge that will both help with productivity, and help rebuild a sense of shared purpose.

# 53%

**Percentage of internal communicators who said health or personal and mental wellbeing was the top concern of employees in their organisation.**

<sup>1</sup> CIPD survey of 1,000 employees carried out by YouGov.

# ENSURING ORGANISATIONAL LISTENING IS EFFECTIVE

At the time of the IoIC's survey, 47% of respondent organisations were using line managers as the primary way of listening to employees' views, with internal social media (20%) as the next most frequently used method. No other method was used as the primary way of listening by 10% or more of respondents.

# 47%

Percentage of internal communicators using line managers as the primary way of listening to employees.

It's important to use a mix of listening methods. Here's why.

**Line managers** can be excellent in terms of "local" listening. Many issues are likely to be local ones that can be discussed and resolved within the team. Managers can also play a useful role in organisational listening, where upward processes are in place for this. But it is important to be aware of potential bias. Sensemaking theory tells us we all pick up on the "cues" that we recognise/are meaningful to us, while missing others completely. So even the most well-intentioned manager may unconsciously be reflecting and feeding back those views that most reflect their own.



**It's important to listen to managers' own views and concerns – which may be different to their team. Ask managers to feed both back.**

Support managers as part of your listening infrastructure – but don't rely just on them. It's also important to make sure you are listening to managers' own views and concerns – which may be different to those of their team. Ask managers to feed both back.

**Internal social media** can also make a great contribution to listening. Again, be aware that your own sensemaking filters will be at play as you review contributions (and automated tools tend to be crude

in terms of analysing meaning where comments are complex or ambiguous) and also that people may be self-censoring what they say.

It's also important to be aware of who is joining in. How confident are you that views are representative? Could it be a vocal minority? So again – internal social media is hugely useful, as well as a fantastic opportunity for leaders to demonstrate visibility, listen themselves, and potentially take the conversation forward. But don't over-rely.

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**Surveys and polls** were the primary way of listening to employees for 9% of respondents to lolC's Covid-19 survey, and **employee reps/forums** were the main channel for 8%.

Both are valuable methods, but, while surveys have the advantage of confidentiality, which can again be important in terms of psychological safety, questions are tricky to write in a way that ensures that both you and the respondent interpret them in the same way.

Piloting (testing questions first) helps here. And taking time out of the next employee representative meeting to equip members with simple methods

for gathering the views of those they represent will be time well spent.

Other options? The lolC survey did not ask about **communication champions**, but these can be a valuable part of the listening armoury. The gold standard would be to conduct qualitative research – regularly talking to selected cross-sections of employees chosen from across the organisation via either (probably virtual) **focus groups** or **individual interviews**, then analysing responses using a process known as “coding”: breaking down responses into individual points, then seeing what themes emerge for different subgroups and for the participants overall. This systematic process helps to make

results more representative, as well as reducing bias.

Having the resource to do this is likely to be unrealistic currently – though results would pay dividends in terms of your in-

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depth knowledge. So getting the best possible mix of listening channels is likely to be the best way. This also recognises that people's individual personality types will have an influence on how they want to speak up. Extroverts are typically happy contributing in the cut and thrust of a (virtual) team meeting. Introverts will prefer to reflect and consider views and then set them out.

Doing any additional listening at all may seem like an impossible task given the pressure many internal communicators are facing, with 71% of lolC survey respondents indicating a significant increase in workload. But ultimately – do what you can.

# MAKING BEST USE OF LISTENING

At a basic level, it's important to understand the feelings within different groups. While there will be common themes, issues are likely to differ according to specific circumstances. Build that understanding in to your ongoing communication, addressing concerns directly and building organisational dialogue.

But listening in order to learn and take action is where the greatest benefits arise, as it starts to build employee voice – and knowledge – into the fabric of the organisation and the way it takes decisions. That means keeping people well informed and then involving them in finding solutions, as MacLeod and Clarke's summary of voice as part of employee engagement explains<sup>2</sup>.


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It is great to see that the survey shows that 49% of respondents considered that improved engagement with employees is one of the early impacts of the crisis, though the survey does not define what “engagement” means, and it is a term with many interpretations.

The challenge now is to build on this. This is again a big opportunity for IC teams to be demonstrating value and consolidating the gains that have been made in having influence at a senior level. Ensuring that senior leaders understand the mood and perspectives of different groups is a critical part of the role in being the “bridge” bringing the

organisation together, and potentially in making better decisions.

Really effective listening and involvement isn't the whole answer – it's only one part of the communication process – but it is a vital foundation.



<sup>2</sup> *Engaging for Success: enhancing performance through employee engagement – A report for government*, by David MacLeod and Nita Clarke