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DEVELOPING AND ADVANCING THE LISTENING LIFT PROGRAM TO
IMPROVE HOW LEADERS LISTEN AS A MEANS TO COMMUNICATE MORE
EFFECTIVELY

A Dissertation
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education
Educational Systems Improvement Science

by
Jeremy A. Spielman
December 2022

Accepted by:
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ABSTRACT

In this study, I examined the cognitive improvement process associated with advancing the skills and behaviors of active listening. Through the utilization of the improvement science dissertation in practice (ISDiP), with a strategize, implement, analyze, and reflect (SIAR Cycle) theory of improvement, I developed and utilized an active listening modification tool to better understand and support 10 executive educators' willingness to improve communication, build trusting relationships, and share perception of power in conversations. The proposed improvement action tool centered around four simple and direct strategies to change how executives engage as listeners. The Listening LIFT, (L) refers to Limit distractions, (I) refers to Inquire for clarification, not refutation, (F) refers to Find intrigue, and (T) refers to Transfer power. This strategy was tracked and measured by self-assessments, empathy interviews, and stakeholder feedback over two, thirty-day improvement cycles. The three key findings of this study regarding the perspectives of executives and their colleagues on the most impactful listening priorities are: (1) Communication Leadership Impacts Workplace Wellbeing, (2) Leaders are Expected to Listen Effectively, and (3) Trusting Relationships are Built Through Engaging the Community as an Active Listener.

Keywords: Active Listening, Educational Executives, Improvement Science, Effective Communication

DEDICATION

To the curious virtue in active listening, a behavior inherent yet hidden; if uncovered, understood, and mindfully employed, a priceless gift is shared with others and self, I and Thou.

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First and foremost, I must share my gratitude with those scholars, practitioners, thinkers, and mentors who have walked this path, in one form or another, before me. Your ideas are infectious, challenging, and inspiring, and pushed me to carry on when inspiration was needed. If there is paucity in these pages, it is mine alone.

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CHAPTER ONE

FRAMING THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Listening is a cognitive process and skill essential to understanding. Nevertheless, the intentional edification and practice of maintaining a mindful presence as a listener is rarely a central tenet in our leadership philosophy or everyday actions. Educational change agents serving in the position of district and/or system leaders have a moral imperative to use new knowledge, understanding, and providence obtained as learners to enact change where and when a recognized problem of practice surfaces. To establish a method for enacting an educational improvement in active listening, a problem of practice must be identified. The examination of a problem in the profession utilizing a scholarly practitioner's framework and an improvement science approach allows for both theoretical and practicable outcomes. In the subsequent sections of this chapter, I frame and define the problem of practice associated with educational executives who do not effectively practice the skills and behaviors associated with active listening, in particular the associated framework that I have developed and refer to titled "The Listening LIFT," In the Listening LIFT, (L) refers to Limit distractions, (I) refers to Inquire for clarification, not refutation, (F) refers to Find intrigue, and (T) refers to Transfer power.

Problem of Practice

The establishment commonly known as public education has a way of softening problems and refactoring justifications to allow for systemic problems to invade. When a person feels unheard or ignored, the act becomes publicly altered to become miscommunication. When in reality, the severe problem of ambiguity with how

listener(s) and speaker(s) interact leads to confusion and irresolution (Roche et al., 2021).

Communication breakdowns at the highest levels in educational leadership (superintendent, school board, and executive leaders) can cause irreparable damage to relationships at every level within the organization and the surrounding community.

By improving one's skills and behavior for active or intentional listening, the distinct possibility of improving effective communication and fostering trusting relationships is within reason. Further, employing the skills associated with an active listening training and support program assists in honoring the unique experiences and dimensions of place, identity, and economic position that individuals may share in a trusting relationship.

According to Kowalski et al. (2007), "Far too many of us devalue the importance of listening skills in communication and underestimate the degree to which others recognize if we are poor listeners" (p. 50). If by others, it is meant those in which we serve as educational leaders, then it must be presupposed that the organization or school system culture is directly impacted by the inability to listen effectively. Deal and Peterson (2016) have studied school culture for years and continue to illuminate the need for a school and system to foster passion, purpose, and meaning. Collective meaning can only be constructed if individuals collaborate in effective dialogue, which requires intentional speaking and active listening. According to Bredeson et al.'s (2011) work on Context-Responsive Leadership (CLR), the key behaviors and attributes associated with context-responsive superintendents are that they "engage in fluid conversations with situations of

practice, recognizing variations in context situated in such interactive dimensions as time and historic moment, place, and people” (pp. 20–21).

For decades, communication and linguistic researchers, like Tannen (2013), have argued that the United States is advancing the reality of an argument culture, thus influencing multiple fields and researchers in the processes. Cohen (2018) referenced Tannen’s work in his research on developing communities of dialogue, noting “Tannen observed this growing pattern of aggressive dialogue not just in the political sphere, but also in our private lives. The abrasiveness that we witness in political life can readily spill over into our homes, our schools” (p. 106). It is fair to say that educational executives play a distinct role in the macro and micro political environments of their respective local communities regardless of their geographic location. While there is limited research on the skills associated with active listening in the educational workplace, Flynn et al. (2008) shared that “much of the relevant academic research in the field [of listening] is aging even as the call for listening as a workplace skill appears to be gaining momentum” (p. 142). For more than four decades, researchers (Weinrauch & Swanda Jr., 1975) have indicated that even though listening is noted to be an important aspect of effective communication, the study of the associated skills is too often overlooked; “more attention should be directed to the subject of listening. Both students and businessmen may need to further recognize the importance of this communicative function” (p. 27).

Research Questions

The primary intent of this inquiry is to better understand how best to support executive leaders in the skill and behavior development of active listening, which

requires a particular awareness and interpretation. Accordingly, there is a need to build agency for the open acknowledgment of biases, if not prejudices, based on our personal and professional experiences as we work to construct a shared understanding of a given topic, idea, or problem. A modification in listening behavior requires support in process and practice. For this purpose, the following research questions guided my investigation:

RQ1: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation?

RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively?

Through the utilization of the fishbone diagram process (Appendix A) the identification of reasons why communication breaks down and educational executives do not actively listen can be associated with the following primary causes: (a) lack of effective strategies to engage as an active listener, (b) power struggles, (c) a district/school culture contending with distrust, (d) misunderstanding the social, cultural, and historical paradigms, (e) the role of the listener is undervalued, and (f) misutilization of time while engaged as a listener.

Framing the Research Context

Categories and Causes of Communication Breakdowns

In order to unpack the primary causes and outline each category, an overview of how the cause was identified, along with the contributing factors associated with each

major cause will assist in clarifying the communication breakdown and potential reasons for not actively listening. See Appendix A for additional details and associated contributing factors.

Lack of effective strategies to engage as an active listener

The most simple and direct cause of why individuals may not develop or advance their skills and behavior as active listeners is that they do not know how—the lack of successful or effective strategies to use while listening merely enables the current behavior to continue. The following contributing factors may compound the problem of not having the strategy to change: The individual does not have a professional expectation of being an effective active listener by their supervisor(s) and stakeholders, listening is seen as a passive or soft skill, and the need to be right overrides the intent to resolve conflict (Dowding, 2019). These contributing factors are problematic in their own right, although rarely is a possible cause and contributing factor wholly isolated as the problem.

Power struggles

The concept of power dynamics is not unique to the field of education. However, the system design of public education often has an organizational framework where power advances with a title. Therefore, it is fair to presume that the superintendent, board members, and other top executives are perceived to hold more power. Nevertheless, there are always individuals within an organization who naturally hold a position of influence or power that is not directly associated with their title. When communication breakdowns between any of the abovementioned individuals, including students, occur power

struggles tend to ensue. These struggles are heightened when the following contributing factors are present: speaking up has a negative connotation and comes with consequences, minority voices are marginalized, intentionally or unintentionally, (Barkman, 2018; Gibson & Hughes-Hassell, 2017; Orbe, 2014) and/or any number of educators at all levels use power to regulate or control subordinate relationships, including students.

A district/school culture contending with distrust

Trust as an idea is one that presents many layers to investigate and interpret. How is it won or lost, and what happens when individuals and groups begin to distrust the organization and those in leadership positions? It is fair to state that if communication is broken, or if there is a perception of a disconnect in shared understanding, there will be a loss of trust. If trust can be lost, it can also be gained, and one of the ways of beginning that restorative practice is through authentic “active listening” to those who now distrust. A contributing factor that advances a culture of distrust is that ideas and opinions are collected, inauthentically, to portray collaboration without authentically listening or evaluating for change (Tschannen-Moran, 2001). Additionally, other studies have noted the impact of trust and distrust on the culture of schools (Hoy et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2001). When staff and stakeholders do not feel heard, or as Welton (2002) argues the community feels a level of despair, or a culture of silence is in place than individuals may opt to exempt themselves from listening.

Misunderstanding the social, cultural, and historical paradigms

Even with good intentions, understanding the constructs and paradigms associated with the history, the culture, and the social ethos of a community is still very challenging. If leaders at the highest level are unwilling to engage in active listening and shifting power to those most disenfranchised through their actions as listeners, then a shared understanding cannot be constructed, and meaningful change will not be sustainable (Conus & Fahrni, 2017; Duranti, 2003; Goulding, 1998; Stanlaw et al., 2018). Additional factors contributing to misunderstanding the community's complexity are: key decisions in policy and practices are made with a limited understanding of the community paradigms, the school district is not seen as a community partner, and biases and assumptions feed misunderstanding at all levels (Khalifa, 2018; Milner, 2020).

The role of the listener is undervalued

If communication is anchored primarily in effective speaking and limits or dismisses the importance of the listener's role, then a shared understanding is all but impossible. Further, relationships in which the trust erodes from ineffective communication tend to permeate all aspects of the system and reach a point where the damage done becomes irreparable. The added contributors that extend this evaluation are as follows: the leader communicates primarily to be understood as opposed to seeking to understand the perspective of others, shared understanding is not seen as essential to the communication process, and communication is perceived as top-down or one-sided.

Misutilization of time while engaged as a listener

As stated previously in the causes associated with the lack of active listening strategies, the simple and direct reasons why an individual may not engage effectively as an active listener may lie squarely in the misutilization of time while communicating, specifically, in the role as a listener. Another way to define misutilization of time is as multitasking. There may be occasions when taking on more than one task or action simultaneously is feasible. However, if the goal is to build or restore trust and shared understanding, authentic listening requires complete attention and limits from distractions. Providing availability while being distracted or disengaged as an active listener has the potential to exacerbate the inability to resolve conflict and solve problems. Factors contributing to this cause are as follows: the leader is present in person, but not in mind, the leader's distractibility is misidentified as multitasking, and the leader's attention is divided across too many mediums (Gazzaley & Rosen, 2016; Van Aerde, 2018).

The causes and underlying factors that reinforce the identified problem of practice mentioned earlier in the chapter are the major contributing factors which link the mediums and compound the problem. However, the factors listed also offer opportunities for strategies and solutions to surface in addressing each problematic aspect associated with the research questions and identified problem of practice.

Review of Listening Research

The evaluation and framing of theory utilizes specific criteria to provide a foundation that allows for more generalizable examples and phenomena within the field. Building on the original work of Littlejohn and Foss (2005), who referenced nine key functions of developing understanding within the research of attributes connected to listening behaviors, I have established a connection to previous research and attribute connections to my research. According to Littlejohn and Foss, theory must (1) organize and summarize knowledge; (2) focus on variables and relationships; (3) clarify observations; (4) utilize an observation tool; (5) predict outcomes from the utilization tool; (6) generate further research; (7) provide forums to communicate findings and ideas; (8) establish norms of performance; and (9) generate change (p. 30-31). These guidelines offered a structure for reviewing research that allowed me a focused approach to understanding and applying prior and current ideas to generate change and initiate further research in the area of active listening within the field of education.

The research on listening competency within the larger field of communication competency has both cognitive and behavioral foundations (Wolvin, 2010), which center around the physiology, psychology, sociology, and communication perspectives of the listening process. In this section, I provide a synthesis of four theoretical perspectives that were composed in relation to the proposed intervention strategy of the Listening LIFT which provided empirical support in grounding the theory to the practice and skill development of improving the skills and behavior of active listening.

Physiology of Listening

The physiology of listening connects to the auditory reception associated with the act of hearing, which extends into the neurological processing associated with the senses (Goss, 1995). Another way to look at the physical act of listening is as listening effort. An assessment of listening effort as an additional measure of sensory stimuli may provide insight into listeners' abilities to cope with challenging listening conditions (Pichora-Fuller et al., 2016). The first strategy associated with the Listening LIFT centers around the attempt to control or limit distractions that may impact the physiological act or effort of listening, especially with individuals who may have auditory or cognitive processing challenges that require more mental effort or attention. According to Pichora-Fuller et al (2016), "Listening may be effortful for those who have abnormal pure-tone thresholds...or for any person who participates in activities when the situation is acoustically adverse (e.g., noisy and reverberant) or informationally complex (e.g., multitasking)" (p. 55). Wolvin (2010) offered the idea that the neurobiology and psychobiology of a listener are at the core of their ability to function as an engaged listener and effective communicator. Understanding how a listener processes the information heard or received by the speaker offers great insight into how to improve as a listener and avoid the external distractions that come with overly stimulating environments in the workplace.

Psychology of Listening

The theory of listening expands from the physiological actions related to listening towards the research associated with the psychological processing functions of listening.

The critical aspects around psychological processing are working memory (Baddeley & Hitch, 2008; Cowan et al., 1998; Janusik, 2005), listening perception filters (Burlison & Rack, 2014; Watson & Barker, 1984), and making meaning of messages (Ashcraft, 2006; Imhof, 2010; Mayer, 2002). The second strategy of the Listening Lift centers around “Inquire” to clarify the speaker’s meaning, instead of refuting or responding as a rebuttal. This strategy and skill slow down the process of sense-making by acknowledging potential biases, internally and externally, and directing attention to be active participants in the interpretation process of the shared meaning of the message. In 2003, Wyer & Adaval argued that “Successful message reception...requires an understanding of the goals and intentions of the communicator as well as the literal implications of the message being transmitted” (p. 292). Gaining a better understanding of how the human psyche processes and interprets spoken information allows for the listener to build or repair the speaker/listener relationship through shared sensemaking.

Sociology of Listening

To understand the sociological aspect of listening in relation to the listener/communicator relationship, both parties must be observed collectively and simultaneously (Rhodes, 1993; Wolvin, 2010). To further this notion, Wolvin (2010) stated, “I would argue that a meaningful interpretation of any message requires listening empathy, situating the competent listener front and center in any communication relationship” (p. 15). As the role of the listener takes on a more demanding responsibility for empathizing and interpreting, the third strategy in the Listening LIFT is to “Find” intrigue within the discussion. Finding an anchor as a listener allows a more natural

curiosity to develop with aspects of the content as well as the speaker themselves. Further, Rubin (2012) maintained that listening as a model has an element of “listenability” that considers the listenable prose and perspective of the speaker around communication clarity. If a listener can understand the sociology of listening and foster a sense of empathy with those they engage with, then speakers are more likely to feel heard.

Communication of Listening

The ability to effectively communicate as the collective speaker(s) and listener(s) requires the communicative perspective of listening behaviors within communication theory (Wolvin, 2010). Building on earlier theories of listening, Wolfin (2010) cited Floyd (1985), who offered a seminal addition by characterizing attributes of listeners who truly engage: “(1) genuineness; (2) accurate empathetic understanding; (3) unconditional positive regard; (4) presentness; (5) spirit of mutual equality; and (6) supportive psychological climate” (p. 17). Not only do these characteristics embody the skills and behavior of an active listener, but they also help reinforce the fourth aspect of the Listening LIFT, which is to “Transfer” power towards the individual or group with whom the listener communicates. In particular, the fifth characteristic, which states that the listener should share a spirit of mutual equality, highlights the idea that educational executives who hold a level of power, through title alone, must show a level of empathy to build mutual equality. These actions require a transference of power to allow for the supportive psychological climate. It should be noted that a change to a system’s culture takes time and multiple successful sessions of active listening and effective

communication. However, employing strategies grounded in listening theory, which are informed by the physiological, psychological, sociological, and communication perspective, builds a solid base to study an implementation like the Listening LIFT. Below is an infographic highlighting the crosswalk between the theory of listening research and the development of the acronym LIFT.

Figure 1.1

Infographic for Listening Theory and Listening LIFT



Literature Synthesis

The change idea or aim of this study centers around the development of the Listening LIFT executive educator training to change the way leaders engage as listeners within the school system and the community. The supporting literature is organized into the subsequent sections: The study of listening, leadership theory, leaders who learn to listen, changing the paradigm of community engagement, and program development of listening skill improvement. Each of these topics serves as factors that impact the advancement of an individual's skills and behavior to actively listen.

The Study of Listening

Listening is a skill that many acknowledge as important. However, the study, theorization, and ultimately the application pale in comparison to the bodies of research around the skills associated with effectively speaking. A growing body of research in which valuable contributions continue to be made often finds residence in the International Listening Association (ILA) and its accompanying scholarly journal. For many years, Rogers and Farson, whose definition of active listening was previously mentioned, served as foundational figures in the humanistic approach to the phenomenal field of research. While studying listening, Rogers (1969) later wrote about himself and the struggles he recognized when hearing defensively:

But what I really dislike in myself is when I cannot hear the other person because I am so sure in advance of what he is about to say that I don't listen. It is only afterward that I realise that I have heard only what I have already decided he is saying: I have failed really to listen. Or even worse are those times when I can't

hear because what he is saying is too threatening, and might even make me change my views or my behaviour. (p. 227)

Early in the field of listening research the psychologist Rogers was able to articulate why, despite our ability to hear, we are unable to actually listen. His ideas around active listening continue to influence research, even today.

A more current listening scholar and researcher, Michael Purdy (Purdy, 2010), noted that the tendency of most listening research follows the patterns of cognitive psychology, which utilizes a more therapeutic approach, or quantitative-statistical approach, to attempt to measure the skill in listening. Additionally, Purdy (2000) indicated there was little qualitative research concerning listening. However, he identified a third pathway of research that is a pure form of descriptive/phenomenological to perceive listening, which “works to describe rather than explain what presents itself as communicative in human experience” (p. 51).

Leadership and Communication

The research on skill acquisition and behavior development around active listening in executive leadership is relatively limited. However, what there is reveals that the dispositions connected to distributive leadership are at the top of the list of priorities for what educators consider vital to wellbeing in the profession. As early as the 1920s, Follett devoted the scope of her career towards finding the ideologies connected to organizational leadership that “ensure a stable foundation for the steady, ordered progress of human wellbeing” (Follett et al., 1942, p. 7). The idea of wellbeing surfaces in Jarrett et al.’s work (2010) as a required component of the workplace. In their findings, teacher

respondents indicated the principal characteristics of leaders include collaboration, active listening, and trust/trustworthiness. These findings were uncovered by surveying teachers through a written response on the perceptions of value towards the Co-creating leadership model, which is defined as the proactive and dynamic process of engaging the full use of the organization's human potential. Educators who were surveyed conveyed that the top three leader dispositions (patience, active listening, and trust/trustworthiness), if missing in a school, were perceived to negatively impact school culture. There are clear barriers to this model, in that the nature of current educational systems tends to have a hierarchical structure, which challenges the ideas of supervisor-subordinate collaboration environments. In the study, Jarrett et al. (2010) concluded that the practice of the identified essential dispositions in the Co-creating model is at best sporadic. In schools where leaders recognize the importance of grass-roots networks, and the need to activate and strengthen the tendencies of patience, active listening, and trust, the school or organization's capacity to effectively make decisions and value the contributions of others become more evident among leaders.

Learning to Listen

In efforts to better understand the importance of developing and fostering active listening skills and behavior, an inquiry into Hoppe's (2007) work is indispensable.

Hoppe opened the text with this seminal statement:

The ability to listen effectively is an essential component of leadership. However, many leaders, often unknowingly, fall short in this area. By learning the skills and

behaviors of active listening—the willingness and ability to hear and understand—leaders can become more effective. (p. 11)

Listening actively is not optional if a leader aspires to build trusting relationships and authentically understand the complexity of those they lead. Unfortunately, many leaders are much weaker in this area than they care to admit openly. Hoppe indicated that many leaders believe they listen as often as they speak. However, he stated that the data also shows that leaders do 80% of the talking in their interactions with others.

Under Hoppe's leadership, The Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) authored six skills to become a more active listener: (1) paying attention; (2) holding judgment; (3) reflecting; (4) clarifying; (5) summarizing; and (6) sharing (Center for Creative Leadership [CCL], n.d.). Applying these skills consistently helps form habits and creates a more mindful approach towards crucial conversations and everyday interactions. The CCL indicated that there are a few barriers to successfully implementing these skills. The image of leadership, silence as agreement, external pressure, lack of know-how, individual makeup, time and place, emotion, and cultural differences (CCL, n.d.). These impediments must be recognized and successfully traversed for a leader to become a better active listener and deepen their engagement and understanding of the individuals in which they lead. Hoppe and the CCL argued that active listening is vital in becoming a more effective leader.

Alas, it is all too rare for an executive leader to gain the distinction of being a great communicator if they do not advance their skills and behavior, which are anchored in what are called soft skills. If employee engagement necessitates an authentic

connection, then the daily skill development of listening actively is paramount. Expanding on the idea of effective communication as an essential leadership skill is the work of Kowalski et al. (2007). Their reference of communication competence as both an individual and an organizational goal highlighted the importance of developing “communication characteristics” that augment the collective interpretation of what is being shared between speaker and listener. Communicative behavior, particularly the aspects of building trusting relationships through effective speaking and listening (dialogue), is an expected element of leaders who must facilitate, interpret, and engage in the collective actions of transformational change (Drecksel, 1991; Kowalski, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2007; Weick & Ashford, 2016).

Building Trusting Relationships with the Community

Traditional methods of engaging families often focus on school events and activities, such as parent-teacher conferences, student performances, and parent volunteer opportunities for service and leadership (Baquedano-López et al., 2013; Cooper, 2009). These events are often anchored in the belief system that parent involvement through direct participation at the school is the principal method for family and community engagement. Conversely, it could be said that the school and district are participants in deficit thinking if their family interactions are limited to school ‘building’ based participation, in which the perception of the family is negatively impacted if they are unable to attend (Gorski, 2018; Yull et al., 2014). Moreover, many of the abovementioned families experience one or more forms of social, racial, and/or economic injustices directly associated with attending school.

In efforts to forge a more collaborative partnership with the local school community, primarily parents, a school leader can implement a more culturally responsive approach to how they interact and engage families and the community. Building a relationship-based system of engagement (Hammond & Ferlazzo, 2009) allows parents to share both ideas and concerns in a trust-building conversation where the school engages as active listeners. Crafting opportunities to engage with families, and the community outside of the school building, allows for more marginalized voices to be heard in safe spaces. In Wallin-Ruschman & Patka's (2016) words, "Safe spaces are literal and figurative areas and processes that are sometimes removed from the control of a dominant group to facilitate the development of networks and skill-building among individuals to create social change" (318).

Framework Development for Listening Skill Improvement

The multifaceted process of effective communication has been studied in various fields and perspectives. Nevertheless, most communication scholars agree that relational models tend to describe the continuous nature of communicative interactions (Brownell, 2010) most accurately. One of the most frequently cited skill-based models for listening advancement is the HURIER model, an acronym for *hearing, understanding, remembering, interpreting, evaluating, and responding* (Brownell, 2010). The HURIER model demonstrates the connectivity and overlap of the six skills. Below is a brief synthesis of each skill, which can be seen individually or collectively. The first component is *hearing*, which is the physiological ability to receive auditorily. Also associated with this component are the cultural, experiential, and situational positions that

account for filtering and processing information. These filters impact each component of the following five skills in the process (Brownell, 2010). The second component is *understanding*, which is closely associated with comprehending the message of the speaker and decoding it to form meaning (Brownell, 2010). The third component is *remembering*, which connects to the memory of the listener and the ability to act on the shared information immediately or at some point in the future (Brownell, 2010). The fourth component is *interpreting*, which connects both the verbal and non-verbal cues associated with assigning meaning. For a listener to fully interpret the communicator's message, they must also focus on the speaker's body language, which includes tone, posture, and expression (Brownell, 2010). The fifth component is *evaluating*, which is associated with the listener's ability to make a judgment about the accuracy and validity of the message. Effective listeners must ensure they have understood the information before an evaluation should be made (Brownell, 2010). The sixth and final component is *responding*, which is the intended outcome of effective communication if all other stages appropriately influence the response in the process. These stages are then repeated and overlapped as the conversation continues and the roles shift (Brownell, 2010).

The HURIER model is one of the few validated listening models with an exploratory factor analysis and a confirmatory factor analysis with over 1,000 subjects (Janusik, 2010). However, there are a few identified barriers to all listening skill-approach models, including the HURIER model. These include the motivation of the listener, skill transfer mastery, and the situational demands placed on the behaviors associated with listening.

Another prevalent relational approach to developing active listening skills in the field of education is the LAFF don't CRY strategy (McNaughton et al., 2008). This strategy provides a basic framework to encourage educators to demonstrate the listening behaviors that communicate respect and empathy towards the speaker. The acronym LAFF references "Listen, empathize, and communicate respect, ask questions, ask permission to take notes, focus on the issues, and find the first step" (McNaughton et al., 2008, p. 224). Although LAFF as an active listening strategy is less known, the components associated with effective listening have a solid foundation.

An additional programmatic application for active listening by Rogers (1951) was first established as Reflective Listening (RL), which focused attention on the conversation when listeners work "to understand what it is the sender is feeling or what his message means. Then he puts his understanding into his own words (code) and feeds it back for the sender's verification" (Gordon, 1970, p. 50). This method has a more clinical approach; however, it has been utilized in various professional development settings with the training and encouragement to explicitly respond to others in efforts to continue communicating. As an example, stating "Please continue," or "Tell me more," serves as a form of reflecting, paraphrasing, or restating to encourage more open communication (Horne et al., 1994; Knippen & Green, 1994; Lin et al., 1996; Phillips, 1999). While the methods serve as a foundational aspect of mindful, empathetic, and active listening, they appear not to have reached the necessary traction in the field of educational leadership as a solution to advance the skills needed to improve an educational executive's skills and behavior as an active listener.

The future of listening research

Implementing and assessing an intervention in the way an individual actively listens is complex. The idea of listening is both nuanced and neglected outside of the relatively small field of communication specialists. In efforts to advance the study and measurement of listening, Janusik and Keaton (2015) introduced the need for a more clearly stated and measured process of the actions deemed cognitive and metacognitive while listening:

A cognitive listening strategy is what a listener does to aid comprehension, and it is often done at the unconscious level: A listener might make an inference while listening to piece together a complete thought...Making the inference is an unconscious singular act; thus, it is a cognitive strategy, not a metacognitive strategy. Conversely, a metacognitive listening strategy is what one does when one is aware of the listening process, and one is attempting to understand. (p. 289)

Janusik and Keaton (2015) theorized the cross-cultural impact of applied listening strategies in both the cognitive and metacognitive processes of listening. This work is essential in advancing effective communication with individuals from different cultural backgrounds. As an educational executive, the frequency of engaging in conversation with an individual or group of individuals with divergent communicative practices is high. Having both the awareness and the skill set to employ active listening strategies which honor the speaker and transfer the balance of power in the discussion is essential to building trust or repairing past mistakes while communicating.

An Improvement Science Approach

There are certain fundamental questions that guide an improvement process, specifically in a Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Program (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate [CPED], 2021). The associated inquiry as practice continues to grow as an established theoretical concept in research. The CPED maintained that “The Dissertation in Practice” (DiP) is a scholarly endeavor that identifies and addresses a complex and persistent problem of practice in the work of a professional practitioner, with the potential to improve understanding, experience, and outcomes (2021). While this definition has continued to evolve in the last five years, one of the primary components that solidify its foundation is improvement science and the connection to asking the right questions. Having a framework and method that aims to answer essential, yet practical questions, allow for systematic change and improvement in a more cyclical manner.

The science of improvement centers around rapid inquiry cycles that allow the network to learn and respond to a system by testing small-scale change ideas across the system (Bryk et al., 2015). Traditionally, improvement science has utilized the plan, do, study, act (PDSA) cycle (Langley et al., 2009) to develop a theory of improvement and subsequently implement it. Once the theory work is done, a study or analysis is conducted to weigh and consider the findings and reflect or act with a modified cycle. Perry et al. (2020) introduced an adaptation of the PDSA model to strategize, implement, analyze, and reflect (SIAR) that support the scholarly practitioner “to find actionable problems within their own contexts, blend their professional knowledge with literature to

develop and implement a reasoned change, measure the change, and then decide what to do next” (p. 124). This modification suits my research questions well and serves to emphasize the change practice. Given that my study is anchored in the development and refinement of an active listening improvement tool, the analyze and reflect stages of the SIAR cycle offered me the additional opportunity to consider the ideal actionable practices for an extended implementation beyond the DiP.

Design

Following is a framework of improvement science that uses the SIAR model to investigate and reflect on the information collected through sorting, interviewing, and observing. The SIAR cycle(s) aspect of improvement helped carry the aim of an improvement into the theory of action and led to a change idea that can be both recognized and reproduced. To effectively strategize, implement, analyze, and reflect (SIAR) possible solutions, it was necessary to underline aspects associated with primary and secondary drivers that directly impact the problem of practice and the targeted solutions structured in the improvement aim.

Aim

A vital aspect of the Improvement Science Dissertation in Practice (ISDiP) is the framework in which the problem of practice is addressed and acted upon within the context of factors (Perry et al., 2020), such as racial injustice, social inequities, and economic oppressors embedded within a given community. The complexities associated with implementing a modification to how an individual utilizes active listening skills, it was reasonable to ascertain the following aim: to improve an executive educator’s ability

to actively listen while interacting with students, staff, and the community. As tracked by self-assessment and colleague/stakeholder feedback over two thirty-day improvement cycles. The proposed change idea or improvement action centered around four simple and direct strategies to change the way one engages as a listener. I refer to these strategies as the title and acronym of “The Listening LIFT” The *L* refers to Limit distractions, the *I* refers to Inquire for clarification, not refutation, the *F* refers to Find intrigue, and the *T* refers to Transfer power. These strategies are intended to be utilized across identified communication groups to directly address the primary causes identified within the fishbone diagram and the associated problem of practice. See (Appendix B) for additional details and associated drivers.

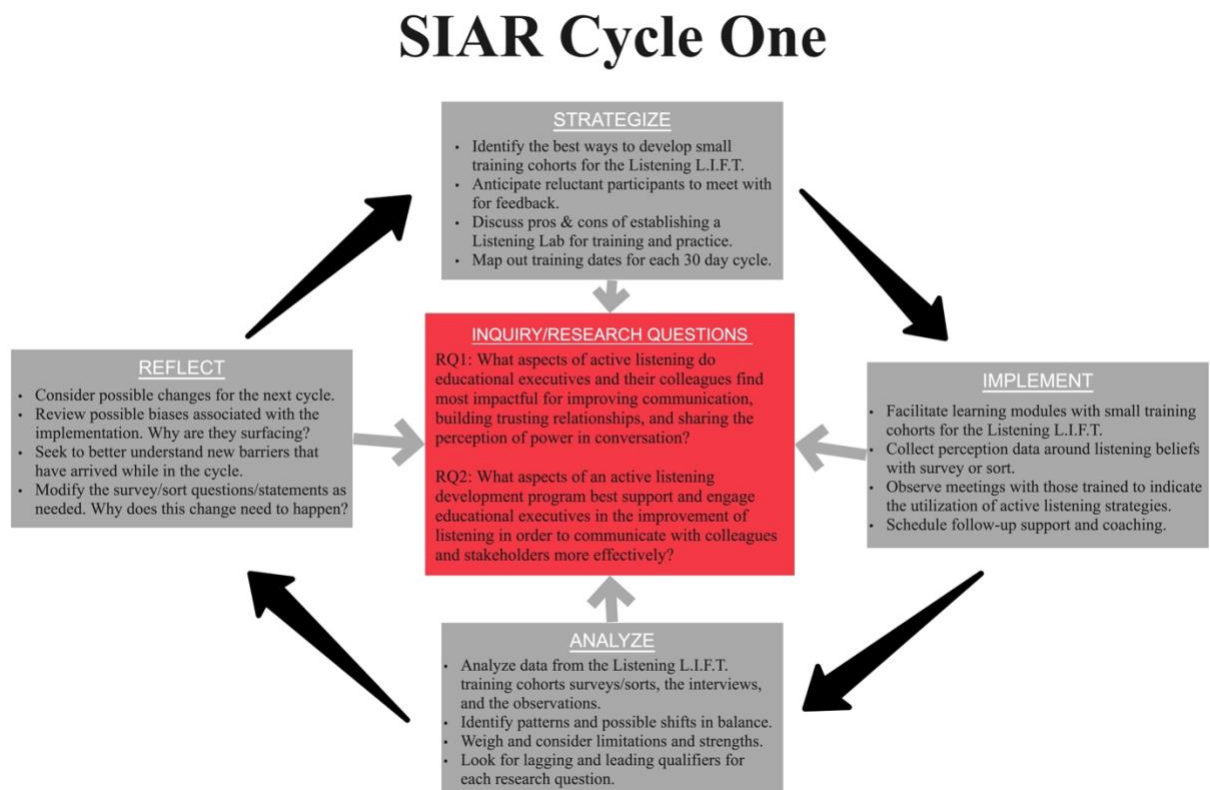
The additional change ideas coupled to the Listening LIFT are identified as aspects of practice and application of skills in both simulated and genuine conversations with individuals and groups. A leading component of the primary drivers is the redefining of principles associated with active listening to directly address previous behaviors that may have contributed to any of the six primary causes of communication breakdowns listed in the fishbone diagram. The secondary drivers center around the necessary intentionality for reflective practice and application of the newly introduced strategies of the Listening LIFT as it relates to system change. These theorized work practices may be modified with additional drivers added or removed as the change efforts or, SIAR cycles, are completed in efforts to sustain productive change (Bryk et al., 2015).

The analysis and measurement or tracking aspect of the SIAR model allowed for evidence of change to accumulate by both the executive educator and those colleagues

and stakeholders with whom they interact on a regular basis. As trends surface through each thirty-day change cycle, the understanding of each strategy connected to the Listening LIFT deepens within the interim to allow for a more precise change strategy moving forward. Thus, the design for this ISDiP utilized two 30-day mini-cycles of the SIAR model for improvement. Below is a diagram of the SIAR model.

Figure 1.2

SIAR Cycle Model



Strategize

In the strategize phase of the study my aim was to introduce the improvement strategy to executive educators and recruit a small initial cohort of executive educators

consisting of school administrators, central office staff, cabinet staff, and the superintendent to participate in the program. During that time, I collected demographic survey data and administered the PLP pre-training assessment activity. These activities were completed prior to the Listening LIFT training. I purposefully selected participants to represent a continuum of diverse system executives that are required to communicate effectively to resolve conflict and foster trusting relationships with colleagues and community members. Further, due to their position of influence within the system, these individuals can support adaptations that took place between the SIAR mini cycles.

Innovation efforts are often met with different levels of diffusion support. However, to anticipate where the resistance to change lies, there were opportunities for reluctant participants to share their concerns and note perceived challenges for implementing the Listening LIFT practices. Further, an analysis of where current breakdowns in communication happen across the district allowed for a more targeted approach in both practice and application.

Implement

This stage of the cycle focused directly on applying the change idea and collecting the evidence to better understand the system-specific expression of the problem within the participant's practice. During this phase, I conducted semi structured empathy interviews to gain insight into the current beliefs around the idea and practice of active listening. These activities were paired with the initial training cycle on the Listening LIFT. Additionally, discussion observation recordings of practice and application were coded. Regular implementation meetings with the cohort participants

allowed for opportunities to support and coach the learners as unique listening challenges arose. A complementary change idea of a listening laboratory or safe space connected which is connected to both the primary and secondary drivers was shared during the coaching sessions. This safe space may serve as a place where cohort members can continue to practice strategies associated with active listening with others. The listening laboratory may also serve as a safe space to hold crucial conversations and assure that the power dynamics associated with location are neutralized.

Analyze

When a change/innovation is introduced and implemented, the scholarly practitioner must analyze data to interpret the effectiveness and what has been learned (Perry et al., 2020). To identify patterns as well as possible system shifts in balance, the lenses of equity around race, place, and economic position was dialed in to draw connections to the practices associated with the Listening LIFT training and supplemental coaching as measured by interviews and observations. One tool for measurement used was the Listening LIFT Training exit survey (Appendix C). In the survey participants indicated aspects of the intervention that they most connect with as well as areas that can be improved. Additionally, the analysis phase of the study helped identify which outcomes are “leading” or “lagging” as the SIAR mini cycles continued. A lagging outcome is one that may take hold across a larger timeframe with additional iterations beyond the ISDiP, which are built on the leading outcomes that happen within the initial 60-day SIAR cycles associated with the study. After each 30-day mini-cycle, the results were reviewed to ascertain progress and any required modifications (Perry et al., 2020).

The leading outcome indicators are compelling focal points with the data that is available at the time. However, these indicators serve in a more formative fashion regarding how the improvement may influence both individual and system practices. Therefore, the lagging outcomes are equally important in measuring impact as it relates to the more profound modification to the listening behaviors associated with the change in one's skills and behavior for active listening.

Reflect

As the initial cycle began to close in the final reflection phase, the direct emphasis on the change process itself and the potential biases and barriers that surfaced during the intervention became more clear. Throughout this reflection, there was a focus on how the contribution impacts aspects of improvement within the scholarly practitioner's personal and professional goals (Perry et al., 2020). The reflection phase allows space for expanding the scope of the change or even adjusting the aim as new data highlights new information, which informs the decision-making process as a new SIAR cycle begins. These changes included the modification to questions being asked in the interviews, as well as the delivery method, training pace, and job-embedded coaching associated with the Listening LIFT implementation.

Definition of Terms

I proposed a working definition in order to construct a shared understanding around the process and the skills and behavior associated with listening actively. As early as 1984 The United States Institute of Peace (USIP) indicated that active listening is a way of listening and responding to another person that improves mutual understanding. Covey

(1989) stated, “good listening involves an active effort to understand the world from another’s perspective” (p. 121). Additionally, Rogers and Farson (1987) noted that “[active listening] requires that we get inside the speaker, that we grasp, from his [sic] point of view, just what it is he is communicating to us. More than that, we must convey to the speaker that we are seeing things from his point of view” (p. 1). An amalgamation of these statements might best serve to highlight the essential components, skills, and dispositions a leader needs to learn in order to be an effective active listener.

Additionally, it is helpful to define key terms central to the study and the actions associated with active listening. The term temperament- characteristic or habitual inclination or mode of emotional response- may be an edict on how one uniquely responds to situations. The developmental psychologist Kagan (1994) defined temperament as a general term meaning a set of biological conditions that predispose how individuals react to the world with special feelings and behaviors. Thus, one’s temperament is more deep-seated and is connected to the physiological component of personality. While temperament may be malleable, it tends to be the more fixed than personality and disposition.

In defining personality, the (American Psychological Association [APA], n.d.-b) stated that personality refers to individual differences in characteristic patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving. These traits or collections of skills and behaviors come together to form one’s personality or even influence one’s temperament. If someone’s propensity is high in the personality trait of openness, they are disposed to act and solve problems in more adventurous and creative ways. Individuals low in this trait are more

likely to struggle with abstract thinking. Further, if someone is disposed or inclined to act a certain way, this becomes their disposition. (Buss & Craik, 1983; Katz & Raths, 1985; McKnight, 2004)

One's skills and behavior can be defined as a reoccurring behavioral, cognitive, or emotional tendency that becomes a distinguishable personal characteristic. Hence, an individual's tendency is less about one's knowledge or ability in a given area; instead, it is one's willingness to invest the necessary time and effort to develop or change a given characteristic. To take one's understanding of something and transform it into an attribute or skill that others recognize as more than a propensity is how an individual defines or modifies their disposition. It may be safely presupposed that using a change strategy, a lasting change in behavior consistent with a modification to an individual's disposition is probable with repeated and supported practice.

Significance of Study on Race, Rurality, and Poverty

In efforts to explain why an individual and/or family unit needs to feel heard or have their voice honored through active listening, one must first consider the circumstances or forces that have oppressed both situationally and generationally. If the individual and/or family cannot gain a sustainable foothold on the ever-shaky ground which serves as a force of poverty, then they may become encircled and even oppressed by the poverty which they are combating (Shorris, 2000). The many struggles associated with the impoverishing conditions that separate the individual and/or family from obtaining the essential resources necessary for an adequate and equitable standard of wellness and opportunity; physically, mentally, socially, emotionally, and intellectually

make it all but impossible to actualize one's potential and nurture the potential of those in their care (Brooks-Gunn & Duncan, 1997; Butterworth et al., 2009; Mortimore & Whitty, 2000). If someone struggles to obtain the essential resources that allow for a standard of wellness and opportunity, they cannot focus on the type of liberty that comes with a level of social and racial justice in the places we call our community. Further, the ability to offer any level of meaningful redistribution to help in the areas of wellness related to mind, body, and spirit is exceedingly challenging if executive leaders are not willing to communicate openly and honestly with both their hearts and minds. Demonstrating an authentic ability to actively listen requires any individual with the power to enact meaningful change, to enter the community seeking first to understand, to utilize context to help make meaning, and to listen to the stories that capture the depth of the conditions experienced. In many cases, the students of South Carolina, and their peers across the nation, are destabilized with inequities because they are still fighting the battles of social, racial, and economic injustices that have oppressed them for generations.

Educational change agents must focus their conversations and their actions on sustainable academic practices anchored directly in the growth and development of all children and offer a restorative justice that builds opportunities and leverages an investment in equity literacy. Gorski (2018) made evident in his formative work that leaders must "Examine every policy and practice, every decision. Are we prioritizing the interests and needs of families experiencing poverty as a central institutional commitment, or keeping our existing priority structure...?" (p. 167). This form of upbuilding equity through literacy and listening also centers with the work of Milner

(2020). His manifesto on understanding diversity and the opportunity gaps that plague primarily students of color intersects with the challenges that South Carolina school district leaders and state legislators face if they are to repeal the injustices of their forefathers. In 2016, Anderson pointed out that “Some of the South’s most respected judges, attorneys, and planters crafted the Black Codes. From the cool marble halls of the statehouses, white opposition had done its job with the mere stroke of a pen” (p. 20). The effects of these efforts to oppress are still seen and felt today. Milner (2020) offered a tool to help dismantle the systems of oppression in the form of obtaining assets through the sharing of a community’s history, which requires the paramount prerequisite of building a trusting relationship and demonstrating the ability to listen actively. In Milner’s words, “When educators deepen their knowledge and insights about a sociopolitical context, they also recognize and honor histories and perspectives of those placed on the margins in the community because they may not have the resources to maintain their communities” (p. 59).

In the Carolinas, there may be some variance in what is considered rural based on the complications associated with how state and federal agencies, as well as individuals, define rurality. However, there are many areas in both North Carolina and South Carolina where the elements of race, rurality, and poverty intersect to establish or maintain an environment that is far from equitable. The work of Eppley and Corbett (2012) described how childhoods become inequitable:

We want to believe that schools are fair, or at least potentially fair. This is the impetus behind the science based or the evidence-based education movements of

the last decade or so.... Children bring their lives to school and these lives provide the material out of which they fashion their literacies. Whether or not they are standardized, educational practices always work out within the context of what Annette Lareau (2003) calls “unequal childhoods” (p. 9).

As leaders work to better understand and respond to the unequal childhoods, they must decipher the relationships associated with poverty and rurality. Individuals often link urban areas to those facing the harshest forces of poverty. However, poverty in America exists at higher rates in rural areas and often persists generationally. In 2010, nearly 64% of rural counties had elevated rates of child poverty, in comparison to 47% of urban counties. (Schaefer et al., 2016)

Certainly, this is not to diminish the necessary work that must be done in all areas and with all people facing oppression. However, the Clemson Education Systems Improvement Science Program has committed to the three themes: race, place (rurality), and economic position (poverty). To respond with an innovative solution to the complex challenges underpinning these themes, the work must be collective in how best to serve the individuals most in need. If educational and community leaders can improve what is within their direct control, they can positively impact their communities.

An aspect of the educational doctorate ISDiP is the selection of a problem of practice, that is, a perceived professional challenge that learners identify in their professional environment that they aim to mitigate. In Chapter 1, I framed the problem and grounded the background with a slightly more traditional synthesis of literature in an

effort to clear a pathway to the methodology of Chapter 2, the findings of Chapter 3, and ultimately the related significance in the discussion of Chapter 4.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

Exploratory Rationale

My early examination of the problem of practice associated with this study provided evidence that educational executives recognize, at some level, that the skills and behaviors associated with active listening need improvement. To engage and respond to my problem of practice: Communication breakdowns at the highest levels in educational leadership (superintendent, school board, and executive leaders) have the ability to cause irreparable damage to relationships at every level within the organization and the surrounding community, I utilized improvement science and qualitative research as an active methodology for the study of active listening. A change mechanism regarding the improvement of the skills and behavior of active listeners, requires a commitment to each component of the SIAR cycle(s). The decision to utilize this method centered on the intersection of the CPED program principle of the researcher as a scholarly practitioner and our Clemson Educational Systems Improvement Science Program belief in the application of designed innovative solutions.

In this study, I utilized qualitative aspects through the exploration of the central phenomenon of active listening by collecting interview data from educational executives and perception data from recorded conversations with participants and district employees/stakeholders prior to the Listening LIFT training and after the LIFT coaching and practice. I compared the themes that surfaced from the qualitative data alongside the Wiley Personal Listening Profile (PLP) assessment to further examine the research

questions. When I examined the effect of beliefs about personal and professional values connected to active listening and the associated behaviors of leaders with their preferences as listeners, I used the PLP assessment (Appendix D) in connection with interviews and discussion observations to triangulate findings. Ten participants identified as educational executives from across the country agreed to participate in the study.

Selecting the appropriate quantitative tool(s) to capture the concept and measure the association can be challenging in a study of listening. An understanding of listening as both experience and behavior must be considered (Purdy, 2010). Listening is not solely a learned behavior, but also a practice influenced by our personal and professional lives. Therefore, the use of more than one tool became ideal for supporting the analysis of both the cognitive aspect of listening, as well as the motivations for and preferences while listening. Bodie and Fitch-Hauser (2010) noted that researchers must consider the multifaceted yet systematic approach to developing validity in listening tests. In other words, “given the multi-disciplinary nature of listening, it is no surprise that tests tend to measure listening in slightly nuanced ways leading one to question the ability to ever capture the true and complete essence of listening” (p. 67). The utilization of a qualitative data analysis allowed for the coding system to highlight key elements associated with active listening in general and more specifically any skills directly related to the Listening LIFT.

My pragmatic approach to this research was a constructivist paradigm that focused on meaning-making and the construction of social and psychological domains through the individual cognitive processes. Consequently, I viewed meaning as being

made in a social and cultural context via active inquiry and discourse in which people form relationships and community (Young & Collin, 2004). A primary tenet of the constructivist approach is the assessment of events, behaviors, and attitudes understood in relation to a given experience (Neimeyer & Neimeyer, 1993). As a constructivist seeking to explain how individuals develop meaning concerning active listening, it is imperative to understand the social, historical, and cultural paradigms that exist within a given school district and community. The use of semi structured empathy interviews with educational executives helped triangulate the findings that surfaced from the PLP assessment and the speaker/listener discussion observations which supported an increase in the overall understanding of how executive educators implement the strategies associated with advancing the skills and behaviors of active listening.

Setting and Participants

In this improvement science study, I explored participant views and behaviors around active listening with a voluntary sample group of ten educational executives from across the United States. To qualify as an educational executive for this study, the participant had to currently hold a position as an organizational leader at the building, district, and/or state level. Each participant was expected to have frequent interactions with contributing groups of colleagues, stakeholders, and community members.

Sample

The ten participants for this study who identified as educational executives are categorized in one of the five areas of leadership: five superintendent/organization executives; two district leaders; two building leaders; and one teacher leader. Of the ten

participants, five identify as male, and five identify as female. In efforts to share demographic data while keeping a level of anonymity, the participants will be identified as executive leaders within one of the seven regions of the United States, with one participant from Vancouver, BC, Canada, who is willing to be coded in the region of the Pacific Northwest. There are six participants from the Southeast, two participants from the Southwest, and two participants from the Pacific Northwest. Regarding the racial makeup of the participants: six participants identified as White, one participant identified as Hispanic, one participant identified as American Indian, one participant identified as Black, and one participant identified as multi-racial.

The diversity across multiple demographic areas allowed for a rich sampling of codes which allowed for a deeper understanding of the similarities and differences among the sample group. Below is a table that displays demographic data including the participant's pseudonym, position, region, race, gender, age, colleague's pseudonym, and organization size/classification.

Table 2.1
Participant Demographics Table

Alias	Position	Region	Race	Gender	Age range	Colleague alias	Org. size
Ken	Supe	PNW	White	Male	61-65	NA	Small Rural District
Kameron	Supe	SE	Black	Male	46-50	Caroline	Small Urban District
Connie	District Exec.	SE	Multi-racial	Female	46-50	Martin	Small Urban District
Stefka	District Exec.	SW	White	Female	51-55	Bella	Large Suburban District
Alice	District Exec.	SE	White	Female	36-40	Enrique	Medium Suburban District
Leonard	Univ Exec.	SE	American Indian/Anglo	Male	41-45	NA	Small Univ Urban
Nora	Univ Exec.	SE	White	Female	36-40	Laura	Medium Univ Suburban
Lucy	School Exec.	PNW	White	Female	36-40	Patricia	Small Suburban School
Checo	School Exec.	SW	Hispanic	Male	46-50	Donna	Medium Suburban School
David	Teacher Leader	SE	White	Male	30-35	Robert	Medium Urban School

The utilization of a well-established network of educational leaders through the National Paideia Center (NPC) allowed for a national recruitment platform. As an educational executive at the NPC, I had access to the Paideia website for advertising the research and professional development, or intervention opportunity, to attract participants who interact with our organization and search for other training and development opportunities. By offering a no-cost web-based training on the Listening LIFT with

preference inventories and skill/behavior coaching an authentic test group self-identified with a given willingness to volunteer for eight hours of training and support.

A breakdown of the schedule is below:

- 1-hour initial assessment using the PLP
- 3 hours live web-based training and assessment (Friday evening or Saturday morning)
- 3 hours of practice with coaching support (Drop-in Zoom coaching and practice)
 - Empathy interviews will be scheduled individually with all participants
 - Discussion observations will be reviewed
- 1-hour follow-up live web-based (Zoom session at the end of the 30 days)
 - Final review of the PLP results and exit survey of the LIFT strategy

The NPC has utilized similar sub-training categories in our professional development offerings and had exceeded capacity for the number of participants, requiring a waitlist.

While the study was primarily focused on the beliefs and behaviors of educational executives, the beliefs and behaviors of district staff were considered for further meaning making as related to the perceptions around active listening as reflected in RQ1.

Therefore, the recruiting process was explicit in clarifying the expectation that the research includes interviews with both contributing groups of colleagues and community stakeholders. The NPC has access to an email database of nine thousand subscribers, who are predominately educators, and hundreds serve in leadership positions. Biweekly emails are sent sharing center updates, training opportunities, and supplemental offerings, of which the Listening LIFT ISDiP research was showcased. Hence, retaining ten

participants who met the qualifications and were committed to completing the eight hours of training and assessment was realistic.

Reflexivity and Positionality

Extensive consideration was given in determining how the qualitative inquiry would be written, as it refers to the framing of responses in context to the implicit biases of both myself and the participants in the research. As an educational leader who has implemented constructivist and co-creational elements of teaching, learning, and leading within schools and districts, I naturally gravitated to the work of the National Paideia Center. As an educational philosophy, Paideia believes in the utilization of reading, writing, speaking, listening, and thinking (critically and creatively) to advance understanding and nurture civil discourse for all who participate in the school community (Billings & Roberts, 1999). Since joining the National Paideia Center as Assistant Director, I have further refined my interests towards advancing the skills of listening.

Working across the country in multiple states and seeing the power dynamics between different groups has impacted my understanding of micro and macro political constructs across all landscapes and communities. These interactions and experiences helped me acknowledge my own biases and articulate my positionality as it relates to the breakdown of listening. Intentional or unintentional, interview questions can become leading even if just by tone, inflection, body language, and interest in follow-up. The goal of the interviewer is to aid in the birthing process of the ideas and sentiments, not to inflict thoughts and feelings into the discussion as an influencer.

Positionality

My positionality as a researcher directly connects me to the ideas, values, and concerns related to active listening and the associated dispositions. The complexity of identity is often overlooked. Individuals self-categorize, or are categorized by others, to fit a given social construct, which in-turn can define and distinguish key facets of one's identity. As race, place, and economic position continue to become more centralized in our discussions, experiences, reading, and research, I continue to shape my beliefs about who I am to the world and who the world is to me. As someone who exists in a cultural heritage dichotomy of the oppressor and the oppressed, it can be challenging to accept the advantage and privilege of one and not be wholly accepted by the other, even if only in solidarity. Nevertheless, having a presence that intersects multiple racial and cultural identities has proved to be a windfall in establishing diverse relationships.

In studying active listening, I understand that I was also a beneficiary of the new knowledge and understanding gained regarding how listening well builds trust and confidence in those I interact with. I also believe this has to do with being vulnerable and open to naming our fears that sustain our biases. My positionality frames my personal and professional philosophy, as well as how I directly interact with the participants of my research. This also had the potential to tint the interactions in a way that may adversely impact the neutrality of my position as a researcher, as well as the position of the participant. Therefore, I worked diligently to maintain a level of non-engagement when the possibility of influence directly surfaced. I am not sure if we can ever eliminate our biases.

Additionally, it is germane to note that as the developer of the Listening LIFT my primary intent was to gain insight through feedback and experience while refining a response or potential solution to a problem within the educational leadership practice. This in itself, is an intersection of idea and emotion. However, if we are to perceive ideas as evolutionary or able to adapt and change, then the relationship with emotion and intellect can be symbiotic and can be a balanced force for positive change. My intended goal was to extract quality thoughts, experiences, and emotional responses about active listening in general, (RQ1), and the learning experience and application of active listening through participating in the Listening LIFT development program, (RQ2), as a way to fortify my response to a call to action within the Clemson EDIS program and the ISDiP.

Data Collection

The purpose of this research was exploratory in that the Listening LIFT intervention is a response to a void in applicable active listening strategies with educational executives. Therefore, I designed the collection methods of assessments, interviews, and observations are designed to triangulate aspects of positive implementation of the Listening LIFT within the workplace. To capture clarity in the data collection and analysis process, I drafted a table that highlights each phase of the SIAR cycle and the associated collection of data (see Figure 2.1).

Figure 2.1*Data Collection and Analysis Through the SIAR Cycle*

Phase	Data collected	Data collection instrument	Data analysis method	Actions to enhance trustworthiness or reliability	Data application/usage
S Strategize	Preference	Personal Listening Profile (PLP) Survey	Coding	Single Administration Internal Consistency	Personalization of content for planning the LIFT
	Demographic	Survey	Coding	NA	Planning purposes
I Implement	Semi structured Empathy Interviews	Interview Protocol	Coding	Second Coder	Source for RQ1
	Discussion Observation	Listening LIFT Discussion Observation Form	Coding	Second Coder	Source for RQ2
A Analyze	Content Perceptions	Exit survey of LIFT training	Coding	NA	Source for RQ2
	Pattern Identification	Leading and Lagging outcomes	All of the above	NA	Possible modification information for future SIAR Cycles
R Reflect	Review of above	NA	NA	Identification of biases and barriers	Anticipated changes to the Listening LIFT PD

The intended sample (P-Set) of this study for the PLP is identified leaders from the school, the principalship, the central office, and the cabinet-level. There were 10 educational leaders that participated in this study from across the country. I established permission to collect data through informed consent and attained approval through exemption from Clemson University's Institutional Review Board (IRB).

The informed consent letter explained the purpose of the study, described the activities and the time allotted for participation. After participants agreed through informed consent to participate in the study they participated in the PLP before attending the Listening LIFT training session and follow-up coaching. Additionally, I conducted empathy interviews with the protocol (Appendix E) to collect perspectives of beliefs and behaviors around active listening for participants. I recorded, transcribed, and coded each one-on-one interview. In addition, a discussion observation tool was utilized to support skill coaching and analyze implementation effectiveness for needed modifications. Lastly, an exit survey for the Listening LIFT intervention (Appendix C) was shared with participants to gain general feedback about the content and experience of each aspect within the training.

Personal Listener Profile (PLP)

The Personal Learning Profile (Appendix D), published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc. was developed in response to a limitation in measurement tools around the attitudes and behaviors of listeners (inscape publishing, 1995). In developing items for the Alpha, 72 item test version, five factors of listening were generated: Discerning, Comprehensive, Evaluative, Appreciative, and Empathetic. The beta test further refined the instrument and reduced the item count to 60. The PLP utilizes a four-point Likert scale that ranges from; Not Like Me, Somewhat Unlike Me, Somewhat Like Me, and Like Me. The Inscape Publishing Research Report (1995) indicates that “the *Personal Learning Profile* is a highly reliable instrument that can be used with confidence to help individuals identify their most natural listening approaches used when communicating” (p. 4). The

PLP has offered multiple versions across its four-decade history, while refining the instrument to make it more accessible across industries. The version used in my research is the hand scored 2.1 form, which is the most up-to-date edition of the instrument. The PLP instrument allowed for both the participant and the researcher to see the data from the listening profile, which places the participant into one of four preference strengths: “People-Oriented”, “Action-Oriented”, “Time-Oriented”, and “Content-Oriented” with information regarding the associated listening tendencies identified in the instrument. The entire test takes approximately 45 minutes to present. The measurement is well recognized in listening research and has reported acceptable reliability and internal validity (Roberts, 1988).

Interviews

The interview with the educational executive(s) took the form of an empathy interview, which is semi structured with open-ended questions to understand the experience of the communicator. The direct interview is meant to elicit stories connected to experiences directly impacting the educational executives, the contributing groups of colleagues, the stakeholders, and community members. The interview event itself is intended to serve as an isolated encounter, not directly representative of the cultural or social norms of the community regarding the ideas around active listening. Thus, each communicator had ample time to guide aspects of the discussion they want to build upon or connect to previous questions. The interview protocol and questions (Appendix E) serve more as a guide depending on how the collaborative meaning-making process unfolds. All interview(s) took place virtually at a time and date of the interviewee’s

choice, with 30 minutes secured to avoid any distractions or events that force the interview time to be discordant. The interview was digitally recorded and transcribed.

Additionally, each interviewee was offered a copy of the transcription prior to the write-up to allow for any clarification or redaction. All data collected was kept secure and private by being stored on password-protected files within a password-protected computer. Further, the study involved minimal risks to subjects, given that participation is strictly voluntary, with options to opt-out at any time in the study. Individual participants were informed of all procedures in detail and were provide written consent for the use of their data.

Discussion Observation Instrument

Utilizing observation-based research to focus on improving general practices has been well established as an effective strategy for improvement. O’Leary (2012) contended that lesson observations have been longstanding approaches to improving new and experienced educator practices in the classroom. Observation instruments can provide a positive impact on educator-led research and effectively carry over into the observation-based research of educational executives. Observation instruments are recommended as a pivotal component to strengthen the connection between internal and external research, which can, in turn, transform the evidence for practice and targeted development (Nelson & O’Beirne, 2014). By using a similar tool (Appendix F) to observe and track behaviors of educational executives in discussions with colleagues, evidence was obtained concerning how these educational executives utilize the principles of the Listening LIFT.

The observation form was developed/adapted from a popular clinical observation tool called the client-centered therapy (CCT) participant observation form. Client-centered therapy, also known as person-centered, is a counseling/therapy approach that encourages the client to take an active role in their therapy with the therapist engaging in a non-directive and supportive manner (Rogers, 1946). CCT was developed in the late 1930s by Rogers, who I previously referenced for his definition of active listening. Accordingly, the CCT observation form had many question stems that matched the skills and behaviors associated with the Listening LIFT. Therefore, the adaptation and development of the LIFT observation form was relatively straightforward.

Procedures

Prior to gaining consent from participants, approval from the IRB was obtained to confirm minimal risk to participants and the university during the administration of the PLP, discussion observations, the interviews, and the Listening LIFT intervention, as stated in the IRB exemption application. Once participant informed consent was shared, the research was conducted in two parts to determine if the Listening LIFT intervention improved the educational executive's disposition for active listening. As the researcher, I identified a second coder to assist in coding the interviews and observations. The second coder holds a position as an educational executive, is familiar with my work, and holds an advanced degree in educational leadership.

Once a second coder was identified, I met with the individual to review all aspects of the proposed study. Additionally, I conducted a brief training prior to coding to share access to the codebook on Atlas.ti for coding the interviews and observations. Any

questions the second coder had about the procedures and instruments were answered prior to completing the sample coding.

Once the participant list of educational executives was confirmed from the NPC registration program, an email was sent to the participants to schedule a time for them to complete the PLP on a pre-identified day, time and date selections for conducting the empathy interviews was also established. Email correspondence to participants also included copies of the informed consent to be reviewed before completing the assessment, the interviews, and the training.

The PLP was introduced virtually with the participant group as well as individually, when a participant was not able to attend the group session. Licensed print copies of the PLP were purchased for each participant and were shared digitally. Paper copies of the inventory assessment were offered to be mailed if the participant preferred to complete the original paper form.

Participants were provided with a demographic survey (Appendix G) preceding the participation in the study, which includes questions regarding experience in education, credentials, years at current school/district, leader's role(s), school/district location, and the optional questions of race, age, and gender. The demographic survey data was numerically coded to identify participants' locations. The school/district sites were identified using an alphanumeric code unique if schools/districts are in the same state. Participants were encouraged to ask any clarifying questions during every web-based communication, including, emails, digital meetings, and during all the web-based interviews.

Analysis of the Data

I intended to analyze views of active listening through the utilization of the PLP assessment, combined with a qualitative analysis of empathy interviews and discussion observation data. Utilizing a sample group from distinct regions in the United States in each phase of the data collection allowed further comparison of viewpoints between educational leaders from areas across the country. In this section, I define the coding method in terms of method approach, coding scheme, rationale, and reliability measures for qualitative analysis. Additionally, in the forthcoming section, aspects of trustworthiness are described with specific criteria that was taken to ensure reliability and validity within the study, and in reference to the larger ideas connected to advancing the skills and behavior of active listening among educational executives.

Coding the Data

Applying cycles of code allows for a bridge between data and meaning. Working through a first and second cycle of coding, a researcher construct can be generated to detect patterns and cross categorization. Saldana (2013) stated that “a code in qualitative inquiry is most often a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data” (p. 3). When the first round of educational executive interviews was completed, I applied the first coding cycle inductively. The second cycle of coding I used a deductive coding process. Creswell and Poth (2017) indicated that “coding involves aggregating the text or visual data into small categories of information, seeking evidence

for the code from different databases being used in a study, and then assigning a label to the code” (p. 259). Utilizing a hybrid approach of inductive and deductive coding of qualitative methods incorporates both the data-driven inductive approach of Boyatzis (1998) and the deductive a priori code templates approach outlined by Crabtree and Miller (1999). Thus, allowing for a level of meaning-making that surfaces from the chunks of code being organized and processed. Below is an adapted list process of the coding steps from the work of Creswell (2003) and Tesch (1990), in which I applied while coding my data:

- I. Conduct an inspectional read of the entire transcript. Annotate as needed.
- II. Review a single document for underlying meaning. Avoid reading for substance.
- III. Once multiple documents have been read, make a list of topics and clusters.
- IV. Take the clusters as codes and attach them to appropriate segments of text for all data. See if new categories or codes emerge.
- V. Look for larger groupings of code that relate to each other and merge interrelated themes.
- VI. Assemble the data and perform a preliminary analysis.
- VII. If needed, recode the data.

Once the first cycle of coding was completed, I returned to the data and conducted the second cycle of coding using steps four-seven in the aforementioned coding steps, with a focus on themes that surface from the interviews, observations, and the PLP assessment. I also used the second coding cycle to produce a codebook (Appendix H) that

supports any re-analysis of the data. The newly established codes were grouped and merged into interrelated categories and themes.

Reliability

In efforts to enhance coding reliability, a second independent coder was utilized to build a level of intercoder reliability (ICR). Campbell et al. (2013) acknowledged that many qualitative research projects use a single coder for most data coding. ICR may be obtained by recruiting an additional person to code a sample of the data; this will assist and maximize coherence within the codes. Syed and Nelson (2015) offered a three-step process for training coders, which focuses on understanding the coding manual, reviewing sample code, and practicing coding. Once suitable reliability is recognized within the codebook, the primary researcher can continue to code the remaining data alone. I established a level of ICR between coding cycles by having a second coder complete a sample section of coding without consultation. The second coder allowed for a level of validity and trustworthiness. Additionally, periodic reliability checks during the coding process can prevent the tendency for coding drift, where intercoders deviate in the interpretations of the coding manual (Myford & Wolfe, 2009).

Trustworthiness

According to Graneheim and Lundman (2004), a primary consideration when reporting the trustworthiness of findings from a qualitative analysis is that there will always be some degree of interpretation when reviewing a transcription. Thus, researchers must consider how to confirm credibility and conformability within the data's

organization phase. By developing a codebook and the sampled double-coded sections, an ICR score can be established, which should further advance trustworthiness and transferability. Even though there is not a universally accepted threshold for an acceptable reliability score, Miles et al. (2019) suggested a minimum standard of 80% agreement on 95% of codes. I employed this minimal standard of 80% agreement on 95% of the coding for each coding cycle. In efforts to further provide a critical inspection of the interviews and focus groups and establish validity, the involvement of a second coder or third party should be used, specifically, for listening to the recording to share questions that needed to be struck from the write-up based on the interviewer influencing the discussion.

After printing the codes from my coding, and the second coders coded, the second coder and I compared each code for agreement and overlap through clarification on synonyms. The crossover can be seen in (Appendix I). To determine the accuracy of the findings from the researcher's standpoint, the participants, and the audience, a level of validity, authenticity, and trustworthiness can be obtained by applying triangulation, member checking, and bias confirmation (Creswell & Miller, 2000).

Application of the Data

In my interpretation of the data from the PLP, a principal component analysis helped identify possible correlations in listening preferences for the sample group. This supported a determination to further personalize content for individual factors pertaining to preferences associated with listening and with identifying items that are cross-categorical. Lastly, data collected through interviews and observations offered data sets

categorized by themes, keywords, and frequency of articulated active listening terminology. The themes and change analysis were used to inform aspects of the SIAR cycle and future cycles that improve and expand the intervention of the Listening LIFT. In order to better highlight the process of applying the data to inform the Listening LIFT development program an infographic can be seen in (Appendix J).

Limitations

Because the study of listening is a cognitive and behavioral construct (Bodie & Fitch-Hauser, 2010), it is abstract by nature. This fact makes any assessment of a given listening model a challenge to measure effectively (Bodie et al., 2008). However, theoretical work pertaining to the evaluation of listening models allows for existing methods to be improved and new methods introduced. Nevertheless, one of the most significant limitations of the study is the reliance on self-reported data. This can be problematic, as participants often have difficulty providing valid data on their behaviors. Teven et al. (2010) described how “people are not always accurate in their own perceptions and abilities. However, accurate or not, these perceptions are likely to drive individuals’ choices of their own communication behavior” (p. 268). Being aware of the bias and accuracy of abilities that both participants and me as the researcher bring to communication, required me to be exceedingly mindful about how my experiences and beliefs could impact my interpretations of the findings. Throughout the study I reviewed my notes and reflected on the process in an attempt to recognize if the self-reported data was becoming contorted.

Summary

In this section, I presented a basic methodology for data collection and analysis. Upon completion of the assessments, interviews, and intervention, in the subsequent section I include an interpretation of the findings and a discussion section that addressed the results in greater depth as part of the reflection phase of the SIAR cycle. The section concludes with the final implications of the study and recommendations for future research or modifications to the intervention for future SIAR cycles.

CHAPTER THREE

RESULTS FROM THE ANALYSIS OF THE DATA

A primary purpose of my dissertation in practice was to gain insight and information from educational executives and their colleagues regarding their understanding of active listening to refine and improve a program that I designed to support educational executives in improving their ability to actively listen. The following research questions anchored the work: RQ1: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation? And, RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively? Following the three-hour Listening LIFT training session, 10 participants were interviewed about their beliefs and perceptions concerning the skills and behavior(s) associated with active listening. Additionally, 10 conversations were observed, and eight participants' colleague interviews were conducted.

The first part of this section focuses on aspects of the participant interview. Subsequent sections of the results weigh and consider trends associated with the participant interview and the colleague/stakeholder interview. Furthermore, this section will highlight data from the Personal Listening Profile and the Listening LIFT exit interview. Lastly, I summarize the findings in relation to the roles of the participants and their participation in the Listening LIFT program and their association to RQ1 and RQ2.

Analysis from this study resulted in four key themes associated with answering RQ1 and the most impactful active listening skills and behaviors for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation : (1) Being an empathetic, active listener is an expected part of an educational executive’s job; (2) Speakers need to feel heard, and the conversation should have a goal of shared understanding; (3) Limiting distractions is essential to practicing and modeling active listening; and (4) The speaker/listener relationship can be strengthened or begin to be restored through trust-building and power-sharing.

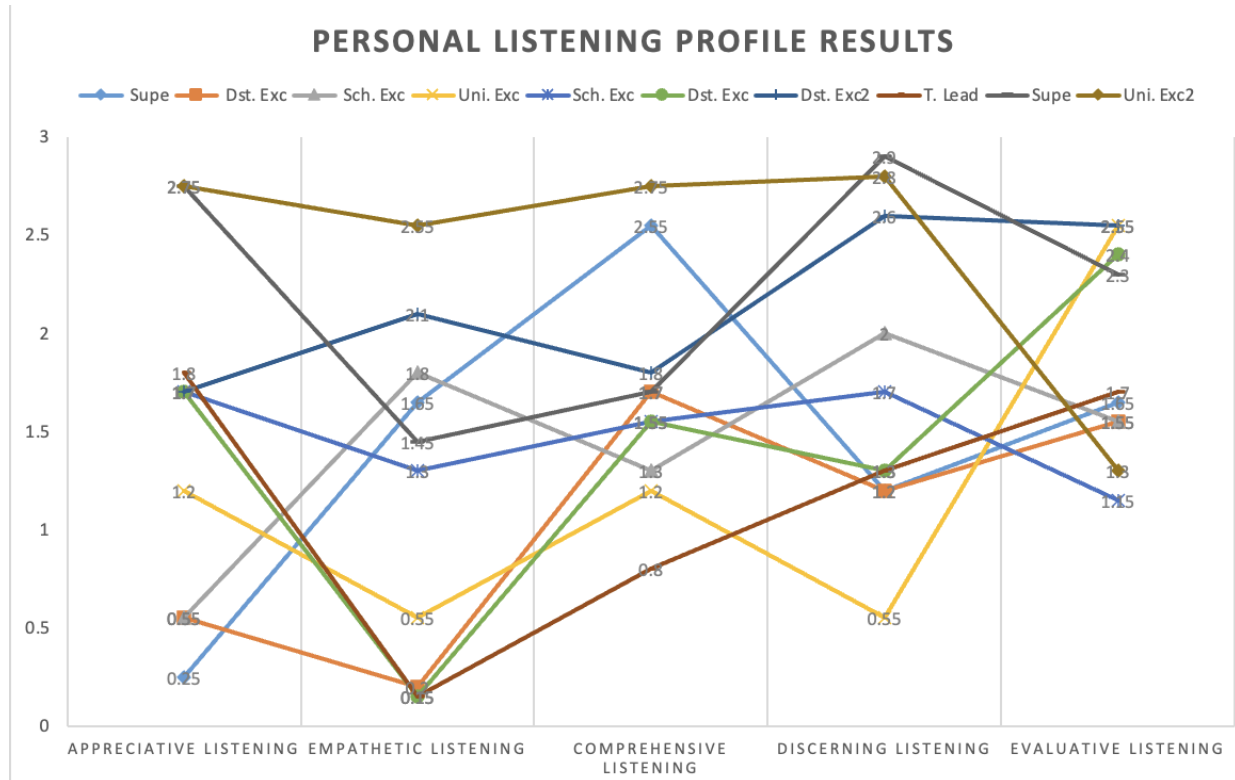
Findings

In order to highlight the study findings in a manner that connects the fishbone diagram (Appendix A) with the development and refinement of the Listening LIFT, the underpinned perspectives on active listening from the participant and colleague interviews, and key takeaways from the Listening LIFT exit survey.

Further, to better understand the diverse perspectives and preferences of the participants entering the research project, it is useful to see a graph of the participants’ responses to the Personal Listening Profile assessment in Figure 3.1. If there is one clearly point to the chart below, it is that each of the participants varies widely in their personal preferences to listening. This is not surprising. However, it did support me in individualizing content for the educational executives as they participated.

Figure 3.1

PLP Preference Plot



An interesting point to note is that the preference of empathetic listening was rated lowest by four out of ten participants. Furthermore, the preference of evaluative listening was rated highest by four out of ten participants, two of those ten being the same that rated empathetic listening the lowest in preference.

Active Listening Interviews with LIFT Participants

I utilized a constructivist approach to analyzing the data, which incorporated conversation analysis with thematic coding of interviews with a more semi-structured approach, requiring more participation from the researcher, with the addition of

observation field notes. First, I coded the participant interviews along with the field notes using an inductive coding process with the Atlas.ti coding platform to capture descriptive themes and patterns around the ideas of active listening. Once the coding process was completed, the coded data was filtered to identify key code groups and the ideas associated with aspects of the Listening LIFT program. The four key code groups identified are that of Strategies, Purpose, Relationships, and Barriers. From the initial coding, ninety codes were assigned to the interview transcripts. In a second code review after combining similar or overlapping codes, a total of thirty-eight codes made up the code book (Appendix I). Below is a graph of the frequencies of the four categories in which each of codes are grouped. These categories were established in an effort to frame the participant responses and offer areas of focus for future development based on the perceptions of the educational executives. Of the final thirty-eight codes, the count in each category is displayed in two different formats. The first is a code category frequency chart and the second is a code category distribution table.

Figure 3.2
Code Category Frequency Chart

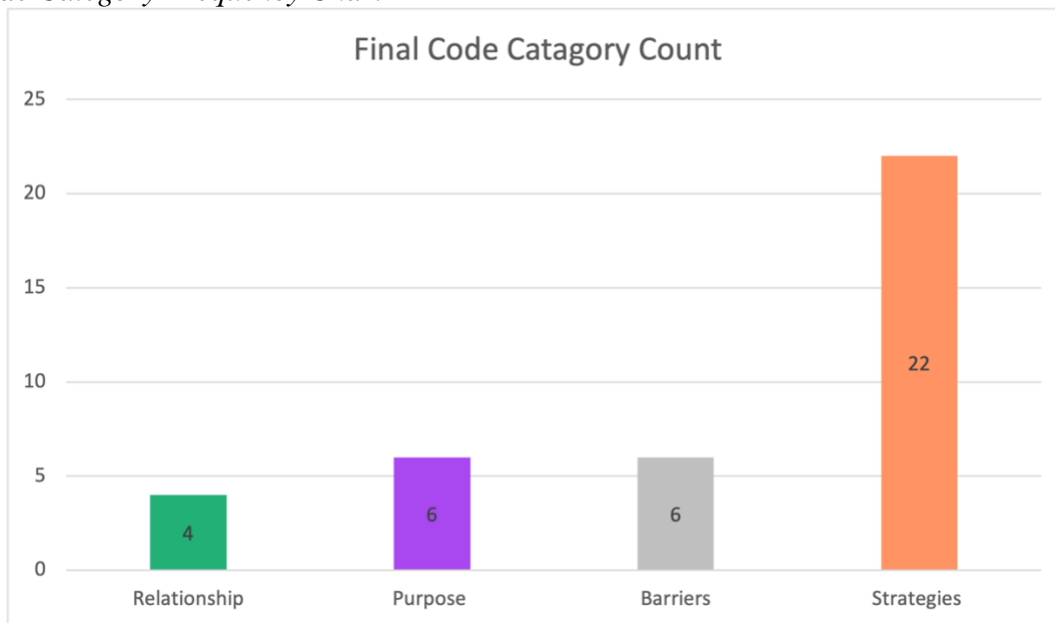
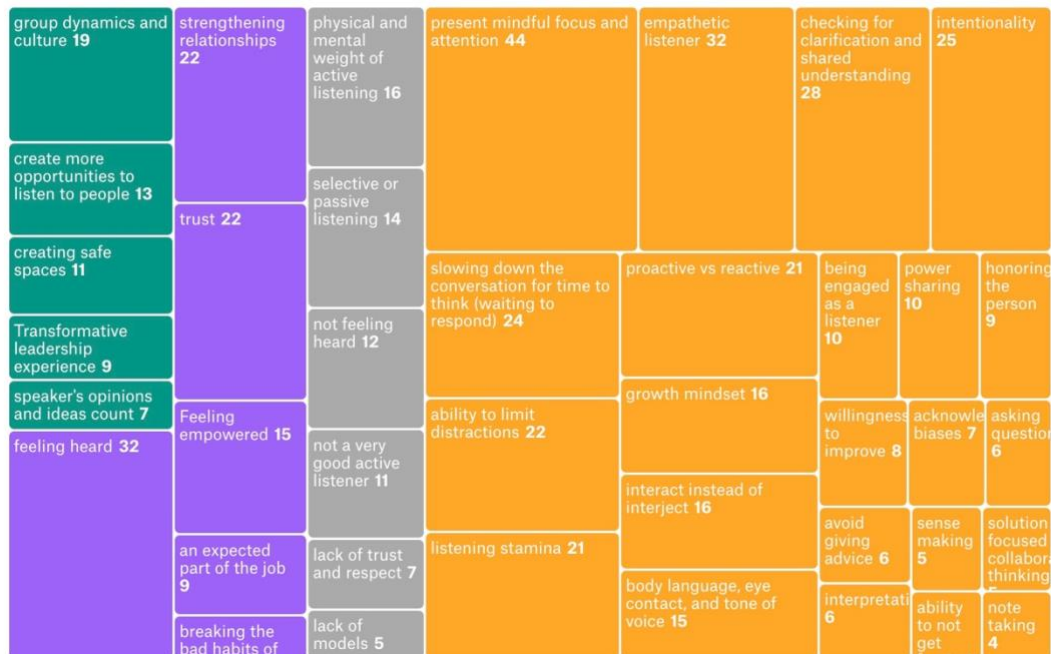


Figure 3.3
Code Category Distribution Treemap



In the overview of the findings, a select number of direct quotations from participants from each of the five areas of leadership, and across the final four code groups, along with interview question responses are underscored.

Statement of Results

Research Question 1 Participant Findings

The following collected and coded qualitative data aims to respond to the first research question: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation?

Being an empathetic, active listener is an expected part of an educational executive's job

While this theme may not appear to offer new insight, it does highlight an essential aspect of the beliefs and perceptions of both executives and those they interact with. The coding of this theme highlights a combination of engaged listening and empathetic listening, which are grouped under the strategies category, and were referenced forty-two times or 8.4% of the code. The expected part of the job code, which was grouped under purpose, was referenced nine times and made up 1.8% of the code. There appears to be an alignment between the expectation of an educational executive being able to communicate effectively, as both speaker and listener. The notion that participants connect their working definitions of listening around the ideas or themes most frequently coded (1) feeling heard, (2) empathetic listener, (3) checking for shared

understanding, and a draw at (4) strengthening relationships, and trust, gives great insight into how to leverage simple and direct change mechanisms to improving the skills of active listening.

Two of the nine interview questions specifically target the ideas and beliefs about the attributes of active listening. The opening question, “What does active listening mean to you?” and one of the core questions, “Describe the best active listener you know in your school, district, or campus.” These questions quickly open the floor for participants to share characteristics in which they connect active listening with behavior and individuals they engage with on a regular basis along with themselves.

While asking the opening question to the university executive, Leonard, about a personal definition of active listening, he responded with, “we all know, I think, being mindful being in the present moment being empathetic.” However, when gently encouraged to elaborate, Leonard, reflected on the difference between being present and being empathetic and modified the response to state:

Maybe present okay, which is related to, you know, being mindful. Yeah, but I think being, you know, really present in that space. Because I don't know that I can always be empathetic, but I think I can be present, which is, you know, in tune to what the person is trying to tell me. I am willing to share that space with them.

Leonard also made multiple connections throughout the interview about sharing power or transferring power in connection to the T in LIFT.

During his interview, one of the superintendents, Ken, was open to acknowledging the importance of empathy in active listening while also disclosing that it is an area of growth that required mindful practice to sustain:

I actually do consider empathy to be one of my weaknesses. I have, I have to work at empathy sometimes, but that is an important part of active listening, is to be empathetic and so, even though it's not a natural skill for me, it's something that you can know, develop and focus on and make sure that you're considering other people's perspectives. Yeah, I think that's important.

Another aspect that educational executives articulated as a characteristic of active listening was body language and eye contact as a way of showing engagement and empathy as a listener. The participants noted that while you can look at someone and use other non-verbal signs of engagement, like body posture, you still may be distracted or passively listening. However, it was stated that it is hard to let the person you are in conversation with know you are trying to actively listen if you are not connecting frequently, through eye contact and body language, even if it is a check for a shared understanding of what is said. One school executive, Lucy, referred to this idea as such:

In a way it's listening with your whole self so that might be physical attributes, including not being otherwise engaged or otherwise distracted but also you know, making eye contact, or what other physical movements, you might need to make or not need to make when listening actively.

The idea of listening with a whole self appeared again in other forms throughout the interviews. The superintendent, Ken, put it this way, "just being focused on the

individual that you're speaking with and making eye contact and you know body language all is important too in terms of making sure that the person understands that they have your undivided attention." The university executive, Leonard, stated, "I think, also listening is not just about words and sounds, it's also, I mean you have to listen to people's body language, you know, just how they're physically in that space too."

When discussing active listening with one of the district executives, Alice, who has a background in cognitive coaching, also indicated the importance of being fully engaged:

I think active listening. means that you are engaged in the moment of conversation, and engagement means to engage with your body, so your physical body is in tune to the person, eye contact is being made, and it's also engagement as listening to understand and propel the conversation.

The above sentiment helped clarify the importance Alice placed on showing physical engagement in order to tune-in to the speaker in the conversation.

Building upon the idea of engagement and empathic listening, one of the primary reasons why individuals cannot engage as active listeners is the distractions that surface during a conversation. In the Listening LIFT training program, a visual anchor of "listening leeches" is used to assist participants in thinking about the parasites that fight to consume our attention. To better understand the impact of current listening practices with executives, it is necessary to understand the challenges of twenty-first expectations, multi-tasking, and the cognitive weight authentic active listening plays on the individual. The subsequent section focuses on the experiences of educational executives as listeners

attempting to limit or remove distractions while engaging in conversation and identifying themes associated with building a conversational space where speakers feel heard.

Speakers need to feel heard, and the conversation should have a goal of shared understanding

If there is a perceived purpose of listening actively, it may be that the individual entering a conversation with a colleague and/or a constituent is seeking to share a level of reciprocity in dialogue. Put another way, the listener is actively working to assure that the speaker feels heard and that the dialogue has a purpose that centers on a shared understanding of the given topic. The coding of the theme, speakers need to feel heard, is grouped under the category of purpose and was referenced thirty-two times or 6.4% of the code. The shared understanding code, which was grouped under strategies, was referenced twenty-eight times and made up 5.6% of the code. The theme of feeling heard continued to surface as a way to describe the purpose of active listening as a process to strengthen relationships with those individuals whom executives engage with on a daily basis. Therefore, the theme discussed in this section highlights the importance of using authentic techniques to share with the speaker that their words have meaning, and they can and should be honored as a speaker even if an agreement or resolution is not achieved during the discussion. The code was analyzed a second time for similar codes to potentially merge and associate data that most closely aligned with feeling heard were their ideas and opinions count, honoring the person, intentionality, how I react, interacting vs. interjecting, and respect. These codes also overlap with the codes for strengthening relationships, trust, power-sharing, and checking for shared understanding.

However, the notion of feeling heard as a speaker surfaced in participant interviews, participant and colleague conversations, and colleague interviews. When interviewing Ken, one of the superintendents, he opened up about the importance of connecting in a way that honors the person and the discussion, even if there is not a resolution:

If we can at least talk about it, the speaker may feel more whole, in the sense that they are not happy about it, but they feel at least heard and feel whole, and that's so important to make sure people do feel like they're being heard and that their opinions do count and have been considered in the decisions we're making.

The above statement from Ken highlights a view from the top seat regarding the goal of working towards helping a speaker feel heard.

When interviewing a second superintendent, Kameron, he extended on the idea above and made a note of connecting through attending to the speaker:

To give your undivided attention. When you are conversing with a colleague or stakeholder in the organization that you're associated with, it's connecting, it's understanding, or trying to understand what is being communicated to you, and not necessarily having the answers but connecting in a sense, where you're making the person feel like you are addressing their needs.

Kameron made a point to highlight the need to let the speaker see that you can give them undivided attention. However, he also indicated how difficult this is to sustain.

When interviewing the teacher leader, David, he indicated that to practice active listening, one must:

Actually, be engrossed in what the other person is saying, to be present in that conversation/discussion. That requires some empathy, even on a very small level like even if you're not an empathetic person, you still have to care, even if you don't care about the other person, you know, try to put yourself in their shoes, do they feel heard.

David's thoughts about practicing empathy indicate a perceived level of genuineness that he can be displayed by the listener and felt by the speaker.

In order to better understand the idea of speakers feeling heard as a key to connecting effectively as communicators, the perspective of the individual in the speaking role should be considered. Individuals rarely look forward to engaging in conversations where they know it will be a struggle to feel heard. However, in some cases, there are employees, stakeholders, and community members who expected to be listened to. The university executive, Leonard, shared an experience where he had to engage in conversations with individuals who may be challenging to interact with:

I wanted to recognize him in that space and be respectful of him. And I was really trying to listen in and hear what he was saying, I also needed him to hear me, so I also put that requirement back to him, so that we can move forward.

Because that is the challenge in academia, you know, people expect to be heard and listened to.

The second university executive, Nora, echoed this sentiment, "But I will say it's been hard to engage the faculty in that kind of discourse. Sometimes, the faculty want to be heard more so than want to listen."

When discussing with the participants the strategies they use to show they are listening actively, we focused on using inquiry to check for understanding instead of interjecting to add-to or even take over the discussion. The participants noted both the importance and the challenge of utilizing the I, Inquire for clarification, in the LIFT approach. In part because this strategy requires the ability to slow down the conversation and to ask good questions to allow for the speaker to clarify their statement(s). One of the district executives, Stefka, shared an experience about a supervisor they had who modeled the strategies mentioned above regarding shared understanding:

We could confidentially talk about each school what their needs were, where we were going to go, and have honest conversations about what everybody can handle, how far I could push/support each school. Having those really deep, slow conversations, and then she would push me the same way, I would go push the schools, which was fabulous because I felt like we were equals in the conversation. It wasn't just her listening to me but me listening to what she would push me to do so, it was active listening on both sides. But I think all of that active listening was based on trust.

Another district executive, Alice, talked about the need to slow down and be mindful in order to work towards a shared understanding:

I will be pausing, and you might not be even aware that I'm pausing, or you know, taking time with the conversation. But you know we're not rushing it. And I'm not kind of like rushing to judgment so that's another thing too, I think. If someone is speaking to me, and they know I'm being mindful, or they feel it in

some way or they're enjoying the conversation then. I believe it's free of judgment. It's in line with what we're talking about I'm not changing the subject, or interjecting. I'm not interjecting a new thought or new idea unless given permission that's where the speaker wants to go.

The ideas that Stefka and Alice shared regarding building trust and developing a shared understanding with the speaker assist in highlighting the notion of strategically applying the skill of seeking to understand through clarification.

In order to extend this notion of utilizing questions as a way to inquire for clarification, participants identified that the practice of sense-making requires a certain level of listening stamina or engagement that takes cognitive energy. One of the school executives, Lucy, referenced this notion of energy, stamina, and focus as deep listening:

I continue to learn how to ask some of those deeper questions, and to understand at a deeper level what the concern might actually be stemming from. That goes with anybody, like any part of your life because oftentimes the things that come up as problems are just the symptom, they're not the actual root of the problem. And so, honing those skills of how to ask better follow up questions or how to make deeper connections to what you already know about the situation or the person, so that you can tap a little bit deeper in than just the surface level.

As the interviews progressed, the themes of listening stamina and the weight associated with true active listening, mentally and physically, continued to surface. The participants' willingness to share about a listener absorbing some of the worry or burden of the speaker was not one that I had fully considered. However, it made perfect sense in

association with the individualized stamina of a listener. One university executive, when discussing their willingness to engage with the student body as an active listener, shared these thoughts:

The psychological state of these kids in this generation, you are constantly taking on the afflictions of these kids, and so I do think I'm a good listener to these kids. I think I get that in my evaluations. But it's, yeah, it's wearing me down...I had an elder one day tell me the responsibility of someone who counsels folks is to make sure that they are also taking care of themselves, is really important, because you know, one of the things that makes them, you know a good counselor, is they take on the afflictions of their patients...I feel that way sometimes.

The sentiment shared above calls attention to the important idea of recognizing one's listening battery, or put another way, one's listening stamina.

When talking with the superintendent, Kameron, he reflected on the idea of work-life balance and technology being a tether to work and communication about work:

I really think there's something to this, you know, as far as like the era that we are living in, in terms of technology. Just the emails alone have added another layer of stress. And feeling compelled to address and answer emails, you know, before emails, it was more of a face to face, or even a phone call. So, I'm always checking my phone. Yeah, and kind of catching up on emails so that's, you know, the job. But the ability to disconnect, comes up one time in the year, I would say.

Which is sad. But it's true you know, just, the holiday season everyone seems to turn off work a little more.

When thinking about the cognitive energy associated with active listening and our listening stamina, one participant, Stefka, indicated that it is more challenging to listen to someone who is dry or not as engaging. This concept was coded as succinct speaking and noted in connection with the engagement, listening stamina, and the F, finding intrigue, in LIFT. Stefka shared:

My interaction being that it (the content) is so interesting I mean I don't have to have a long interaction, but just that little bit just to refocus my listening and so it's the how interesting the speaker is and how passionate they are about their topic helps me stay focused. If somebody else was speaking on the same topic, and they were dry, I would tune out. I think it's the passion of the speaker, sometimes in how well of a listener, I can be. And how much more cognitive energy it takes when there is somebody, you're engaging with that's not dynamic.

The feeling Stefka shared regarding the cognitive energy cost involved in listening can take a toll on all. In the training program we discussed the importance of making note of when you are not in a place to be present in a conversation as an active listener and be mindful to articulate this to the speaker and/or a support staff member and make the needed modification to the schedule for the day.

Working to build a shared understanding was a significant theme identified in both the interviews and in the observed discussions. Each of the educational executives, on the other hand, noted the challenges associated with active listening when it comes to

maintaining focus and improving one's listening stamina. In the next section, the L in LIFT, limiting distractions, comes into full focus as we discuss the factors that prey on the attention of the listener both internally and externally.

Limiting distractions is essential to practicing and modeling active listening

The theme of limiting distractions as a key aspect of active listening, beyond the association with learning and practicing the Listening LIFT strategies, continued to resurface in interviews with enthusiastic and adverse responses to questions. The coding of the finding the ability to limit distractions was grouped under the strategies category and was referenced twenty-two times or 4.4% of the code. The modeling of active listening code, was grouped under the relationships category and is made up of two sub-codes, create more opportunities to listen to people, and creating safe spaces, which together were referenced twenty-four times and made up 4.8% of the code.

The superintendent, Kameron, previously shared his feeling of the stress of obligation to respond. This sentiment was echoed by other participants, and many confessed that during web-based meetings, there is a stronger temptation to multi-task, specifically with clearing out emails that require no response. While all were aware that a part of their cognitive attention was elsewhere, the drive to get caught up directly competes with the need to practice active listening. One of the superintendents, Ken, openly indicated:

And I think you know one on one with individuals, I think I'm very good at doing that (active listening). I would be the first to admit that, with all the zoom meetings and everything else that we've had to do in the past couple of years that

I do multi-task sometimes when I'm in a Zoom meeting where I'm just making sure that I'm getting the information from the meeting, but not necessarily giving it my undivided attention, but that is usually in a larger group setting. But if I'm one on one with somebody, I definitely make a sincere effort to stay focused on what we're talking about.

The superintendent was not justifying the behavior but indicating a habit that had been formed. For the participants more willing to share about their struggles with maintaining focus, a sub-theme emerged regarding the tools used to stay engaged when listening. One school leader, David, indicated the amount of energy used to limit distractions:

Even when I am like engaged in something my mind is going fast, and I am having trouble way holding the conversation. It's like I'm swimming upstream carrying all this luggage and people are adding even more, but then it makes it hard for me to focus on what they want me the carry... again my biggest problem, whether it's consciously or unconsciously, and let's go with a more benign, like I'm not doing it (not listening) on purpose like. Yeah, I still have to work a lot harder than someone who's just traditionally a good listener, right. I have more distractions.

The vulnerability of David's statement is important in that it spoke to the spectrum of attention and how distractions in all shapes and forms can be more challenging for some than others regardless of position or title. Another university executive, Nora, indicated the pre-listening process she follows to help limit possible distractions:

One of the biggest things is the limiting distractions. I can find myself easily distracted. I also, if I know I have to really be an active listener, I like to also have an opportunity to take notes and jot things down for myself, so I can remember. Or, if I have a focus point that's a guiding look for something in the conversation, or something like that, always helps me with my active listening and staying engaged. And also eye contact. I would say really engaging with the body language of the speaker.

Nora, also went on to share later in the interview about web-based discussion, "It goes back to really checking myself about limiting distractions because it's so easy to multi-task, especially in this Zoom world. I think, just send me the recording later and I'll listen to it, while I'm doing something you know." These sentiments, if not openly shared in the interviews, were discussed by the group in the training sessions. While talking with a school executive, Lucy, she shared her thoughts on multitasking:

Something we touched on in the LIFT training meeting is something I've been very aware of for this full pandemic is the multi-tasking ability that we all have to do, while we're Zooming or you know when you're on screen versus when you're sitting there in person with someone. I think I've really, I would say in the past, maybe six months I've had to like shut it down, you know not be distracted by the things, especially when you're on screen. Because, that actually kind of made me notice, in real, in person meetings that I was feeling like I also needed to be doing something else. Even though I wasn't trying to do anything else, and there was nothing else around me to specifically do, but it almost made it harder for me to

listen for it felt like it was just that I was so used to kind of doing a few things at the same time.

These admissions of the wrong kind of habits forming within a digital synchronous space and carrying over into physical, in-person listening spaces are intriguing, and a code was developed with the title breaking the bad habits when listening. The perception of needing to fill downtime with quick response tasks seems to carry over into conversational spaces. Hence, if the formal meeting has not begun, it may be internally justified to “catch up” digitally. However, those snippets of time seldom allow for full tasks to be completed.

When talking about what types of day-to-day activities seem to consume the most energy, one superintendent, Ken, while in the LIFT training session, indicated that he sometimes drafts an email and almost finishes it, only to have it get lost in drafts and never get sent to the intended recipient. Other participants echoed their sentiments, and a brief academic conversation ensued regarding technology and work-life balance. Since a safe space had been established, many of the participants were willing to share more about the times that seem to be most taxing when they are listening in conversations. The conversation expanded into the times of the day, and the different roles played as situational listening shifts from work to home. One participant who agreed to have this moving response included, anonymously and without a pseudonym, when asked the final question in the active listening interview, what, if anything, would you change about how you actively listen? Why? They shared the following:

I just have to constantly work on being patient at, you know, at home. Where I have to really work on being mindful and present. I mean that is really probably my greatest priority at the moment. I would just say in life. You know if I were to better prioritize my professional life, so that I was a better listener at home, I would do that. Because I don't feel like my kids have gotten the best of me, at times.

The above statement is an unveiled depiction of the challenges executives face when the expectations of the job usurp the time and energy that is needed for wellness outside of the workplace.

One of the other aspects of identifying areas for growth was to reflect and discuss how active listening can have reciprocal effects when modeled effectively. A few of the participants connected the development of trust around the consistency of behaviors and being present, even when those in conversation with you may be distracted. One district executive, Stefka, shared, "Frankly, I think that probably for me is the biggest part of active listening when you're trying to build someone as a leader is, you have to have that trust to be there. You have to model what you expect." The superintendent, Ken, shared these facets associated with trust and modeling:

When you're committing to the time to be present as a listener you are trying to build trust. I think you know it's an important part of relationship building. That if I'm not giving people that attentive ear, when they talk to me, then they will begin to dismiss the things that I'm saying, and not trust that I have their best interests at

heart... so I think it's a very important part of the role that I'm in to make sure that show that I am listening.

The required display of attentive listening that Ken shared above gives great insight into the value of modeling a behavior while working to better understand it.

Participants also associated a number of other segments connecting to the schema of limiting distractions as part of active listening. In particular, the importance of creating a shared space where speakers feel as though the power dynamics are less skewed. In the next section, the theme connected to relationship building and restoring trust will be reviewed.

The speaker/listener relationship can be strengthened or begin to be restored through trust-building and power sharing

The theme of power-sharing and trust-building is one that emerged as the participants became more comfortable discussing the practices and purpose of active listening in connection to when communication breaks down within the system or beyond the system. The coding of this finding is in three parts. The first code, strengthening relationships, is grouped under purpose category and was referenced twenty-two times or 4.4% of the code. The second code, trust building, which was also grouped under purpose, was referenced twenty-two times and made up 4.4% of the code. The third code, power sharing, was categorized under purpose and was referenced ten times and made up 2% of the code. The idea of T, transferring power, in the LIFT is one that participants could weigh and consider without feeling defensive of the roles and responsibilities of the job. Interestingly, when participants were asked about whom they consider to be the best

active listener in their organization, many attributes surfaced that connected to aspects and strategies associated with the LIFT and active listening in general. One school executive, Lucy, shared details about how her supervisor actively listens and transfers or shares power:

So, our President and CEO, my boss, there's a way he lets people speak without interpreting everything that he thinks they say, he might be interpreting it internally, but he doesn't spell that back out. I think part of it is that he's much older, there's a wisdom to him. He's seen so many things and seen so many trends and worked with so many people over the years that he's honed this skill and he shares it freely. There's a way, I don't know, that he kind of is able to cut through the surface and either ask questions that help get to whatever the deeper issue is or just somehow be comfortable waiting for it to come up from others.

Lucy went on to indicate that she tries to model those behaviors and look for opportunities to share her power she has gained through experience and the position.

Another participant, one of the university executives, Nora, referred to their supervisor in a similar manner:

They hold high positions within the college, but whenever I speak to them, I feel that I have their attention they're not distracted, multitasking on their computer, they're making eye contact, they will bring up something about our last conversation or will bring up a personal note of connection with me, and that really, I always feel heard, and seen. And they, like I said, have really high level

of leadership within the college, but I always feel like I'm listened to in conversations with them.

The participant shared how important this skill set is and how they try to utilize similar tactics when working with those they supervise. When interviewing one of her colleagues, the interviewee was quick to share the same high praise for Nora.

Moving into the associated theme of trust, there are multiple examples that participants shared about building working relationships that center trust. Superintendent Kameron, remarked:

I field concerns from people that may not make an appointment, who just have general questions, who feel comfortable to come to you and ask you questions. Sometimes people will reach out to you because it is a level of trust and a level of comfort in knowing that if even if you don't know the answer, even if I don't have the answer, they know good and well that I'm going to make sure I direct them in the right place. So that is that level of responsibility that comes along with this job.

Kameron clarified that this openness comes with a physical and mental cost. However, he also knew that trusting relationships make the job easier at times. When looking at the perspective of a district executive, Alice, who has a coaching role, indicated the need to check the pulse of the conversation:

So, when I'm in a coaching role, I really try to be reflective of my mindfulness and my body language and things like that... it would be kind of matching mindsets, and knowing the gentle question, not an intrusive one that's going to

catch them off guard or upset them, but the right question to calibrate. As I think about next year starting each conversation with just a few norms like, this is a safe space what we discuss here is between you and me, especially if you're talking to someone, you don't know that well.

While Alice did not directly say trust, everything she described connected to the ideas of what builds and fosters trust. One of the executives, Leonard, who also serves in a leadership capacity outside of his duties at the university, shared his experience relating to the role of guiding a board with strong cultural expectations:

Everything they say is, then, therefore, important and it slows to a crawl with the board if it requires active listening. And it requires something else which I think is cultural. You know I'm expected to listen to the elders. And we're expected to sort of be in that space communally and together. And so, for me, there is a piece that whether it's sympathy or empathy or whatever terms you're using. You know native people do not, I mean in a native space for all to be together, it means you're required, I mean there's an expectation, that you listen. Not everybody will speak and it's totally cool, but when they do speak, you know you're respectful and that you, you listen. Everyone gets a chance to be heard, there is no hierarchy in that.

The participant also shared that listening as a skill is expected and that those that hold the stories are those that are able to listen well. Leonard mentioned a saying that refers to a culture that is anchored in oral traditions, "I mean I keep saying that every time an elder

dies a library is burned.” That level of deep knowledge that can be shared with those willing to listen is astounding.

As a practice of deep listening, there were often mentions of actively working to maintain the role of the listener, to stay quiet so that the speaker can carry on. The school leader, David, makes a note of an occasion where they forced themselves not to interject:

I forced myself to like actively listening to the group. Yeah, I forced myself to be quiet, and I realized how dependent the group was on my direction. Basically, I realized that my assertiveness was bringing our ceiling down. Because they can make more informed decisions without needing to know everything. Empowering them to make that decision versus if they’re reacting to what I’m telling them is trust on both sides.

When the topic of trust arose with one district executive, Caroline, she shared the following, “I can work to build a safe space where the speaker feels a level of trust or where I at least honor them through assuring that they feel heard.” The succinctness of that statement encapsulates the idea of trust-building and power-sharing. To close out this theme, a quote from the university executive, Nora, helps place it all into perspective:

Demonstrating that you can listen without judgment, that’s a huge piece of people being/feeling comfortable, to really encourage people to speak up. And, if you have a leader that values active listening and a shared voice, that makes all the difference for people to be able to speak up. To attune to others, is to listen completely.

Summary statement

The interviews conducted with participants shed light on aspects of active listening that had not previously been closely considered. On the other hand, many of the concepts that became codes were areas of related theoretical or pedagogical practices around active listening that surfaced in the literature review or in anecdotal investigations leading up to the dissertation in practice. The results of the interviews answer the first research question of which aspects of active listening educational executives find most impactful to communicating effectively.

The findings on the key aspects of active listening are consistent with the research. However, the introduction of a pandemic and the need to operate in a digital space has produced fascinating data concerning the way individuals interact and allow for a level of multitasking or even distractibility if not engaging one on one. Further, the notion that these habits are carried over into in-person spaces may only exacerbate the struggle with focus and distraction. Nonetheless, there is hope that if executive leaders who have a span of influence can name and accept the challenges, there is an opportunity for a modification to the behavior. The participants were asked a final question in their interview, what, if anything, would you change about how you actively listen? Their responses were steeped in a mindset of growth and a willingness to apply the simple and direct strategies of the Listening LIFT. The participants referenced the following: (David) building up listening stamina, (Lucy) asking better questions, (Checo) not interjecting as much, (Ken) creating more opportunities to practice, (Kameron) staying present and focused, (Leonard) be patient and slow down the conversation, (Nora) limit distractions

and not multi-task, (Caroline) assure people feel heard, (Stefka) focus on the details to stay intrigued, and (Alice) mindfully checking for clarity.

Research Question 1 Participants' Colleagues Findings

Active Listening Interviews

In order to further establish the codes, set by the participants, I worked with the participants to coordinate a colleague selection to interview using the same questions to gain insight into their perspectives around active listening. Having these additional views allows for more data points and trends to ultimately improve the Listening LIFT training and coaching sessions. Eight of ten participants were able to coordinate a colleague interview, and two of the interviews fell through with the timing of the research window. However, there was sampling from each of the leadership groups. 1 Superintendent/Organization Executives, 2 District Leaders, 2 Building Leaders, and 3 Teacher Leaders. Of the 8 participants, three identify as male, and five identify as female. Because the colleague participants work in the same systems and organizations as the participants, the regional demographic data is the same. However, both of the colleagues who could not schedule interviews are from the Southeast. The subsequent section highlights the themes that surfaced in a discussion about active listening. Many of the codes that surfaced aligned with the central themes of the participants. When reviewing the participants' colleagues' interview transcripts and fieldnotes the same coding procedures were followed and the initial code was compared and contrasted. Where there were new codes, I reviewed the participant transcripts to look for overlap or mergeable categories given that the interviews were centered around the general beliefs regarding

the aspects of active listening that are most impactful. The colleague specific themes that surfaced from their interviews were designated into the following categories: (1) Being an active listener as a leader is easily identifiable and rare, (2) Speakers need to feel heard, and opportunities for conversation should be available, (3) A strong speaker/listener relationship requires trust and engagement. These theme categories had code overlap regarding general active listening observations from both the participants and the participants' colleagues. However, the code themes below are specific to what colleagues perceive to be essential to active listening at the executive level.

Being an active listener as a leader is easily identifiable and rare

If there was one very clear trend, it is that individuals know what good active listening can look like in a leader. The coding of this finding is inverse in that the code(s) derived serve as identified barriers to listening. Thus, the code of, not being a good active listener, and the code, lack of listening models, referenced sixteen times or 3.2% of the code. Conversely, the code, present mindful focus and attention, which was grouped under strategies, was referenced forty-four times and made up 8.8% of the code. As participants were asked to share a personal definition of active listening, attributes surfaced that often reemerged when asked about who they felt were the strongest active listeners they worked with or have worked within the past. Many of the colleagues selected are themselves educational executives at one level or another and have served, or do serve, in some type of educational coaching/mentoring capacity. Consequently, their answers to many of the same questions shed new light on aspects of active listening. One university teacher leader, Laura, shared her insight into active listening as such:

Active listening is fully engaging with the speaker and giving signs of your engagement, whether they be through body language or short verbal phrases and feedback, but really encouraging the speaker to continue on their train of thought, without interruption, other than potentially asking some further probing questions.

Once this erudite description was shared, a moment later in the conversation, Laura shared:

I mean, I can really only think of one maybe two, you know, school or district leaders that I've worked for who have been truly transformative in their leadership. They had that ability to really see the big picture and all the little pieces of it and because they're out there and they're getting to know, everybody, listening... and they use that to make improvements and changes for everybody involved, but that is definitely the minority of leaders and not the majority.

The ideas mentioned above about transformative leaders being leaders who can effectively listen, and the rarity of those individuals in school systems, speaks to the feeling colleagues have about the importance of building relationships through listening.

One district executive, Bella, referred to those in their department who embody the best traits as active listeners as "Incredibly, conscious of being good listeners or actively listening just for the reason that they seek input. When you have a leader who wants input from their staff and co-workers, they are active listeners, and they are rare."

Other colleagues in the interviews also reflected on the uniqueness of an active listening skill set in one form or another as they highlighted attributes of active listening or described individuals, they have interacted with over the years. It should be noted that

some of the colleagues referenced their accompanying participants with the distinct status of “one of the best active listeners I know.” However, it is not prudent to highlight those participants, even anonymously, in this section. In the following section, the second condensed theme of feeling heard and having opportunities to converse emphasizes the experiences shared by colleagues around the importance of an active and effective speaker-listener relationship.

Speakers need to feel heard, and opportunities for conversation should be available

It may be presupposed that a primary component of communication is the stipulation of sharing and receiving information effectively to make sense of a situation. This act of sense-making can only happen if both parties feel heard and time is prioritized to have such meaningful conversations. When interviewing the participants’ colleagues, the theme of feeling heard was highlighted from another perspective with similar frequency. As stated previously, the code, speakers need to feel heard, was grouped under the purpose category and was referenced thirty-two times or 6.4% of the code. The code, creating more opportunities to listen to people, which was grouped under relationships, was referenced thirteen times and made up 2.6% of the code. One district coach, Enrique, shared his thoughts on finding and utilizing time to talk with those in a position of power:

If I know there is someone at the cabinet level who is open to ideas from building leaders, I try to broker those opportunities to engage. I work really hard to connect people and, yeah, I try not to put people in contact if I don’t think they will connect. Both parties need to feel like their time is being effectively used and that

they are both good communicators, good listeners...if someone monopolizes the conversation, and it didn't allow for any improvement, changes or real input or feedback it is a loss for all.

This insight allows for a number of connecting codes in one statement. What stands out is the mindfulness around working to pair strong thought partners. When thinking about the growth mindset associated with all of the individuals who agreed to participate in the interviews and the conversations, it is clear that they see value in learning new things, processing their actions, and sharing their experiences. These sentiments were shared throughout the research process and, in particular, when asked for their views on leaders who listen. A building leader, Donna, shared, "I think strong leaders have a profound understanding of those they lead. In order to get to know that group and how to lead them, you have to listen and know your people." The other side of that perspective holds weight as well. One teacher leader, Robert, shared what happens when leaders don't listen very well:

There are multiple teachers today that are not necessarily wrong when they say they feel completely unheard by leadership. This is not a school specific statement, but a general observation. And this causes an element of toxicity that is hard to overcome. So, cliques form, and there are those in the circle of communication and outside the circle of communication, which makes those on the outside feel like they don't get the time or space to share what they feel is going on.

Having individuals voice generalized concerns can shed light on a problem that exists across all levels and places of education. Nonetheless, if these concerns fall on deaf ears or are passed off as disgruntled musings, then it can be challenging to make a change. This only further spotlights the idea that employees at all levels need multiple chances to be heard and to feel valued when they are willing to speak up. The final section of findings takes the idea of building an environment where communication at all levels is anchored in active engagement and works to build or restore trust.

A strong speaker/listener relationship requires trust and engagement

The colleagues were more than willing to share their perspectives on how trust is built and how it is lost through the ability or inability to listen actively. While this notion seems straightforward enough, there are certainly aspects of the listening process that can be unpacked. The coding of the finding, trust, is grouped under the purpose category and was referenced twenty-two times or 4.4% of the code. The intentionality code, which was grouped under strategies, was referenced twenty-five times and made up 5% of the code. Intentionality is coded with engagement from the receiving or speaker perspective in that it is a trait that both participants and colleagues indicated as perceptual in conversation. One district executive, who is the participant Kameron's colleague, Caroline, shares her thoughts on the importance of active listening in the role of the superintendent:

It's extremely important to be an active listener, especially when you're a superintendent, and even in district leadership, I mean there's nothing more irritating than someone coming to your office, and you know too they would like to have an engaging conversation and the leader who is supposed to be listening is

messing with their phone, or shuffling papers, or they're trying to multitask.

That's extremely irritating to the listener.

The interviewee went on to share that they have learned to be a better active listener by seeing what not to do and feeling unheard by others at the executive level. The district leader, Martin, shared about the connection to feeling their input is heard and building and retaining trust, "Well, it directly connects to building trust in that if you feel that your input or your feedback is valued, then you feel that you are respected and that automatically just builds that trust, naturally." The idea of feeling a value for what you share connects strongly to the previous theme regarding feeling heard. The emerging idea that the lack of opportunity to share, or if the time is not honored by the listener, then the level of trust is adversely impacted. If these behaviors continue to surface, then a level of toxicity stands to saturate the culture of the organization. On the other hand, there are those executive leaders who are mindful of improving their skills and behavior as active listeners, and those they lead are aware of those behaviors. The university teacher leader, Laura, shared her point of view regarding a leader's ability to see the bigger picture:

Whomever the leader might be, if they are dynamic, you know, the faculty know where they are coming from, and their realities, and what's actually happening in the organization. You have to listen and engage and see things from each individual's perspective, as opposed to just your own worldview or knowledge of, you know, the department, the college or the education systems in general.

These reflections of how the colleagues of participants are helpful in strengthening the themes identified by participants. Further, the collective efficacy around the willingness to explore and consider the ideas associated with active listening is very promising.

Summary statement

The interviews with colleagues facilitated a shared level of collaboration between the participants and their identified associates, who not only agreed to be interviewed but also to support the participant with a recorded conversation in which the executive attempted to incorporate aspects of the Listening LIFT strategies. In review, the first research questions asks: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation? Even though the findings of the colleague interviews are more generalized in nature, given the dynamic of being recruited by a participant who might serve in a supervisory position, the knowledge and insight shared served as a powerful tool in gaining additional educational leader perspectives. Further, the findings support the initial four trends identified by participants, which emphasize key areas of focus for targeted practice in active listening. Each of these themes has and will continue to be used to improve the overall effectiveness of the Listening LIFT training and support program. In order to leverage the many fine points made about the perceptions of executives who can and cannot listen actively, the subsequent section will focus on the aspects associated with the second research question, RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to

communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively? By prioritizing key training aspects of the Listening LIFT with findings from the entirety of the study, including data from the post-training exit survey to improve and solidify the Listening LIFT program, a response is crafted to RQ2 along with implications for future iterations of training and research.

Research Question 2 Core Findings

The Listening LIFT Exit Survey Participant Responses

RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively?

Collecting data regarding the educational executives' perspectives on their experiences as participants in the active listening development program referred to as the Listening LIFT allows for the second research question to be addressed through an exit survey (Appendix C) which utilized a mix of Likert scaled questions and short answer response questions that were developed to highlight the principles Guskey (2003) formulated for effective professional development. These principles provide clear descriptions of the contextual elements to identify factors that sustain steady progress in the efforts to improve the quality of professional development endeavors. The LIFT survey responses are focused on Guskey's (2014) Level Two "participants' learning," meaning what new skills and knowledge are learned, Level Three "organizational support/change," as well as, Level 4 "participants' use of new knowledge and skills" which are captured as evidence of changes to practice.

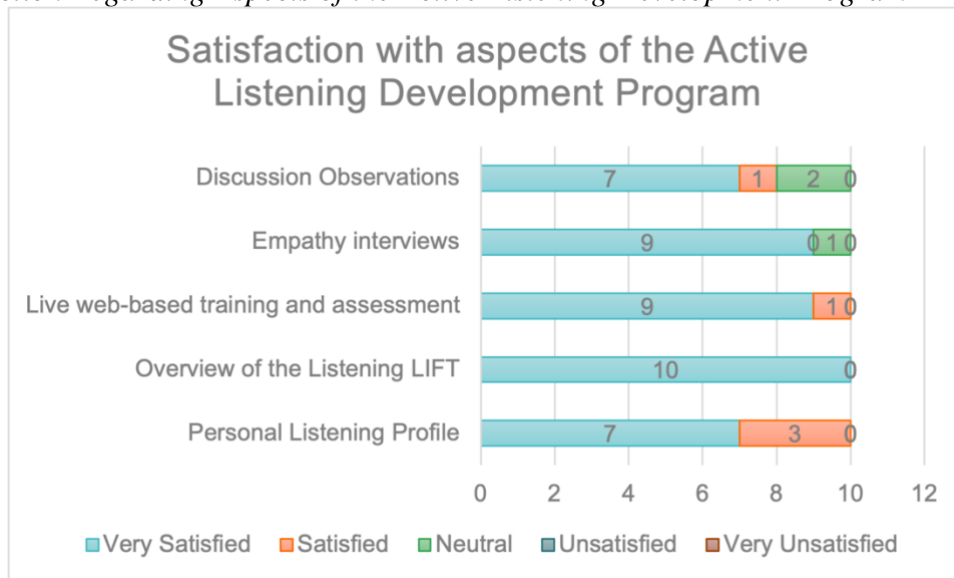
Feedback about LIFT

Whereas the interviews served as a strong baseline for what executives and their colleagues believe about active listening, the post-training, practice, coaching, and exit survey functions helped me to clarify key takeaways from participants once they had an opportunity to reflect on the strategies and practice in a safe space with a colleague.

Below are the themes that surfaced regarding the potential benefits of the Listening LIFT as reported by the participants. The section commences with an exit survey results graph that displays the levels of satisfaction with each aspect of the study. The section that received the highest level of satisfaction from all ten participants was the overview or training of the Listening LIFT with all ten participants indicating that they were very satisfied. The area that received the lowest level of satisfaction was the Discussion Observation, with seven of ten participants indicated they were very satisfied, one participant indicated they were satisfied, and two participants indicated neutral. One of which indicated that self-imposed technical difficulties impacted their rating. While these levels of satisfaction and knowledge acquisition fall between Guskey's level one, participants' reactions, and level two, participants' learning, the highest rated section of the development program was the three-hour interactive training which incorporated a combination of didactic instruction, skill practice and coaching, and discussion anchored in experiences and perspectives.

Figure 3.4

Satisfaction Regarding Aspects of the Active Listening Development Program



New skills learned from the LIFT (Level Two)

The educational executives who participated in the study indicated that even with a base knowledge of what is expected of an active listener, there were new skills introduced and opportunities to develop them within the professional environment.

Additionally, the collaborative small group learning sessions allowed the participants to offer follow-up questions and situational anecdotes where certain LIFT skills would have been most useful. The superintendent, Ken, offered “The element of LIFT I really appreciated was building a shared space for solutions. This is a skill I’ve been able to apply in several meetings since the training.”

Other participants echoed these sentiments and disclosed the connection of shared spaces and sharing or transferring power. Alice indicated that she is working at “creating space to listen and only inquiring for clarification when I must. By letting people talk they have

indicated they feel heard. Even in a tough conversation. So also transferring power.” The idea of transferring power surfaced as both an area of practice and the most difficult to accomplish in conversation from multiple participants. The educational executives were able to see the connection between actively listening and building or restoring relationships inside and outside of the organization.

Improve relationships with key stakeholder groups using the LIFT strategies (Level 3)

One of the themes that traversed the interviews, the observations, and the exit survey is the importance of working to improve relationships through the modeling of active listening in conversation. As participants practiced the LIFT strategies, they referenced their levels of mindful reflection on how the speaker feels in the conversation through the verbal and non-verbal cues the speaker shared. The school executive, Checo, shared his purpose in participating in the study as a way to grow as a listener, “The content and delivery in the training allowed for me to think through issues that are truly fixable in my personal and professional life. LIFT allows for you to recognize where and how to make improvements and build relationships.”

Another school executive, Lucy, shared her thoughts on deepening connections through practicing the T in LIFT; “Transferring power has helped me have a few very deep conversations with colleagues who were facing difficult inter-personal issues. The space began to naturally open up.” The aforementioned statements help highlight the next theme and the intersectionality of improving relationships through staying focused and transferring power as an active listener.

A mindful focus on transferring power in discussions (Level 3)

Being fully immersed as a listener requires the ability to limit distractions. When you are focused in the discussion and mindful of improving, then the ability to show the speaker that you are invested in actively listening serves as a pathway to share/transfer the perceived power. These ideas connect to the concept of listening stamina and our ability to articulate when we begin to deactivate as listeners. Building off of Checo's earlier statement about his purpose in participating and learning to improving relationships through active listening, Checo also shared: "I have been able to verbalize my current listening stamina. This allows me to schedule meetings with staff members and give them my devoted attention." In a similar sentiment, Lucy shared: "my colleague mentioned that he appreciates morning meetings, so our next conversation was in the morning. I realized that asking when he prefers to converse is a simple way to transfer some power. I became more in-tune to his needs." A statement from a university executive, Nora, helps succinctly describe the importance of being mindful recognizing the power dynamics: "I have recently become more aware of the unspoken dynamics in the room. I ask, is my position impeding the speaker from feeling seen, heard, and valued?"

The statements expressed above indicate that participants are willing to think critically about how they listen and articulate their feelings.

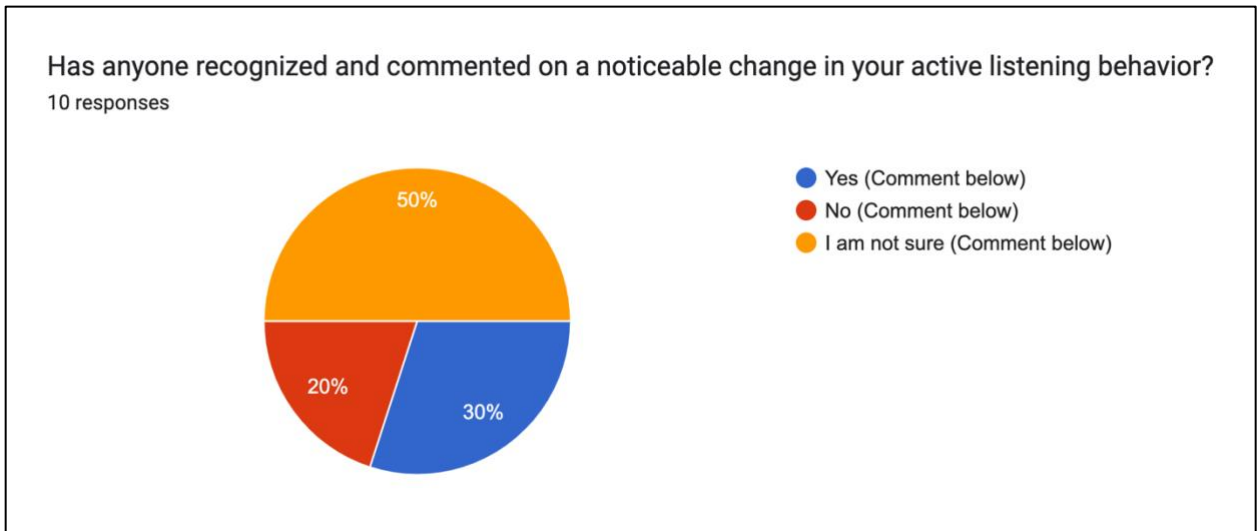
Application of new learning (Level 4)

One of the more challenging questions in the exit survey centered on noticeable change in active listening behavior. Over time this question should be easier to answer.

However, in the course of thirty days or less, an unprompted comment about a noticeable change in behavior is daring if not audacious. Nonetheless, the graph below shows participant responses.

Figure 3.5

Active Listening Development Program Application



The significance of the data indicating that three participants received a comment about a noticeable change, and that an additional five participants may have seen a change, (I am not sure), allows for the comments below to shed light on the perception of post development practice.

Figure 3.6

Comments Regarding Noticeable Changes

Type of response	Participants' Comments
Not Sure	My wife said I was taking more time before responding and that makes her feel validated.
Not Sure	I haven't received any comments about a change in my behaviour, however I have had multiple colleagues and friends mention they feel better after talking to me.
Yes	I am certainly hoping that I did a better job in a collective bargaining meeting I was in recently. My relationship with the union has been strained because of what I consider unreasonable requests from the union. I believe I made some progress in rebuilding that relationship by inquiring for clarification and finding intrigue in the meeting.
No	Not yet, but I hope to have better conversations. I am not sure if someone would really come out and say something.
Yes	A group of concerned staff members who needed someone to listen shared with me that my patience and presence were appreciated in a time of real frustration.
Yes	Actually, my wife and my learning leader have noticed that I am making an effort to limit my distractions. They have also noticed that I rearrange my schedule to devote my attention to them during a more personnel meeting.
Not Sure	I have engaged in some very interesting conversations over the last two weeks and remained focus on active listening; however,

Not Sure	'I'm afraid this will be a long journey for me.
No	People often comment on my calm tone and nature but not necessarily on my listening. I think I am seen as a person who creates a safe space for all to engage in conversation, but I have not yet received feedback on my ability to listen.
Not Sure	No comment
	It is possible. I spent a long time talking with a colleague about my willingness to improve as a listener. They indicated that it feels like I am more open to modeling and sharing active listening. I feel like this may have been unintentionally solicited by me.

Presented above in Figure 3.6, the comments display additional insight into the application of modifying behavior(s) when it comes to engaging as a listener. An interesting note is that two of the ten participants indicated that a spouse articulated a noticeable change in listening behavior. This is meaningful in that active listening skill practice is intersecting with the personal, and that family member communication, as Braithwaite (2004) indicated, offers complex ways in which interpersonal communication, or daily discussions, can impact relational satisfaction with different members of home and work.

When participants engaged in follow-up coaching and support as an aspect of the active listening implementation program, they were able to reflect further on their theoretical aspects around listening in relation to the experience, skill development, and

application of the new skills and strategies associated with the Listening LIFT. To this end, the research questions individually and collectively are answered in that the insight, understanding, and application of an essential, and expected, executive skill is established. The university executive, Nora, shared her thoughts on the experience as a whole:

I truly enjoyed interacting with others from across the country and learning about their preferences and experiences related to listening, conversation, and productivity. It made me reflect on the power of listening in every life interaction, as all humans (no matter their age) want to be heard, seen, and known. We can only achieve this through intentional listening for true connection.

The above comment along with the satisfaction graph in figure 3.4 indicates the value that participants associated with the skill development experience of the Listening LIFT. The sentiment of wanting to be seen and heard in order to be known is one that captures the purpose of active listening exceptionally well.

Conclusion

The skills and strategies of the Listening LIFT are grounded in theory and have surfaced in one form or another even prior to the work of Rogers (1951) that would become what most know as active listening. In the response to RQ1, regarding the perceptions of active listening, participants and their colleagues shared insights into meaning, reasoning, motive, and intentionality of listening actively within and beyond the workplace. These perspectives allowed me as the researcher to cross reference the theory of listening with the application of change development and the working theory of

improvement associated with the SIAR Cycle. Additionally, in response to RQ2, the feedback shared by the participants regarding the designed active listening program referred to as the Listening LIFT holds promise as a simple and direct improvement strategy that resonated with my small national sample of educational executives. The leadership acumen developed over years of experience sanctioned the participants in sharing their critique and appraisal of the Listening LIFT program through written and verbal feedback.

CHAPTER FOUR KEY FINDINGS, DISCUSSION, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the final chapter of my improvement science dissertation in practice (ISDiP), I discuss the implications of my findings regarding the research questions and the overall application of the new insight gained around the improvement ideas accompanying the strategize, implement, analyze, and reflect (SIAR) model of my research. Furthermore, I share recommendations for future research in the area of active listening, in particular, the associations we are forming with how we engage as listeners in a digital space. In the concluding section, I reflect on the individual understanding I have gained from the scholar-practitioner oriented research process through the interactions with the participants and their colleagues.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this dissertation in practice was exploratory in that the Listening LIFT intervention is a response to a void in applicable strategies for active listening strategies with educational executives. Therefore, the collection methods of assessments, interviews, and observations are designed to triangulate aspects of the positive implementation of the Listening LIFT within the workplace. The initial review of the findings aimed to answer the research questions: RQ1: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation? And, RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best

support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively?

Brief review of the study design

This ISDiP utilized a qualitative data collection with a framework of improvement science. A targeted literature review was utilized to develop the Listening LIFT training program, and coaching strategies to support educational executives with skill development in active listening. Additionally, the utilization of the SIAR model to investigate and reflect on the information collected through sorting, interviewing, and observing was utilized to refine and improve the skill development embedded in the Listening LIFT program. The participant recruitment and selection process provided a geographically diverse group of educators ranging in leadership levels from teacher leaders to system leaders.

Summary of the data analysis and findings

An important aspect of the improvement science process is the review and modification of a system or program to implement effective change. In the case of building a program, the identification of a problem of practice, and the analysis of literature, coupled with the identification of themes and patterns gained through the interview process and the observation of participant conversations, informed and substantiated the importance of having a simple and direct theoretical and pedagogical framework for active listening like the Listening LIFT strategy.

The following findings and key components from the research in chapter two, along with major themes coded from the participants and colleagues, are organized and summarized below in order to address *RQ1: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation?* And, *RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively?*

To further extract the findings in a direct connection to the research questions, it is important to review the primary code groups which became the themes accompanied with the perceptions of the most impactful aspects of active listening. Upon completion of the initial coding cycle, ninety codes were assigned, many of which overlapped slightly in definition and application, to the transcribed interviews of the educational executive participants and their colleagues. When synthesizing the codes into holistic groupings, four code groups, and three key findings surfaced. Those results helped frame a central target for the further development of the skills and behavior of active listening. The four code groups referenced in figures 3.2 and 3.3 were strategies, purpose, relationships (building), and barriers. In the section below, I introduce three key findings that help frame the discussion and recommendations for future research. These key findings can be seen as immediate data points or take-aways for system leaders and/or general readers to begin a new SIAR cycle, or focal points for the individual study of active listening.

Key Findings

Key finding #1: Communication Leadership Impacts Workplace Wellbeing.

A sense of wellbeing in the workplace has a correlation to effective communication. If those being led cannot connect and co-create with their leader, and if they perceive their leader not to be patient, trusting, and an active listener, the school culture can be negatively impacted (Jarrett et al., 2010). A key theme around feeling heard and building a shared understanding surfaced in both the participant and colleague interviews. The participants who serve in educational executive roles indicated that *speakers need to feel heard, and the conversation should have a goal of shared understanding*. When interviewing the colleagues, a very similar notion surfaced. The frequent reference to *speakers need to feel heard, and opportunities for conversation should be available* was inclusive in their roles as both speaker and listener. One of the key aspects of indicating that you are listening is to be fully immersed in the conversation, to ask clarifying questions, and share your interest in the conversation or find intrigue. The strategies accompanying the I (inquire for clarification) and the F (find intrigue) in the LIFT aims to help listeners improve their ability to show speakers they are heard through their words, posture, and actions.

Key finding #1 extends the answer to RQ1 in that both educational executives and their colleagues see the importance in communication leadership, which in turn, impacts the overall wellbeing of the individual and the organization. As mentioned above, this key finding also extends the answer to RQ2 in that there is a development component associated with growing your ability to effectively communicate as a leader. However,

this notion is more directly addressed below in the second key finding. Educational executives who are able to weigh and consider their perceptions regarding who they are as communication leaders will gain a perspective on the impact they have on workplace wellness.

Key finding #2: Leaders are Expected to Listen Effectively

Listening actively is not optional if a leader aspires to build trusting relationships and authentically understand the complexity of those they lead. Nevertheless, leaders often fall short in this area. Those that are willing to improve must have opportunities to practice and reflect on the skills and behavior associated with active listening (Hoppe, 2007). The participants indicated often that *being an empathetic, active listener is an expected part of an educational executive's job*. Further, the participants centered in on the idea that *limiting distractions is essential to practicing and modeling active listening*. The notion of modeling surfaced as a result of asking how a speaker knows you are listening. The colleague interviews offered a similar sentiment. However, the frame of importance that emerged in *being an active listener as a leader is easily identifiable and rare*. When individuals indicate a willingness to improve, or as Rogers (1946) denotes, the person is in a state of incongruence, then an openness to construct change becomes actualized. Moving from passive listening as expectation, to active listening as modeled behavior, supports the educational executive in displaying the skills and behaviors connected to what both participants and colleagues have indicated as important and expected. The accompanying strategies of L (limiting distractions), I (inquire for

clarification), and F (find intrigue) all work in concert to help the executive listen more actively.

Key finding #2 extends the answer to RQ2 in that the principal focus of the development of the Listening LIFT is a professional development experience that both supports and engages educational leaders in improving their abilities as active listeners and effective communicators. Inherently, an aspect of any program development is the purpose behind the appeal in participation. This finding also more topically extends RQ1 in that the participants' and their colleagues' perceptions regarding active listening, and the acquisition of new knowledge in that area, frame the development and refinement of my professional development program. Educational executives who are able to acknowledge the need to improve as active listeners will gain clarity and insight into advancing effective communication for themselves and those they lead.

Key finding #3: Trusting Relationships are Built Through Engaging the Community as an Active Listener.

Building a relationship-based system of engagement (Hammond & Ferlazzo, 2009) creates a space to share both ideas and concerns in a trust-building conversation where the school, district, or organization engages as active listeners with its employees and its community. The participants identified that *the speaker/listener relationship can be strengthened or begin to be restored through trust-building and power-sharing*. The executives recognize the need to use active listening and effective communication to build trust with those they lead and the community they serve. The colleague interviews also focused on trust-building conversations as essential. *A strong speaker/listener*

relationship requires trust and engagement. They carried this notion further in stating that good listening is contagious and that if the leader shares authentic opportunities, the system can improve its level of trust. Trust, power, and authority have a unique relationship in that the reasons to trust someone are often based on the notion of one's trustworthiness (Hawley, 2013). If those in a position of perceived authority do not share their power or allow the speaker(s) to feel as though they bring value, then in time, the relationship breaks down, and trust continues to deteriorate. However, by being an active listener who can utilize the T (transfer power) from the LIFT strategies, the executive can strengthen or begin to restore the relationship between speaker and listener.

Key finding #3 extends the answer to RQ1 in that directly addresses the values associated with building trusting relationships and sharing the perception of power in conversation. In turn, RQ2 has a more personal secondary resolve in that I gained valuable insight into prioritizing activities that help showcase the importance of utilizing the skill associated with the T in LIFT.

These findings provide a baseline to inform an understanding of the essential aspects of active listening, theoretically, as well as inform the further development and refinement of an active listening program (Appendix K).

The interviewing of educational executives about their experiences and perspectives regarding active listening along with the feedback collected from the participation exit survey allowed for a both a critical examination of practice along with shared analysis of the program training experience. This allowed me, the researcher and program designer, the opportunity to advance the overall effectiveness of the Listening

LIFT training program from a theoretical lens as well as a pedagogical lens. Educational executives who are able to prioritize their time in order to engage with the community as an active listener will be able to gain trust and/or begin to repair relationships.

Ultimately, the shared discussion within the training paired with the individual empathy interviews allowed the participants multiple entry points into reflection on their understanding and practice of active listening. The findings in this study have allowed me, as the researcher, to gain new insight into the perceived priorities associated with the practice of active listening for executive educators and the colleagues they engage with. These discoveries suggest that educational executives are aware of the importance of active listening as an expected part of the job, as well as the need to employ strategies in order to advance or improve in the process of active listening.

Discussion

Research regarding strategies for active listening in an educational leadership setting is relatively limited. Flynn et al. (2008) indicated that most of the academic research relevant to listening, in general, is dated, even as the associated skills are perceived as important by leaders across industries. Further, the above-mentioned research is 14 years old, dating it in its own regard. Nonetheless, there is valid, current research in the communications field and within organizational psychology that highlights the importance of active listening. The work of Kluger and Itzchakov (2022) highlighted similar findings and shared that the cultivation of listening within the workplace may improve numerous outcomes, including job satisfaction, employee retention, and wellbeing. The findings of this dissertation suggest that educational

executives who participated in the study had prior knowledge of the importance of active listening in the role of an educational leader. Furthermore, the participants are willing to not only articulate those beliefs, but they are also willing to engage in training and practice to improve their skills and behavior as active listeners. Results of this study denotes that educational executives who prioritize the improvement practice of active listening see a value in the eight-hour training and support investment of the Listening LIFT training program. Moreover, seven of ten participants indicated they would be “very open” to additional web-based coaching on active listening using the LIFT strategies, two participants indicated that they would be “open” to additional web-based coaching, and one participant marked “neutral” referencing time conflicts based on a three-hour time difference. This frequency of interest for additional time in the coaching process may further suggest the Listening LIFT skills and strategies hold promise for job-embedded professional development (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 2011; Hirsh, 2009) beyond the initial eight-hour training/practice/coaching session.

An additional result suggests that the executive participants find the skill/strategy of transferring power to be the most challenging to integrate into a new active listening behavior. As mentioned above, the executive sees the value in the skill to strengthen or begin to restore the relationship between speaker and listener. One recommendation is for educational executives to explore the possibility of implementing an active listening development program for their cabinet level staff and the school board as a way to promote effective communication and foster or restore trusting relationships within reason. During the LIFT training, the idea of incorporating a professional development

and support program anchored in active listening extended the conversation among the participants.

An active listening training program could be an opportunity to support educators at all levels through the development of skills that allow for more opportunities to engage in meaningful conversations where employees, parents, students, and stakeholders feel that their voice has a space to be heard and that their ideas matter. One study (Reis et al., 2017) found that people feel understood if they believe that others recognize their experiences and can place a sense of empathy, trust, and validation. Supporting leaders who listen offers a germinal quality that stands to foster an improvement in communication with executives. If this active listening behavior is modeled, a shift in expectations around effective communication could extend across the organization.

Next Steps

At the National Paideia Center (NPC), where I serve as the Assistant Director, we are afforded the time and space to design development opportunities for schools and systems to respond to their specific needs. When we engage in the design process we collaborate with the client while also honoring the foundational tenets and principles of Paideia, which includes productive dialogue and discourse anchored in the ability to effectively read, write, speak, listen, and think (Billings & Roberts, 1999). Therefore, there are viable opportunities to continue the work of this dissertation-in-practice by spanning the boundaries of the Listening LIFT with interested schools and systems across the country within the network of Paideia. Conversely, there is a shared understanding within the NPC that we can produce and publish work that allows us to advance

educational solutions individually. These offerings frequently reference the work of Paideia and often yield additional work for the center.

Recommendations

The qualitative aspects of this research have allowed for a level of understanding of the perceptions of active listening from both educational executives and their colleagues. Additionally, the written feedback from the exit survey gave further insight into aspects of the Listening LIFT program in connection to their beliefs and practices as active listener practitioners. Nonetheless, if another SIAR cycle was to be completed or if the described methodology was to be utilized again, a few modifications should be made.

Recommendation for Practice

The first recommendation would be to offer an in-person option for learners who prefer to attend training events face-to-face. The second modification would be to find or develop a pre and post assessment of active listening that allows for participants to track change over time. In an early iteration of researching methodologies, I reached out to a respected listening researcher, Watson of the Watson-Barker Listening Test (WBLT), and we discussed the assessment at length. Watson indicated that the WBLT needed to be administered in person in order to assure a level of fidelity. It was also shared that the assessment was not designed to be a pre and posttest even though it might offer reasonable data. If there were to be a future in-person Listening LIFT research cohort, it would be recommended to utilize the WBLT or a similar instrument.

The acumen shared by the educational executives offered key insight into what an ideal active listening development program would offer. Although the development of the

Listening LIFT was a response to a scarcity of listening development programs for educational leaders, the primary recommendation for future research is to design and develop more research-based active listening programs.

Recommendation for Policy

The two areas of policy that would be most impactful towards the improvement of active listening in the workplace would be with in an educational leadership preparation program and as a part of an executive leader's yearly evaluation. The first recommendation is for a university to draft and approve policy that requires an active listening training event and or program as a part of the graduate-level educational leadership programs to offer future leaders an opportunity to begin the active listening improvement process before entering positions of influence, authority, and power. The second recommendation would be for a school system to draft and approve policy that adds an evaluative aspect of active listening within the current effective communication standard(s). It would be advantageous to couple this policy with an active listening training and support program.

Recommendation for Research

In addition to the above recommendations, a new problem of practice that surfaced while engaging in discussion with participants is that of how we listen in web-based spaces and the habits that carryover into in person meetings. Both executives and their colleagues shared that when engaging in group discussions and meetings virtually, the temptation to multi-task often overrides the aspiration to stay fully engaged as an active listener. While this notion may not be a revelation, the intrigue comes from that

idea that the multi-tasking behavior perceived as more allowable or justifiable has the distinct possibility of carrying over into in-person meetings. The frequency of virtual conversations, meetings, and general communicative activities in this post-pandemic world has expanded to a new level and seeking to better understand how we can steady our listening behaviors across platforms stands to be an impactful research opportunity.

Reflections on the Dissertation-in-Practice

Throughout the research process, my understanding of active listening and the associated perspectives matured with each conversation. While the process of taking information, forming knowledge, and cultivating understanding are different for everyone, the dissertation-in-practice allows a scholarly practitioner to identify a problem in the practice of education and strategize possible responses to enact change. My goal has always been to offer those that serve as leaders in the institutions of learning a toolkit for building relationships. My current position at the NPC gives me a natural platform to advance the skills of active listening associated with school and district leaders. However, I recognize that it has been a while since I have been a system leader who feels the constant pressure of needing to respond to all the requests for time and answers. This pressure has a dichotomous effect in that the use of active listening can serve as a tool to relieve pressure within ourselves as well as with those we are communicating with; then again, the time needed to slow down conversations and be more present causes the digital communication attempts, like emails and text messages, to pile up.

When I began to analyze the interview findings, the conversation observations, and the exit surveys, I began to see more clearly the connections the participants made to

active listening and improved relationships, at work and at home. One of the more intriguing lessons that I take away from this process is that active listening may matter even more when it comes to the people we share our lives with outside of work. If there is a further potential benefit to the practice of active listening, it is that our families may benefit from our presence as listeners at home, starting with the first aspect of LIFT in limiting distractions. Over the entirety of this process, from the moment that I identified the area in which I wanted to impact, I have thought about, read about, and discussed listening with anyone interested. I have grown as both scholar and practitioner, and I believe that I have developed something that could have a positive impact on those willing and open to considering an improvement to the way they listen.

The participants' willingness to engage in this research and recruit colleagues to be interviewed, denotes, at minimum, a willingness to improve or a growth mindset. More directly put, the educational executives and their colleagues with whom I had the honor to work with are not mere leaders; they dedicated eight plus hours of their time during one of the busiest times of the school year. It is known that there is never a slow time for educational leaders, though the months of May and early June usually prove to be even more demanding. Their commitment to the process allowed me as a researcher to engage in a way that might be very different than if an individual participant was assigned to a training like this by a supervisor. That being said, as I continue to refine the Listening LIFT development program, I need to consider how my approach would need modification with a participant who operates from a more fixed mindset about active listening, or if an individual chooses to not actively participate in the training.

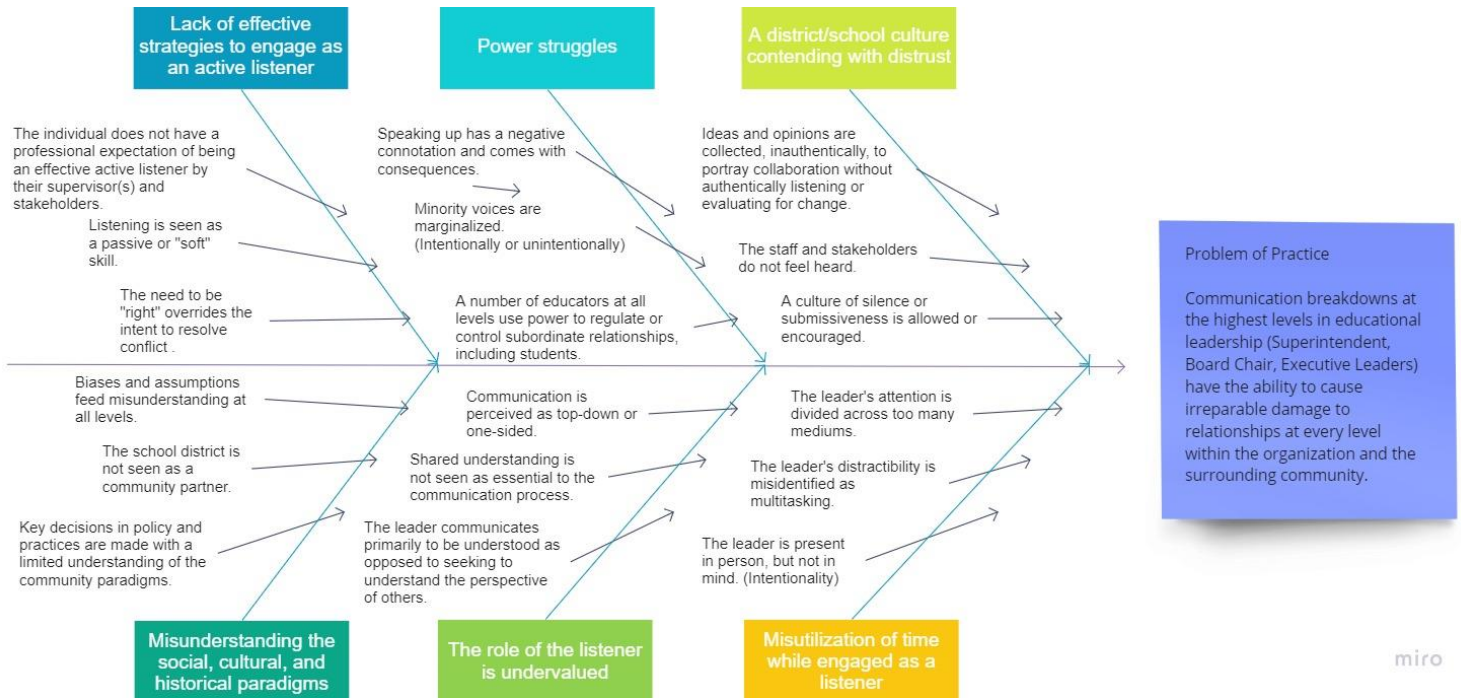
Concluding Remarks

For the purpose of this study, the initial primary intent was an inquiry into a better understanding of what leaders see as most impactful regarding active listening and the associated skills, behaviors, and development. The results highlighted the beliefs and perspectives of educational executives and their colleagues around what is most essential to active listening. Participants' acuties closely aligned with an early postulate I noted as key to change. They openly disclosed that a modification in listening behavior requires support in the process and practice with the skills. Furthermore, a willingness to admit to a need for change or an actualizing tendency that forms from a state of incongruence is a key place to initiate the work. In the preceding findings section, the themes identified through participant contributions activated the needed adjustments and refinements to a fledgling active listening program designed for educational executives. The study offered educational leaders an opportunity to voice their perspectives on active listening, which further informed strategies for the improvement of active listening, while also providing feedback regarding the learning experience as participants in an active listening professional development program. I discussed the SIAR Cycle theory of improvement and my scholarly practitioner's approach to (S) strategize, (I) implement, (A) analyze, and (R) reflect on active listening with the educational executives throughout the thirty-day professional development experience cycles. This allowed for the participants to enhance and/or refine their skill set when participating as active listeners, while also informing my active listening development program for future training and coaching opportunities. Educator attrition continues to raise, and there are many factors that are

perpetuating this. However, the mindset associated with feeling heard, seen, and respected honors an employee in a way that that supports what Kluger and Itzchakov (2022) indicated about cultivating listening to improve job satisfaction, retention, and overall workplace wellbeing. The astounding thing about listening actively is that you may gain invaluable insight into how best to guide those you have the honor and responsibility of leading. The continuation of research on the importance of active listening development is vital, and it is my hope that my work may support the advancement of that study and development in some small way.

APPENDICES

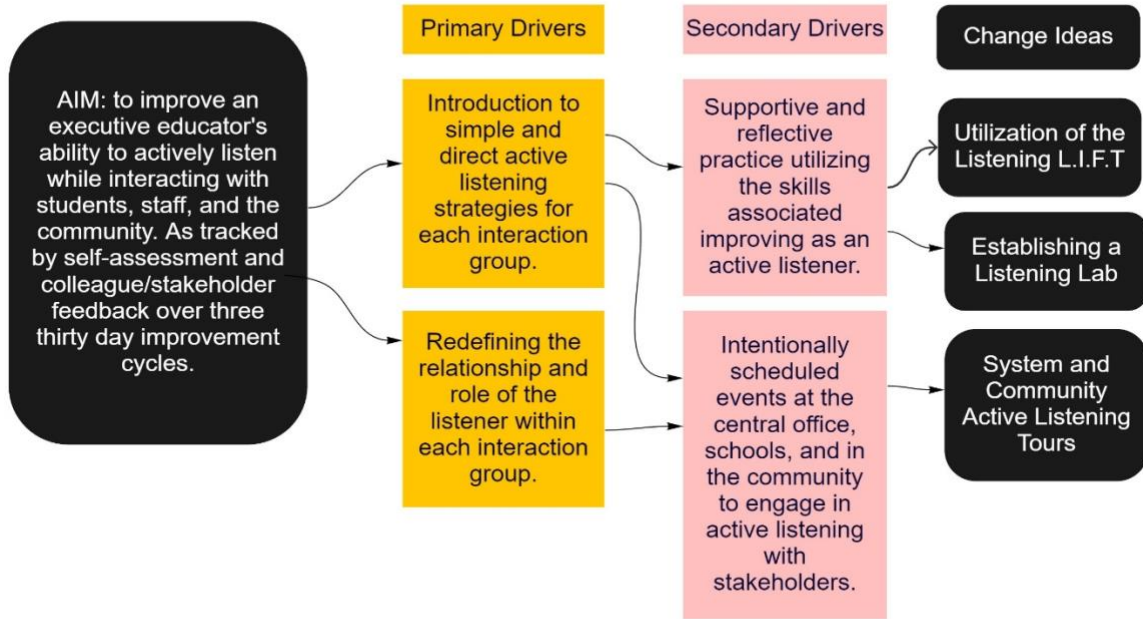
Appendix A Fishbone Diagram



Categories and Causes

of Communication Breakdowns Fishbone Diagram

Appendix B Driver Diagram



miro

Primary and Secondary Drivers

Appendix C Listening LIFT Exit Survey

Listening LIFT Exit Survey

To improve future offerings and overall content for future participants, please complete this brief survey. Your feedback and insight will be very helpful in informing modifications to the Listening LIFT training and coaching process to facilitate better and more consistent training and support. Thank You!

* Required

1. Email *

2. What new knowledge and skill/strategy on the topic of active listening have you effectively applied to your daily conversations?

3. Which skill/strategy of the Listening LIFT did you find easiest to integrate into your active listening behavior? Why?

4. Which skill/strategy of the Listening LIFT did you find most challenging to integrate into your active listening behavior? Why?

5. Has anyone recognized and commented on a noticeable change in your active listening behavior?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes (Comment below)
 No (Comment below)
 I am not sure (Comment below)

6. Comment: Active listening behavior (from above)

7. How satisfied were you with the events and activities?

Mark only one oval per row.

	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neutral	Unsatisfied	Very Unsatisfied
Personal Listening Profile	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Overview of the Listening LIFT	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Live web-based training and assessment	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Empathy interviews	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Discussion Observations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

8. What are some aspects that I can improve upon for future Listening LIFT sessions?

9. What were your favorite experiences or moments while implementing the Listening LIFT?

10. What was your main priority when attending this event? Were you able to fulfill it within the virtual space?

11. Would you consider sharing more time for virtual coaching opportunities on Active Listening after the LIFT training?

Check all that apply.

- Very Open
- Open
- Neutral
- Somewhat Open
- Not Open

Appendix D Personal Listening Profile (PLP) Statements

Personal Listening Profile Statements

Not Like Me (NLM) Somewhat Unlike Me (SUM) Somewhat Like Me (SLM) Like Me (LM)

Number	Statement	NLM	SUM	SLM	LM
1	I learn a lot from people whose experiences are different from mine.				
2	I like to be entertained.				
3	Some people talk to me because they need to clarify what they're feeling.				
4	I try to figure out the speaker's intentions before I respond to the message.				
5	I like to reflect back to people what I hear them saying.				
6	I like to listen to someone who makes me feel good about myself.				
7	I'm good at recognizing what people want even before they see it themselves.				
8	It's not hard for me to "hear" the real feelings behind someone's emotional outbursts or complaints.				
9	I find myself summarizing in my own mind what I hear.				
10	I sometimes ask questions to clarify a speaker's intention.				
11	I especially like to listen to someone who helps me relax.				
12	I usually remember the speaker's appearance, tone of voice, and other features in addition to the message.				
13	I am good at relating what I can hear to what I already know.				
14	I listen better when the other person is enjoying his or her performance.				
15	I like to let the other person know that I care about what they're saying.				

16	I often take notes on a speaker's key points.				
17	I do not accept something as true just because an expert says it.				
18	I'm good at picturing what someone is explaining.				
19	I usually remember the speaker's behavior or appearance more than what they said.				
20	I am more likely to pay attention to someone if I enjoy his or her presentation.				
21	My colleagues often come to me to "let off steam."				
22	I listen for how a speaker develops his or her argument in order to critique it.				
23	I am good at remembering people's names.				
24	I can recognize links between one message and another.				
25	I am considered a patient listener.				
26	If someone asks me for advice, I encourage them to decide for themselves.				
27	I do not allow myself to become emotionally involved with the speaker.				
28	I get a lot out of a story when it is told through pictures.				
29	When there are too many distractions, I tune out.				
30	I like to look for the facts to support what a speaker is saying.				
31	I am good at recognizing key points, even when a speaker jumps around.				
32	I tend to think how I would present a speaker's message differently if I were in his or her place.				
33	I listen for inspiration.				
34	I can generally tell when someone doesn't understand what has been said.				
35	In a conversation, I am comfortable with prolonged silence.				

36	When listening to someone, I may “argue” with him or her in my mind.				
37	I generally don’t criticize someone who presents a message well.				
38	I find distractions very annoying when I am listening to someone.				
39	I can generally figure out what people intend to say, even if they’re not explicit.				
40	I tend to be skeptical of someone who is very enthused about something.				
41	I get more out of a presentation that makes me laugh.				
42	I write down people’s comments to keep from forgetting.				
43	I listen until I know what someone is saying, and then reply.				
44	I listen for how a speaker develops an argument in order to understand the rationale.				
45	I can easily remember someone’s voice.				
46	If I don’t like what someone is saying, I quit listening.				
47	Once someone has explained something to me, I can explain it easily to someone else.				
48	I find many opportunities to give people my advice or opinion.				
49	I try to make sure I get the information I need from someone.				
50	I like to find the humor in what people are saying.				
51	I tend to focus closely on what a people are saying.				
52	I try to organize what I’m hearing so it makes sense to me.				
53	When someone asks me what I’ve heard I tend to critique it.				
54	Sometimes I don’t care about the details; it’s just my overall impression and feelings that matter.				
55	I try my best to eliminate distractions during a conversation.				

56	It's important for me to know the main message.				
57	I listen to the feelings and emotions that are expressed.				
58	I recognize when someone is one thing but means another.				
59	I can easily relate to other people's emotions.				
60	I like to listen to someone who makes listening fun.				

Appendix E Overview for Educational Executive Interview

Research Questions:

RQ1: What aspects of active listening do educational executives and their colleagues find most impactful for improving communication, building trusting relationships, and sharing the perception of power in conversation?

RQ2: What aspects of an active listening development program best support and engage educational executives in the improvement of listening in order to communicate with colleagues and stakeholders more effectively?

Overview for Educational Executive Interview:

Interview Space:

- The researcher will meet the superintendent at a location/space of their choice.

Outline:

- Welcome
- Overview of Topic
- Shared Understanding
- Questions

The researcher will thank the superintendent upon arrival and share the informed consent forms for review.

Interviewer Introduction and Purpose of Discussion:

Greetings. My name is Jeremy Spielman, and I am a former teacher, coach, principal, district leader, and doctoral student from Clemson University. As part of my dissertation research, I am here with you today to gather your thoughts and opinions about the importance of how we listen to effectively communicate, problem-solve, and support trusting relationships. Our conversation should last between thirty and forty-five minutes, depending on the flow of our discussion.

As the interviewer, I will be asking you questions, encouraging follow-up statements, and take notes on the ideas and opinions shared.

Please know this interview will be digitally recorded. However, the identity of any and all participants will remain confidential. The recording will allow us to revisit our discussion for the purposes of the research topic.

Shared Understanding:

In order to encourage our conversation to flow more openly, I will go over a few goals to build a shared understanding of the discussion and assure that I effectively capture your thinking.

1. This is a confidential discussion in that your name will not be identified or connected to what is said about any colleagues, board members, and subordinates. Names of participants will not be included in the final transcription of this discussion. The notes written for this discussion and what is shared in this space will stay in this space.
2. Confidentiality is crucial in order to allow for an open and direct discussion. Please feel free to remark without fear of your comments being repeated later or possibly being taken out of context.
3. The flow of the discussion may have us skip around with questions and responses. If at any time you want to return to a question or topic, please let me know or highlight the connection.
4. If, at any point, during the discussion, you need a break or need to attend to something, please do not hesitate to let me know that we need to pause the interview.

Do you have any questions at this time?

I will now collect the informed consent forms that detailed your involvement in the study and how your information will be used and protected. **[Assure that the participating superintendent has signed the form prior to collecting.]**

Introduction of Participant:

Before we begin, can you please share with me:

1. Your name, and what you would prefer to be called.
2. What is one word you would use to describe your current leadership focus in **[the school district]**

Interview Questions (50 minutes)

At this point, the interviewer should progress through the superintendent interview questions featured for this study.

1. What does active listening mean to you?

2. What qualities or characteristics would you associate with active listening?
3. Where does active listening fit in the superintendency? And, how is this a part of your role as the superintendent?
4. Describe the best active listener you know in your school/district. If you cannot think of a specific staff member, board member, or stakeholder, describe the ideal active listener?
5. Would you consider yourself to be a strong, active listener? Why or why not?
6. How might your professional relationships change if you, as the district leader, committed to improving your disposition as an active listener?
7. Please describe any particular leadership experience in your career where active listening was essential to effectively communicating.
8. Please describe how the district's culture is impacted by how the staff, students, and the community speak and listen to each other.
9. What, if anything, would you change about how you actively listen? Why?

Closing (2 minutes)

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and beliefs about the importance of how we listen to effectively communicate, problem-solve, and support trusting relationships. Your statements and commentary give great insight into the different ways that we see a concept like active listening. I am grateful for your time. If there is anything else you would like to share with me, please let me know before we close out our conversation.

Appendix F Listening LIFT Discussion Observation Form

Listening LIFT Discussion Observation Form

This observation form should be completed individually to assess effectiveness in discussion and meetings. A copy of notes and/or the agenda should be attached.

Speaker Pseudonym: _____ Listener Pseudonym: _____

Meeting Date: _____ Meeting start time _____ meeting end time _____

Observer: _____

*Scoring: Use a 4-point scale for each item. A score of 5 indicates the listener seems to do this routinely. A score of 1 indicates the listener rarely or never does this. The criteria are categorized within the following executive areas of listening: **Effective Communication, Conflict Resolution, and Fostering Trusting Relationships**. Additionally, strategies of the Listening LIFT are sub-categorized: (L) refers to Limit distractions, (I) refers to Inquire for clarification, not refutation, (F) refers to Find intrigue, and (T) refers to Transfer power. Circle any of the LIFT strategies observed and note comments.*

Score 0-3: 0=Opposite behavior is observed. 1=Minimal: Basic skill is observed. 2=Effective: Strong skill is exhibited. 3=Ideal: Optimal skill is displayed

Criteria	Score	LIFT Strategies Observed: Comments
<p>The conversation is opened warmly, and intentions are shared.</p> <p>0. Does not greet the participant or does so in an indifferent manner. 1. Welcomes the participant, and introduces self and role, if needed. 2. Same as #1, plus an explanation of conversation activities and length. 3. Same as #2, plus what is hoped to accomplish during the conversation.</p>	L I F T	L I F T
<p>The listener makes a point to limit or eliminate distracting objects/devices.</p> <p>0. A device is present and utilized in an indifferent manner. 1. Objects/devices are used to multi-task with associated content in the discussion to be more efficient. 2. The listener prioritizes the time in conversation by not checking or responding to any digital notifications. (Watch/Phone/Tablet/Computer) 3. Same as #2, plus the listener actively works to maintain focus on the speaker and limit cognitive diversions. (Distracted thinking)</p>	L I F T	L I F T
<p>Asks appropriate open-ended questions to gather information.</p> <p>0. Reads notes/questions verbatim, forgets or misinterprets responses. 1. Uses notes/questions, interprets and documents responses accurately. 2. Individualizes notes/questions, interprets and documents responses accurately and smoothly within the flow of conversation. 3. Frames questions to check for clarification, translates responses and documents seamlessly.</p>	L I F T	L I F T

<p>Asks appropriate probing questions to gain a clearer understanding of the speakers intent.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. No follow up questions asked. 1. Some questions asked, missed opportunities. 2. Many questions asked, few missed opportunities. 3. Asks insightful questions regarding participant's knowledge and experience, no missed opportunities. 		L I F T
<p>Supports participant talk time by actively listening.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. The listener talks more than 50% of the time. 1. 50/50 talk time between participant and listener. 2. Participant talks more than 50% of the time. 3. Conversation flows smoothly, and the listener responds to verbal and non-verbal cues. (Body language/partial sentences started) 		L I F T
<p>Gives authentic affirmations when appropriate to show a transfer of power from listener to speaker.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. No affirmations offered, or sarcastic declarations are made. 1. Uses phrases such as "I can see how you would feel that way" and "I want to make sure that I understand" to shift power towards the speaker. 2. Uses full sentences to affirm strengths and frustrations. 3. Statements focus on specific strengths, abilities, efforts, and frustrations to help work towards a resolution. 		L I F T
<p>Uses reflections to check for understanding.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. No reflections offered. 1. Simple reflections restate what was said using the participants words. 2. Reflections paraphrase what was said using the listener's words. 3. Deeper reflections address the feeling or intent behind what is said. 		L I F T
<p>Finds intrigue in the speaker's content and/or perspective.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. No intrigue or curiosity is expressed. 1. Simple non-verbal behavior shifts are present and help relax both speaker and listener. 2. Same as #1 plus, statements of intrigue or curiosity are made paraphrasing ideas shared by the speaker. 3. Same as #1 & #2 plus, deeper connections are made around what is being discussed. 		L I F T

<p>Refrains from providing solutions until speaker(s) have completed sharing (listen first then share).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. Answers questions in-depth regardless of type or timing of question. 1. Addresses issues that are raised during conversation with minimal regard for the speaker(s) perspective. 2. Delays responding to questions in respectful manner during conversation. 3. Same as #2 plus successfully tracks questions while actively listening and engaging in discussion. 		<p>L I F T</p>
<p>Asks permission when offering perspective and/or possible resolutions or actions.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. Not offered 1. Offers without discussion or permission 2. Offers with general overview of information 3. Offers with specific suggestions and guidance including acknowledging potential biases in perspective. 		<p>L I F T</p>
<p>Offers possible resolutions based on participant's interests, needs, priorities and risks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. None or minimal explanations offered based on the listener's agenda. 1. Addresses participant's stated needs and interests with respect and a goal of shared understanding. 2. Same as #1, plus the listener interacts with possible solutions to assure the speaker feels heard even if a resolution is not possible. 3. Same as #2, plus the listener shares their purpose as an active listener and refers to the LIFT if the timing is appropriate. 		<p>L I F T</p>
<p>Uses a natural pause point to guide the conversation to a close.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 0. The conversation is abruptly ended due to time. 1. The listener uses a natural summary technique to provide closure at the end of an interaction 2. Same as #1, plus the listener uses the summary to transition between understanding and next steps 3. Same as #2, plus throughout the conversation the listener makes note to intentionally set a next step and/or creating an outcome statement to be shared after the close of the conversation, if necessary. 		<p>L I F T</p>

Appendix G Educational Executive Demographic Survey

Educational Executive Demographic Survey

The questions of this demographic survey are intended to capture your experiences in education and the time you have spent as a leader. Please read each question carefully and use a pencil to complete this questionnaire.

Where do you currently reside? (City/State)

If you work in an area outside of where you live, please indicate the location of your workplace? (City/State)

What is your age?

- Under 25
- 25-29
- 30-39
- 40-49
- 50-59
- 60+

Which best describes your race? (Mark one or more)

- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- Other

To which gender identity do you most identify?

- Female
- Male
- Gender Variant/Non-Conforming
- Not Listed
- Prefer Not to Answer

What is the highest level of education you have completed?

- Bachelor's degree
- Enrolled in course work beyond Bachelor's degree

- Master's degree
- Education specialist or professional diploma based on at least one year of course work past a Master's degree level
- Doctoral degree

What is your current job title?

How long have you been in your current role?

Counting this school year, how many years have you been an educator?

YEARS _____

What size do you consider your school district?

- Small (# of schools) _____
- Medium (# schools) _____
- Large (# schools) _____

Do you consider your school to be rural, suburban, or urban?

- Rural
- Suburban
- Urban

Please share any additional comments to assist in developing an accurate demographic profile.

This is the end of the survey.

Appendix H Codebook

	Area	Code	Frequency	Percent	Definition	Example
1	Strategies	ability to limit distractions	22	4.4	The successful act of removing or limiting internal and external distractions while listening.	Removing or silencing cell phones, smart watches, and computers to avoid possible distractions. The ability to stay focused on the content of the discussion.
2	Strategies	ability to not get frustrated	4	0.8	The successful act of maintaining a level of patience and respect for the speaker. Seeking a level of shared understanding.	Checking with the speaker for clarification on what is said prior to forming a response, challenge, or disagreement.
3	Strategies	acknowledging biases	7	1.4	The act of sharing a possible bias or predisposition for people, events, and ideas.	Letting the speaker know at the beginning or during the conversation that a certain position is currently held. However, as a listener you are open to seeing the topic from a different perspective.
4	Purpose	an expected part of the job	9	1.8	Serving in the role of an executive leader, the consistent behavior of active listening while in discussion, meeting, or event is perceived to be expected and practiced with fidelity.	When engaging with a person or a group the educational executive must not only be present in body, but also, present in mind and attentive as an active listening participant.
5	Strategies	asking questions	6	1.2	Engaging in the discussion in a way that the question is centered around a check for understanding as opposed to a tactic for usurping the conversation and advancing a given position.	The listener respectfully pauses the flow of the conversation when there is a natural close to the speaker's statement, and asks to check for understanding about something shared giving the speaker a chance to clarify or restate the statement.
6	Strategies	avoid giving advice	6	1.2	Limit the need to share unsolicited advice in conversation.	If advice is requested, consider posing possible scenarios with follow-up questions to allow for the speaker to hold more power in the decision making process.
7	Strategies	being engaged as a listener	10	2	The use of verbal and non-verbal indicators to highlight a sustained level of attention while in conversation.	Stating the value for having the discussion along with the goal of honoring the speaker with an engaged distraction free conversation.
8	Strategies	body language, eye contact, and tone of voice	15	3	The act of indicating engaged listening through non-verbal and verbal cues.	The listener assures that their posture is centered to the speaker and that they are on a level sight line to improve eye contact. The speaker should attempt to regulate their tone of voice to not intimidate or indicate disinterest.
9	Purpose	breaking the bad habits of discussion	5	1	The individual attempting to improve as an active listener is aware of the bad habits that form in discussions theoretically and within individual application.	The listener shares with the speaker the skills they are working on as way of transferring power and opening up or being vulnerable.
10	Strategies	checking for clarification and shared understanding	28	5.6	In efforts to assure that both the speaker and the listener have a sense of mutual understanding the listener will pause the conversation to ask clarifying questions and check for understanding.	At a natural pause point the listener take the moment to share back what they heard to check for mutual understanding and to clarify intent on both side before progressing.
11	Relationships	create more opportunities to listen to people	13	2.6	Prioritizing time in your schedule to engage in individual and group discussions as an active listener.	This week the executive made a point to reach out to three individuals whom I have started conversations with that requires more time and attention. We scheduled a time to continue the discussions.
12	Relationships	creating safe spaces	11	2.2	The conscious effort of establishing space and time for conversation where the speaker(s) feel heard, seen, and respected. This is both a cognitive and a physical space.	The leadership team decided together that the "war room" needed to be repurposed and future meetings and discussions would be held in a different room in the building that had been reimaged as a Listening Lab.
13	Strategies	empathetic listener	32	6.4	An active listener who can show a level of understanding about the speakers' feeling.	Defining a primary goal as a listening that is anchored in understanding and honoring the speaker's ideas and feelings even in disagreement is a way of being an empathetic listener.
14	Purpose	Feeling empowered	15	3	The feeling(s) of the speaker when engaging in conversation with the listener and once the conversation is completed a lasting sense of empowerment carries on even if the outcome was different than expected.	Throughout the conversation both the speaker and the listener shared their thoughts and feelings about the topics and ideas. At the close of the conversation all involved are empowered to act on next steps and understand the outcome even if they are not fully in agreement.

Area	Code	Frequency	Percent	Definition	Example
15	Purpose feeling heard	32	6.4	The feeling(s) of the speaker when engaging in conversation with the listener and once the conversation is completed a lasting sense of feeling heard carries on even if the outcome was different than expected.	Throughout the conversation both the speaker and the listener shared their thoughts and feelings about the topics and ideas. At the close of the conversation all involved feel heard and empowered to act on next steps and understand the outcome even if they are not fully in agreement.
16	Relationships group dynamics and culture	19	3.8	Being aware of the past and current group dynamics as well as the current culture of the system and community.	The listener is aware of the dynamics and the discussion and is able to adjust skills, behavior, and expectations based on situation.
17	Strategies growth mindset	16	3.2	The listener is vocal about the process of improving as a listener and recognizes that it takes time and practice.	In conversation the listener shares with the speaker that they are working to improve as a listener and may be trying some new strategies to engage. The listener may also solicit feedback as a way grow.
18	Strategies honoring the person intentionality	9	1.8	Verbally honoring the person as the speaker beyond the intent/outcome of the conversation. When there is disagreement there is level of respect that is shared to work towards a level of solidarity. Setting and naming the thoughts, beliefs, and purpose of the discussion for self first and to speaker(s) when appropriate.	The executive is able to transfer a level of perceived power by honoring the person through words and actions regardless of the outcome of the conversation.
19	Strategies	25	5	The intentional effort as a listener of interacting with a check for understanding or an inquiry for clarification instead of interjecting a counterpoint or sharing unsolicited advice.	Prior to the beginning of the conversation the executive takes a moment to consider the current headspace and beliefs about the known topics that will be discussed. There may be opportunities to share the intentionality as well as asking the speaker(s) their intentionality to create a safe space and honor the person.
20	Strategies interact instead of interject	16	3.2	The ability to receive the speakers output (content, tone, and body language) and slow down the conversation to allow for time to interpret meaning and check for shared understanding before moving to the next topic.	At a natural pause point the listener take the moment to share back what they heard to check for mutual understanding as a way to avoid interjecting with counterpoints of unsolicited advice.
21	Strategies interpretation	6	1.2	The perception that there are not enough leaders/executives who model active listening. Therefore it may challenging to learn from individuals in authority positions within the organization.	The listener avoids interjecting prior to the speaker completing their thoughts and then shares back what they have heard with a check for understanding and the articulation of processing meaning with questions and statements to the speaker to clarify.
22	Barriers lack of models	5	1	Trust and respect are lost or eroding from the organization and the surrounding community.	The executive shares that they only know a few individuals who they consider to be good listeners and that prior supervisors or mentors have not necessarily held the belief that listening is an expected part of a leaders job.
23	Barriers lack of trust and respect	7	1.4	The ability to sustain the prolonged mental and physical effort of active listening.	Given past decisions and experiences individuals within and outside of the organization feel a lack of trust and respect causing the ability to effectively communicate very difficult.
24	Strategies listening stamina	21	4.2	The acknowledgement that the individual is currently not very good as a listener.	The listener recognizes when they are losing stamina and can share with the speaker the need to adjust or even reschedule if needed.
25	Barriers not a very good active listener	11	2.2	The speaker(s) do not feel they are or have been heard by an individual, a group, or by the organization as a whole.	If someone is perceived as a poor listener or perceives another as a poor listener the dynamics of the conversation can be negatively impacted and cause a barrier to effectively communicating.
26	Barriers not feeling heard	12	2.4		Individuals from within or outside of the organization share their frustrations of not feeling heard with those that will listen. This includes sharing thoughts and feelings via social media or other more traditional media outlets.

Area	Code	Frequency	Percent	Definition	Example
27	Strategies note taking physical and mental weight of active listening	4	0.8	Using paper and pen/pencil to capture key details of the discussion to help stay engaged as a listener and extend one's listening stamina. The listener should ask permission of the speaker prior to note taking. The toll taken to be actively engaged as a listener for any amount of time. This code is closely associated with listening stamina.	The executive knows they will stay more focused on the discussion if they can jot down notes while listening. Therefore, they share with the speaker that they care about what is shared and they do not want to miss something with a follow-up request to take occasional notes while listening only if the speaker feels comfortable. If there are trust or respect concerns this strategy should not be employed. The leader is aware that the quality to listening may change based on the time of the day and the number of conversations they have engaged in across the day. Someone working to improve as an active listener will avoid scheduling meetings back to back, where they are primarily listening, if they do not have the mental or physical ability to engage as an active listener.
28	Barriers power sharing	16	3.2	The conscious effort of establishing a conversational space in which the speaker feels seen, heard, and valued and that the perceived power dynamics are not drastically skewed.	The person holding the perceived power through position or influence recognizes a need to adjust the environment to allow for more power, authority, actionability in decision making to be shared. Thus transferring a level of perceived power as a level of respect and solidarity to build or begin to repair trust.
29	Strategies present mindful focus and attention	10	2	The ability to stay present in the discussion without becoming distracted and being aware of the shifting of focus and engagement.	The listener actively works to stay engaged and mindful of the speaker(s) verbal and non-verbal comfort and works naturally display strategies listening throughout the conversation. Including, the ability to share when there was a momentary loss of focus or distraction.
30	Strategies proactive vs reactive	44	8.8	Actively working to problem solve on the front end as opposed to developing a response once the problem or situation requires a response. While listening proactively, the individual works in collaboration to get in front of a situation.	The executive enters into the conversation with a willingness to think through possible responses and solutions in an effort help the speaker feel validated and supported.
31	Strategies selective or passive listening	26	5.2	The listener may disengage if the individual or content is not engaging or there is not a perceived benefit to the listener. Multitasking behaviors may take place if the individual is passively listening.	The listener may be present in body, but not in mind for parts of the conversation. This behavior may be highlighted as "multitasking." However, the speaker can usually pick-up on the selectivity or distractibility within the discussion.
32	Barriers sense making	14	2.8	The act/process of making sense of or giving meaning to something. This includes new information and experiences.	The listener indicates to the speaker that they want to collectively find meaning and make sense of thoughts and ideas within the discussion. Engaging as thought partners should lead to strengthening relationships.
33	Strategies slowing down the conversation for time to think (waiting to respond)	5	1	The process of adjusting response time to allow for thinking or reflection about what is being said.	The executive, utilizes a wait time in order to allow all involved in the conversation to reflect on whatever was just shared. Prior to moving on in the conversation the listen may check for understanding through paraphrasing the statement or asking a follow-up question.
34	Strategies speaker's opinions and ideas count	24	4.8	The speaker(s) feels seen, heard, and respected. What the speaker says is taken into consideration and they feel the time in conversation was valid even if the outcome is not what is anticipated.	The executive actively works to validate the speaker as a person and share the importance of their voice. As a listener the executive works to share power and sense make with the speaker(s) to allow for a better understanding the goal/outcome of the discussion.
35	Relationships	16	3.2		

Area	Code	Frequency	Percent	Definition	Example
36	Purpose strengthening relationships	22	4.4	Through actively listening on a regular basis the speaker(s) are able to see that their opinions and ideas are important. These actions work towards restoring or fortifying tris and strengthening the relationship with the speaker(s) and community.	The executive has an understanding that by active listening regularly the people they serve will feel more willing to engage in conversations that require trust and vulnerability.
37	Purpose trust	22	4.4	the firm belief in the reliability, truth, ability, or strength of someone or something.	The listener is aware of the stakes involved in the perception(s) of the speaker(s) as it related to being seen, heard, and respected. The idea of trust is not static, but dynamic. Trust may be lost or gained in every interaction.
38	Strategies willingness to improve	8	1.6	The open acknowledgement to self and others regarding a willingness of make a change in behavior to improve.	The executive is open to improving as an active listener and is willing to share with those they engage with that they are practicing to get better. The executive willingly requests feedback.

Appendix I First Coder/Second Coder Comparison

Coder 1

ability to limit distractions
ability to not get frustrated
acknowledging biases
an expected part of the job
asking questions
avoid giving advice
being engaged as a listener
body language, eye contact, and tone of voice
breaking the bad habits of discussion
checking for clarification and shared understanding
create more opportunities to listen to people
creating safe spaces
empathetic listener
Feeling empowered
feeling heard
group dynamics and culture
growth mindset
honoring the person
intentionality
interact instead of interject
interpretation
lack of models
lack of trust and respect
listening stamina
not a very good active listener
not feeling heard
note taking
physical and mental weight of active listening
power sharing
present mindful focus and attention
proactive vs reactive
selective or passive listening
sense making
slowing down the conversation for time to think (waiting to respond)
solution focused collaborative thinking

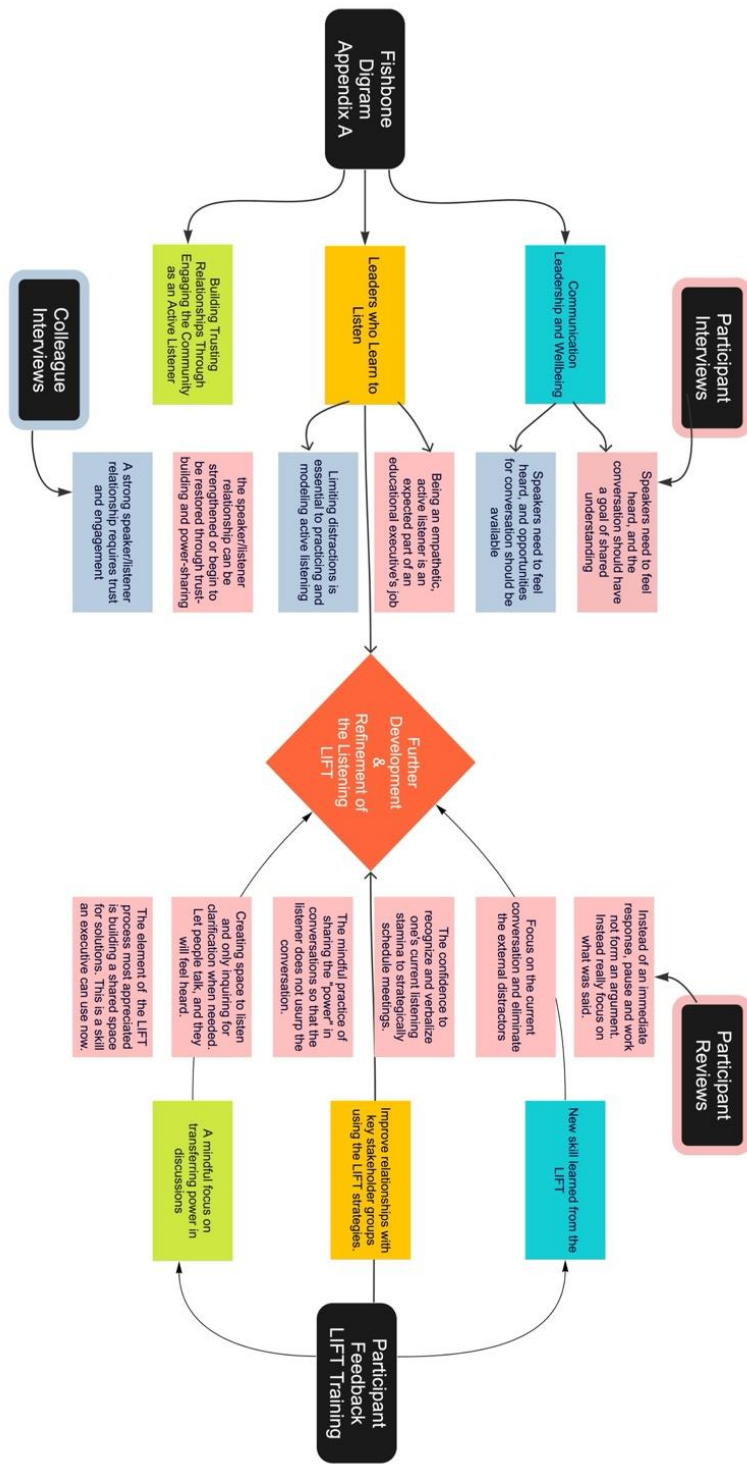
Coder 2

limiting distractions
don't become frustrated
acknowledging biases
professional expectations
asking questions
avoid giving advice
engaging as a listener
eye contact, tone, body language
the habits of discussion
check for shared understanding
create more opportunities for active listening
creating safe spaces
empathetic listener
empowerment
feeling heard
culture
future focused
honoring the speaker
intentionality
speaker listener engagement
interpretation
have not learned how
lack of trust and respect
listening stamina
poor listener
not feeling heard
taking notes
straining to listening well
power sharing
focus and attention
proactive vs reactive
selective listening
sense making
time to think and waiting to respond
problem solving

speaker's opinions and ideas count
strengthening relationships
Transformative leadership experience
trust
willingness to improve

speaker needs confirmation
strengthening relationships
strong leaders listen well
trust
desire to improve

Appendix J Information Graphic: Listening LIFT process



Appendix K Slide deck for Listening LIFT Training



**Who am I
as a
Listener...**

Introductions and Launch Activity

- Share your name and what you prefer to be called
- Where you currently reside (City, State, Country)
- What is your role is as a leader (Job & Organization)
- What is something you do as a listener (good, bad, or ugly) that is different from most people you know?

We will connect these insights to the results of your Personal Listening Profile (PYP).

2

The slide has a light gray background with a blue and teal brushstroke on the left side. A white rectangular frame is positioned over the brushstroke, containing the text 'Who am I as a Listener...'. To the right of the frame, the text 'Introductions and Launch Activity' is followed by a bulleted list of four questions. Below the list, a line of text is underlined. A small number '2' is in the bottom right corner.



What is the LIFT?

How these simple and direct strategies help advance our abilities to actively listen.

3

Research Question:

In what ways does the Listening LIFT skill development program advance participants' utilization of active listening skills and behavior while communicating with colleagues and stakeholders?

Why...

4

“Listening is an art that requires attention over talent, spirit over ego, others over self.”

-Dean Jackson

5

Unpacking the Elements of Active Listening using the LIFT



L
Limit Distractions
What competes most for your attention while you are listening?



I
Inquire for Clarification
How do you engage when you ask questions when you are in the role of listener?



F
Find Intrigue
When are you most engaged as a listener?



T
Transfer Power
How do you share the balance of power in a discussion?

6



L

Limit Distractions

Building the capacity to keep a cognitive focus and limit unnecessary stimuli allow for the physical act of listening to be improved through the removal of distractions.



L

Limit Distractions

What currently is your biggest distraction as a listener?

Don't vilify urgency;

Rather, work to balance what requires immediate attention with a patient presence in the dialogue you are in.

When do you begin to lose focus/interest in a conversation?

Acknowledge your current listening stamina;

And, accept that active listening takes practice and attention.

Do you have a pre-conversation practice to tune in as a listener?

Understand the connection between mindset and listening;

And, consider a brief practice to re-set/recharge your listening battery prior to entering the discussion.

8

Inquire for Clarification

To clarify the speaker's meaning, instead of refuting or responding as a rebuttal serves as a strategy to slow down the process of sense-making. By directing attention to shared understanding, listeners engage in seeking clarity over contradiction.

Inquire for Clarification

Are you able to suspend judgement when listening?

Find a tool that allows you to weigh and consider;

Rather than, to begin crafting a response or rebuttal. Using a momentary pause to slow down the conversation.

What do your listening questions look like/sound like?

Co-create a mindful pace to the discussion;

And, allow for your clarifying question(s) to calibrate the discussion vs. drive the discussion.

Do you use the speaker's name when you inquire for clarification?

Work to use the speaker's name in conversation;

And, associate the speaker's name with words of encouragement and respect .

How do you remember the speaker's name?

F

Find Intrigue

As the role of the listener takes on a more demanding role for empathizing and interpreting, the strategy to "Find" intrigue within the discussion helps anchor the listener to the discussion and allows a natural curiosity to develop within the content and with the speaker themselves.

F

Find Intrigue

When are you most curious as a listener?

Cultivate curiosity in every conversation;

And, allow your natural wonder support you as a listener.

Connecting around ideas with the speaker allows fortification or restoration to continue.

How might you use intrigue as a shared anchor?

Don't drift, towards other priorities;

Rather, work, like an explorer or archeologist, to uncover what assets the speaker and conversation might be concealing.

What if anything is your goal while listening?

Let the speaker know you want to build a shared space for solutions;

And, be open to asking a question that allows for the conversation to change direction.

T Transfer Power

To “Transfer” power towards the individual or group with whom the listener communicates requires that the listener should share a spirit of mutual equality.

T Transfer Power

What does your listening posture or (body language) say about you?

Assess your conversation space;

And, work to make subtle adjustments to allow for a more equitable space.

Lighting,
Furniture barriers,
Background noise,
Visual Distractors

Can you notice a distinction in perceived power between those in the conversation?

Shift the pre-conversation energy to be better balanced;

Rather than, getting directly to the business at hand. Find a genuine statement that offers some sense of humility.

What currently is your biggest challenge as a listener during conflict?

Honor the process, even if you can't yet honor the person;

And, acknowledge that you are working to be present as a listener.

Building a shared understanding does not mean “giving-in or giving-up.”

Time for a listening break



Our ability to actively listen is like a battery, it can be drained or charged throughout the day.

15

**How the Listening
LIFT was developed
and is being
improved**

16



Where listening breaks down

Physiology of Listening:

The physical act of listening through auditory and visual sensory stimuli along with the cognitive capacity of the listener to process incoming information.

Connection to L (Limit Distractions)

What environment(s) are we most attentive as listeners?

How do we build a deeper awareness of our weaker listening behaviors?

Attention

Posture

Level of Energy

17



How we can begin to change our active listening skills and behavior

Psychology of Listening:

The cognitive behavior associated with the successful message reception while listening. This requires an understanding of the goals and intentions of the communicator to make sense and meaning.

Connection to I (Inquire for Clarification*) (*not refutation)

What space(s) do we tend to schedule our conversations?

Are there certain spaces we tend to be more argumentative?

Pausing for sense making

Staying anchored in the discussion

18



**Why do we
need to
build a
partnership
as Active
Listeners**

Sociology of Listening:

The meaningful interpretation of any message requires a level of listening empathy and situational competence. This establishes a communicator relationship that enhances clarity in two-way communication.

Connection to F (Find Intrigue)

What aspect of the conversation are you most curious about? Why?

Can the speaker sense your non-verbal energy level?

Cultivating Curiosity

Acknowledging our current state of mind

19



**What are the
ways in
which we can
communicate
that we are
actively
listening**

Communication of Listening:

Effective communication involves engagement in dialogue from both speaker and listener. The listener who can assume an active role in the interaction shares the responsibility for the outcome of the communication. Listening can serve as a linking function to build or restore a relationship.

Connection to T (Transfer Power)

What efforts do we make to share responsibility in the outcome of the conversation?

How do we build a deeper awareness of upbuilding the interaction as speaking and listener?

Honoring the speaker

Prioritizing the Time


Steps Towards Solidarity

20

 <h2>Listening Research</h2>	=	 <h2>Listening LIFT Principle Development</h2>
 <p>Physiology of Listening: The physical act of listening through auditory and visual sensory stimuli along with the cognitive capacity of the listener to process incoming information. (Bodie & Wolvin, 2020; Goss, 1995; McCroskey & Valensic, 2001; Pichora-Fuller et al., Worthington & Bodie, 2012/2016)</p>		<p>L=Limit Distractions Building the capacity to keep a cognitive focus and limit unnecessary stimuli allow for the physical act of listening to be improved through the removal of distractions. (Killingsworth & Gilbert, 2010; Montemayor & Haladjian, 2015)</p> 
 <p>Psychology of Listening: The cognitive behavior associated with the successful message reception while listening. This requires an understanding of the goals and intentions of the communicator to make sense and meaning. (Blackley & Hitch, 2008; Janusik, 2005; Wyer & Adaval, 2003)</p>		<p>I=Inquire for Clarification To clarify the speaker's meaning, instead of refusing or responding as a rebuttal serves as a strategy to slow down the process of sense-making. By directing attention to shared understanding, listeners engage in communication that seeks clarity over contradiction. (Ashcraft, 2006; Imhof, 2010; Mayer, 2002)</p> 
 <p>Sociology of Listening: The meaningful interpretation of any message requires a level of listening empathy and situational competence. This establishes a communicator relationship that enhances clarity in two-way communication. (Imhof, 2010; Rhodes, 1993; Rubin, 2012; Wolvin, 2010)</p>		<p>F=Find Intrigue As the role of the listener takes on a more demanding role for empathizing and interpreting, the strategy to "Find" intrigue within the discussion helps anchor the listener to the discussion and allows a natural curiosity to develop within the content and with the speaker themselves. (Purdy, 2000; Wolvin, 2010)</p> 
 <p>Communication of Listening: Effective communication involves engagement in dialogue from both speaker and listener. The listener who can assume an active role in the interaction shares the responsibility for the outcome of the communication. Listening can serve as a linking function to build or restore a relationship. (Purdy, 2000; Wolvin, 2010)</p>		<p>T=Transfer Power To "transfer" power towards the individual or group with whom the listener communicates requires that the listener should share a spirit of mutual equality. This highlights the idea that educational executives who hold a level of power, through title alone, must show a level of empathy to build mutual equality and link the communicative relationship. (Floyd, 1985; Wolvin, 2010)</p> 

21

The easiest way to recharge



When was the last time you did something for the first time?

22

Tips for recharging your listening battery

- Effectively identify your “listening leeches”
(The internal and external drains on your ability to focus)

Background noise

Posture as a listener

Lighting in the room

- Have meaningful conversations: Talking helps our ability to actively listen by nurturing the two primary elements listening (Desire and Focus)
- Engage in using your voice and ears while alone

Sing and Dance

Read-aloud or Listen to high-frequency music

23

Strategies to model and encourage active listening when the speaker is distracted

- Model your intent as an active listener prior to the beginning of the discussion. (L)
- Offer a time to reschedule. (I)
- Redirect to an area of focus you find most intriguing, and follow-up with a question. (F)
- Reference the value of the conversation and your respect for the speaker (T)



24

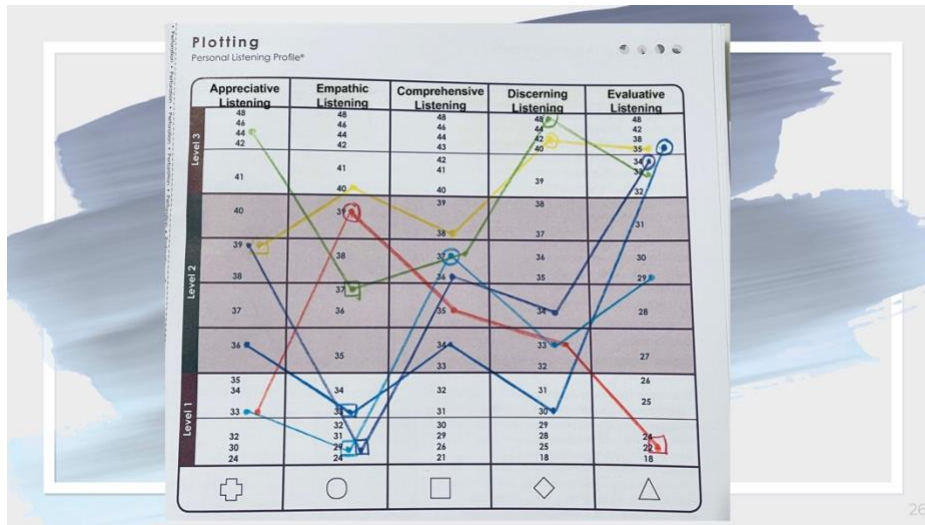
The Personal Listening Profile (PLP)

The purpose of the PLP is to help identify your preferred listening approach. We will also look at where other listening approaches might be effective given different situations or environments.

This is just a starting point to mark how we currently prefer to listen.



25



26

Appreciative Listening

Description:

People with the preference to appreciate while listening focus on inspiration, a relaxing environment, and meaningful discussion.

Focus:

To be present in the listening experience

Motivation:

To be entertained

To be inspired

To find humor in a situation

Behaviors:

Pays attention to context, style, and presentation

Tends to help the speaker feel relaxed

27

Empathic Listening

Description:

People with the preference to empathize while listening want to provide the speaker with a sounding board for reflection and support.

Focus:

To offer support to the listener as they talk through ideas and/or concerns

Motivation:

To provide opportunities for support

To accept the message without judgement

To learn from other people's experiences

Behaviors:

Lets the speaker know they care

Asks open-ended questions

Remains relatively quiet, not offering immediate solutions

28

Comprehensive Listening

Description:

People with the preference to comprehend while listening relate what they hear to what they already know to organize and summarize.

Focus:

To organize and make sense of information

Motivation:

To relate the message to personal experience
To understand the connection of ideas
To determine the speaker's rationale

Behaviors:

Elaborates on what has been said
Asks for clarification when needed
Explains the message to others in their own words

29

Discerning Listening

Description:

People with the preference to discern while listening want to make sure they get all of the information.

Focus:

To get complete information

Motivation:

To determine the main message
To sort out the details
To make sure nothing is missed

Behaviors:

Takes notes to stay focused
Asks for clarification and repeats for accuracy

30

Evaluative Listening

Description:

People with the preference to evaluate while listening tend to look for the facts that support the speaker's comments.

Focus:

To make a decision based on the information provided

Motivation:

To relate what is heard to personal beliefs
To support the message for facts
To accept or reject the message

Behaviors:

Actively engages with agreement or disagreement
Willingly shares advice
Has internal dialogue while listening

31

Building a Better Understanding Situational Listening

- Listening at Home
- Listening as a Parent
(Young Children/Teens/Adult Children)
- Listening at Work
- Listening Recreationally
- Listening in a Crisis
- Listening for Joy

Where else or when do we listen differently?

32

The
PROCESS
is SIMPLE
& DIRECT,
but not
easy

1

Understanding the LIFT

Which of these skills most resonate with you? Where will you start?

2

Practicing the LIFT

Who will you practice with? Will they notice a difference?

3

Reflecting & Refining the LIFT

When does the LIFT become second nature? How do your actions as an active listener, mentor or coach communicate relationships?

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