



## Helping Public Relations Students Develop Active Listening Skills: A Pilot Study

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### Abstract

The Global Alliance for Public Relations and Communication Management identified listening as one of the top priorities for the profession in these changing times. Subsequently, the largest global study of communication leadership to date found that public relations leaders worldwide consider listening skills among the top three leadership development priorities (Jin, 2014). This pilot study tested ways to help aspiring public relations practitioners become better active listeners. This exploratory study engaged undergraduate public relations seniors in active listening exercises, and then, one year following their graduation, solicited those young professionals' impressions of what they carried forward from their study of active listening. The results shed light on how professors might help students better develop this increasingly important skill for public relations practice and leadership development.

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Early research in active listening, not specific to public relations, pointed to the interdependence among active listening, effective leadership, and productive teamwork. Two decades ago, a study involving videotaped group behavior demonstrated that emergent leaders displayed more effective listening skills than other members of a leaderless group that had no prior history together (Johnson and Bechler, 1998). More recently, scholars have suggested that active listening skills are, indeed, an essential aspect of effective leadership (Carollo, 2011; Simmons, 2011). Of-

ten, these arguments are tied to the vital role of active listening and its resulting impact on co-created leadership within a learning environment (Ehren et al., 2011; Wasonga, 2011; Wasonga and Murphy, 2007).

Recent studies about active listening that focus on professional work have revealed that genuine attention and understanding of team members makes a difference in team performance (Johnston et al., 2011). Other research has shown that workplace listening behavior is often contextually dependent, and that person-oriented listening is most closely associated with leadership (Welch and Mickelson, 2013; Kluger and Zaidel, 2013).

To date, no known studies have explored how to teach active listening as a vital leadership skill for aspiring public relations professionals. That was the intent of this pilot study.

**Keywords:** Public Relations, Leadership, Active Listening

## Methods

The researchers conducted a pilot study within an ACEJMC-accredited program at a private university in the Midwest. The purpose of the study was to explore the role of active listening in public relations students' sense of self-efficacy working in small teams, and, more specifically, what role active listening played for undergraduate seniors (n=29) enrolled in a public relations campaigns course. The researchers facilitated six weeks of listening-centric training to each of six student agency teams. The coaching, exercises and reflections centered on the five pillars of the active listening model: receiving, interpreting, remembering, evaluating, and responding (Rane, 2011).

During the study, five methods were employed: weekly coaching via class discussions and email follow-up messages throughout the study period; a large-group listening exercise involving all 29 participants; a set of small-team listening exercises; real-time peer feedback during client pitch presentation rehearsals; and individual written reflections. Brief descriptions of each method are included within the Results section.

The students completed pre- and post-test survey measures. In addition, the 29 students were contacted via email, one year following graduation. They responded to three open-ended questions: (1) Which of the listening exercises, if any, do you recall from your senior year campaigns class? (2) What lasting impact, if any, did these learning exercises have on your growth as a young professional? (3) What role does active listening play in your current position? Six responses were received, representing a nearly 21 percent response rate. Responses were analyzed using both open and axial coding, and then a constant-comparative method was employed regarding themes that had emerged during the students' senior year (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

## Results

The researcher's findings suggest that helping students develop active listening skills may improve their sense of self-efficacy, as well as the performance of their small work teams. Following is a summary of key findings, organized by method:

### *Large-Group Listening Exercise*

Description: During the first week of the study, the instructors conducted a large-group listening exercise with all students. Participants formed a single line

stretching across the classroom. Instructors whispered a different fact to each person at either end of the line; the facts were the length of a single sentence and drawn from material previously provided to the class by the service-learning client. The students then completed a relay, from one end of the line to the other, and vice versa, whispering the facts to the next person in line, until both facts had reached the opposite end of the line.

Results: Key messages strayed significantly. The first fact morphed from "Though women may not be the primary users right now, they are definitely the purchasers and consumers connecting [the service-learning client] with those dealing with PTSD and autism" to "Women are not the main source for [the service-learning client], but they are the main influence." The second fact morphed from "Therapy dogs are not service dogs; their handlers do not have the same protections under ADA" to "Service dogs are not therapy dogs because they have rules under the ADA." All 29 students agreed that consciously trying to listen actively is more challenging than they had realized but critical to their success.

### *Small-Team Listening Exercise*

Description: Midway through the study period, instructors conducted small-team listening exercises. While keeping time, the instructor asked each team to answer the question, "How is campaign development going?" The challenge was that the instructor pointed to a different person midway through each speaker's thought, and that next person had to pick up the train of thought without hesitation. The clock was stopped as soon as one of the team members could not continue the discussion train.

Results: The teams' length of continuous verbal reporting ranged from a low of 1:34 to a high of 3:21. The average time was 2:26. The team that was able to keep the verbal relay report going the longest was also the team that went on to win the pitch presentation to the client at the end of the semester.

### *Individual Written Reflection*

Description: Prior to graduation, the students were required to write a reflection regarding their experience in the public relations campaigns course. This was an open-ended assignment with only two broad prompts: (1) Identify and describe the areas in which you have grown professionally, and (2) Identify and describe the areas in which you have yet to grow.

Results: Of the 29 students, more than one-third (n=10) explicitly mentioned active listening as a skill gained during the course. Themes about active listening centered around better understanding client needs, truly collaborating with teammates, and being better able to focus. A few representative verbatim responses include:

I'm certain that we not only learned to be better, more active listeners, but we also were able to interpret the needs and wishes of the client into what I know was a realistic and feasible campaign.

As a friend, there are times I tune out (the person who served as account executive). In this experience, though, I truly needed to listen to her. I also needed to ask questions and to challenge her decisions, when needed.

I often feel uncomfortable when I am unprepared for a professional conversation, which encourages me to think ahead in conversations rather than truly listen and stay in the moment. Now, I feel that I can combat this.

#### *Pre- and Post-Test Survey Measures*

A 19-item survey was administered at the start of the study period, and re-administered at the end. Scores improved, pre- to post-test, in eight of the 19 dimensions culled from Rane's model of active listening:

I put aside distracting thoughts while listening.

Environmental distractions like music and side conversations do not affect my ability to listen.

I "listen" to the speaker's body language.

I use my own body language and gestures to convey that I am listening.

I nod occasionally.

I relate what I hear to ensure I understand the message correctly.

I ask questions to clarify certain points.

I don't interrupt with counter-arguments.

#### *Follow-up Survey*

One year following graduation, students were contacted via email, and their responses yielded the following findings:

The most-remembered exercise was the initial large-group listening exercise.

All respondents stated that the exercises themselves didn't have lasting impact, but unanimously agreed that the underlying lesson did.

Respondents explicitly stated that active listening

plays an "important" role in their work, and specifically in managing issues, executing strategies and building relationships.

Finally, constant-comparative analysis of the follow-up survey revealed two findings: respondents still believed, even a full year after graduation, that active listening is vital to understanding client needs and collaborating with teammates. However, none explicitly cited the role that active listening plays in helping them focus – which had been a key theme in their senior year written reflections.

### **Discussion and Recommendations for Further Research**

This pilot study was intended as exploration. Results may not be generalized, but they do suggest areas for further investigation. Pre- and post-test surveys indicate that purposefully coaching and testing public relations students on active listening skills may drive improvements in their sense of self-efficacy, related to active listening. In terms of specific behaviors, students seemed to grow the most in terms of being able to focus their attention, affirm their listening through body language, and clarify the speaker's intents versus their own personal interpretations of messages. However, after the students transitioned to full-time employment, they no longer emphasized the importance of focusing, but rather simply described active listening as a way to better understand issues and strategies, and to improve collaboration with colleagues.

Ultimately, a larger and more rigorous study could be completed, ideally involving a statistically representative sample of public relations students nationwide. Rane's active listening model seemed to function well as the theoretical framework for this pilot study; further research could likely be structured using this same model of active listening, with perhaps some deeper examination of each of the five dimensions of the model.

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