

The crisis of listening

 By [Daniel Munslow](#)

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Speaking at the World PR Forum in Toronto last week, Australian communications professor Jim Macnamara suggested the prevalence of what he dubbed a 'listening crisis'. Quite simply, he said, organisations spend a lot of time, money, and effort talking to stakeholders, but with very little genuine listening taking place.



Daniel Munslow

For Macnamara, listening is emerging as a missing link in corporate communication - a discipline increasingly focussing on engagement but that spends too much time generating monologue and not enough time engaging in dialogue. While the wording may appear to be semantic, Macnamara suggested that organisations need to re-evaluate their communication objectively to determine whether they are creating monologue, dialogue, or monologue disguised as dialogue.

Macnamara recently completed phase 1 of a 2-year study into organisational listening, spanning multiple organisations and government communication departments in three countries. His findings were relatively conclusive – most organisations say they listen, but when put to the test, he found that of a 100 listening engagement analysed, not one thing had changed!

In other words, even when organisations listen, they are not hearing what is being said.

He went on to highlight that his research shows that 80% of communications resources are spent on speaking, and in some cases up to 95%! One would have to ask a simple question - are we changing quickly enough? Are we embracing change? Are we as communicators educating the leaders of organisations on the importance of listening, giving feedback, and actually doing something with the information given?

It would appear that, for the most part, the majority of listening that is done is instrumental and organisation-centric. In other

words, it's not about feedback with an intention to do anything. It's about making people feel as though they have been heard. Social media even allows for a short term interaction where you get feedback and think the organisation you 'spoke' to 'heard' you and is going to make changes to deliver better service in future.

Macnamara's study shows, alarmingly, that the least active listening globally takes place around the internal communication and employee engagement space. Arguably, where it should in fact be taken most seriously.

"Companies don't pay attention to employees' front line experiences, but rather speak at them and give them information," suggests Macnamara. Many organisations argue that when the leaders do the annual road show (even they do one), that they are 'listening' to staff. Research shows clearly that while staff respond positively to these engagements, they take place infrequently, and are not part of a business-as-usual leadership approach. They take place at specific times of the year with the primary reason to impart information and strategy updates, not to engage and connect.

Architecture of Listening

Few would argue that this research proves a point that many have known for a long time, but possibly lacked the data to argue to leaders. So, how do organisations overcome this massive challenge? Macnamara said that in its simplest form, we need to move from an architecture of speaking to an architecture of listening.

As an example, to move beyond traditional "listening", MasterCard created something now known as the 'Conversation Suite'. It is a dynamic, global insights and engagement engine that shifted the company from monitoring social and traditional media, to applying purposeful listening to inform business decisions and foster more impactful communications. The Conversation Suite is a web-based analytic tool supported by a global team of social experts that monitor, analyse and engage in conversations around the world, in real-time, 24/7.

What is most important, however, is that MasterCard doesn't only claim to listen. They take the best suggestions provided to them, and implement them throughout the business. It doesn't stop there, as they also give feedback to stakeholders to tell them what they are changing. They do this, as they realise that acknowledgment of hearing something does not equal listening. The feedback is evidence that they have done something as a result of the interaction and made their business better for it.

While MasterCard did use technology to support the change process, they also acknowledged that technologies alone are not the solution. Whatever is implemented must be designed and integrated into the fabric of the organisation.

Similarly, when it comes to internal engagement, organisations need to be more responsive and receptive to employees' feedback. This includes acting on good information, and giving feedback to demonstrate that the organisation has taken the comments on board and done something about them.

The 2016 World PR Forum focussed on communication across cultures as this year's theme, attracting speakers from all corners of the globe to present their perspectives on the importance of cultural appreciation in communication. South Africa was well represented, with two workshop speakers and 3 research stream presenters from some of our leading academic institutions.

**Daniel Munslow was one of the speakers at this global summit, and he presented a paper covering key trends and insights into the communication landscape in South Africa and more broadly into Africa.*

ABOUT DANIEL MUNSLow

Daniel Munslow is the owner and founder of MCC Consulting and former director on the International Association of Business Communicators' International Executive Board. He has 16 years' experience in business communication consulting. He has worked across Africa, as well as in the Middle East, the US, Europe, and AsiaPac.

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