

## Leadership Listening: Connotation and Multi-level Effects

**Authors:** Liu Geng, Han Yi, Lu Junyang, Lu Junyang

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### Abstract

Facing intricate and rapidly changing business environments, effective listening by leaders is essential for organizations to respond swiftly. Through literature review, we find that existing research has not yet established a unified definition of leadership listening, and the theoretical perspectives and levels of analysis remain relatively limited, which hinders in-depth understanding of its conceptualization and multi-level effects. In fact, as a leadership behavior, leadership listening not only influences leaders themselves but also impacts teams and their subordinates. Therefore, this study conducts exploratory research on the conceptualization of leadership listening based on dyadic interaction contexts, examining both communication of information and employee support. From the perspective of leadership effectiveness evaluation targets (leaders, teams, employees), and employing a comprehensive research paradigm that integrates multi-level, multi-theoretical, and multi-method approaches, we gradually reveal the differential effects, black box mechanisms, and boundary conditions of leadership listening on various targets. This study not only opens up new ideas and perspectives for listening research but also provides managerial implications for enhancing the positive effectiveness of leadership listening in enterprises.

### Full Text

## A Study on the Connotation and Multi-level Effects of Leader Listening

**LIU Geng<sup>1</sup>, HAN Yi<sup>2</sup>, LU Junyang<sup>3</sup>**

<sup>1</sup> School of Economics and Management, Jiangxi Agricultural University, Nanchang 330045, China

<sup>2</sup> School of Business Administration, Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, Wuhan 430073, China

<sup>3</sup> School of History, Culture and Tourism, Jiangxi Normal University, Nanchang 330022, China

**Abstract:** In today's complex and rapidly changing business environment, effective listening by leaders is crucial for organizational responsiveness. Our literature review reveals that existing research has yet to establish a unified conceptualization of leader listening, and theoretical perspectives and research levels remain relatively narrow, hindering in-depth understanding of its connotation and multi-level effects. As a leadership behavior, leader listening not only influences leaders themselves but also impacts teams and subordinates. Therefore, based on dyadic interaction contexts, this study explores the connotation of leader listening through two dimensions: communication information and employee support. Drawing from leadership effectiveness theory and adopting a panoramic research paradigm encompassing multi-level, multi-theoretical, and multi-methodological approaches, we systematically examine leader listening's differential effects on distinct targets (leaders, teams, employees), uncover its underlying mechanisms, and identify boundary conditions. This research not only opens new avenues for listening research but also provides managerial insights for enhancing the positive effectiveness of leader listening in organizations.

**Keywords:** leader listening, leadership effectiveness, leader job performance, team followership behavior, employee voice

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As the ancient Chinese adage goes, "Heaven sees as the people see; Heaven hears as the people hear," a sentiment echoed by President Xi Jinping to emphasize the importance of heeding public opinion. Another Chinese maxim, "Listen to both sides and you will be enlightened; heed only one side and you will be benighted," similarly underscores that leaders must learn to listen. J.W. Marriott Jr., Chairman of Marriott International, exemplifies a listening-oriented manager, with his company praised by management guru Jim Collins as a "visionary company." Similarly, Country Garden, a leading real estate enterprise, requires its subsidiary and regional presidents to serve not only as "bridges for employee opinions" but also as "Chief Listening Officers." These examples demonstrate that listening has always occupied a vital position in management practice and constitutes an essential leadership skill for modern managers. In the digital economy era, as internet technology, big data, and artificial intelligence permeate organizations, we find ourselves in a world characterized by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. As navigators and pilots of their organizations, leaders must seize opportunities by building communication bridges through listening, clarifying organizational vision, maintaining rational cognition, bridging the "information gap" between leaders and employees, and enabling timely organizational responses to intricate external environments to drive survival and development.

Although both academic research and practical wisdom indicate that high-quality listening can gather diverse ideas and is crucial for establishing effective communication and building organizational cohesion (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018), an Accenture global survey found that nearly two-thirds of respondents (64%) believe listening has become increasingly

difficult in today's work environment. While scholars have emphasized the importance of employee voice and upward communication (e.g., Wei & Zhang, 2014; Liu et al., 2010), research on leader-subordinate relationships may have overemphasized subordinate assertive communication (Billing & Alvesson, 2000) while neglecting the role of leader listening (Lloyd et al., 2015a). Listening is widely studied in communication, counseling psychology, and marketing, yet mainstream organizational behavior research has paid relatively little attention to listening (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Pery et al., 2020). One important reason may be that listening lacks a universally accepted definition (Schroeder, 2016). Therefore, advancing listening research in organizational behavior, particularly leader listening research, and guiding related management practices is essential.

In recent years, although some scholars have begun exploring listening's role in organizational management, few empirical studies have examined whether these effects apply to leader-member interaction contexts or how leader listening influences leaders, teams, and employees' work attitudes and behaviors (Ames et al., 2012). On one hand, a few leadership theories explicitly identify listening as a key component, such as servant leadership theory (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006) and spiritual leadership theory (Reave, 2005). Moreover, listening represents an important manifestation of supervisor support and may yield potential positive effects on individual job performance, interpersonal influence, and work outcomes (Lloyd et al., 2017). On the other hand, listening is a vital leadership skill (Avolio et al., 2009). Some scholars note in leadership development literature that only leaders who understand how to listen to employees can create authenticity among them, which is key to building sustainable organizations (O'Toole & Bennis, 2009). Thus, leaders skilled at "listening" can better unleash leadership potential, helping to fully stimulate the potential of target objects and produce many positive effects. Nevertheless, depending on listening style and information content, some scholars find that listening can be a double-edged sword (Yip & Fisher, 2022) with negative effects. For instance, Sessions et al. (2020) and Rosen et al. (2021) found that listening to employees' negative information (such as concerns and venting) can trigger negative listener reactions (such as interpersonal abuse). In summary, although existing research shows listening plays an important role in enhancing leadership, few studies have systematically examined what leadership effectiveness leader listening produces in organizations. Leadership effectiveness is a crucial indicator for evaluating the validity of leadership behaviors (Lü et al., 2018) and can be defined from three aspects: content, level of analysis, and target of evaluation (Derue et al., 2011). This study examines leader listening's multi-level effects on leaders themselves and other targets (teams and employees) from the perspective of leadership effectiveness evaluation targets, which will not only deepen understanding of leader listening behavior but also help organizational managers effectively utilize listening's positive effects.

In summary, this study places listening in an organizational management context and conducts a systematic thematic study on "leader listening." Specifically, this research primarily explores the connotation and measurement of

leader listening, examines how leader listening stimulates leadership effectiveness based on leadership effectiveness theory and from the perspective of evaluation targets (leaders themselves; others: teams and employees), gradually reveals leader listening's differential psychological and behavioral impacts on different objects and underlying mechanisms, and explores the moderating role of various contextual factors in these processes. Through this panoramic research system, this study will promote deeper understanding of leader listening and its leadership effectiveness, thereby better guiding and intervening in leader listening in organizational practice.

## 2.1 The Connotation of Listening

Listening primarily occurs in four contexts: general situations, couples, colleague-colleague, and leader-subordinate (Lipetz et al., 2020). Bodie et al. (2008) argue that the concept of listening focuses on three research perspectives: (1) From an information processing perspective, listening is a cognitive activity involving information selection, organization, and integration; (2) From a competence perspective, listening is placed within a communication competence model, including listening to verbal or non-verbal information; (3) From an individual differences perspective, individuals may engage in different listening based on their preferences for person, action, content, or time orientation. Additionally, some scholars view listening as a multi-dimensional construct comprising cognitive, emotional, and behavioral dimensions (Lipetz et al., 2020; Worthington & Bodie, 2018). The cognitive dimension involves attention, comprehension, reception, and interpretation of content and related information; the emotional dimension includes empathy and respect; and the behavioral dimension includes verbal and non-verbal feedback. Together, listening's multi-dimensions reflect listeners' broad skills, abilities, attitudes, and behaviors, which scholars describe as essential components of "good listening" (Lipetz et al., 2020).

presents definitions of listening from previous scholars from process, behavior, and perception perspectives. Literature analysis reveals that listening involves not only receiving information from expressers but also understanding information and supporting expressers (Lipetz et al., 2020). In recent research, Kluger and Itzhakov (2022) adopt a dyadic perspective, proposing that listening comprises three causally related constructs: listeners' unobservable behaviors (such as understanding) affect observable behaviors (such as eye contact), which in turn influence expressers' perceptions and evaluations. Some scholars have also preliminarily explored listening dimensions; for example, Kluger and Zaidel (2013) divide listening into two types: person-oriented listening and fact-oriented listening.

Furthermore, shows that although leader listening shares some similarities with related concepts, significant differences remain. Leader voice taking reflects leaders' supportive responses (acceptance, recognition, execution) to employee voice from the leader's perspective (Lü et al., 2020). This behavior takes employees

as information initiators and emphasizes employees' proactive upward voice, with leaders subsequently reacting to the voice (Burris, 2012). The feedback sources for leader feedback-seeking include employees, colleagues, and superiors (Ashford & Tsui, 1991), making its behavioral direction and information flow diverse. Reverse mentoring reflects leaders' initiative in seeking advice and consulting information from employees, emphasizing that leaders are the primary initiators and beneficiaries, with behavioral content focusing on leaders seeking information rather than emotional support from subordinates (Lü et al., 2020). Leader support highlights leaders' assistance and care for followers in work tasks and interpersonal relationships, with behavioral targets tending to be followers rather than all direct subordinates (Zhu et al., 2022). Based on the preceding analysis of listening connotation, we preliminarily posit that information in leader listening is "bottom-up" transmitted from employees to leaders, with leaders reacting to information content and expressers through understanding and support. Thus, distinguishing similar concepts from behavioral content, direction, and information flow provides important insights for further clarifying leader listening's connotation.

## 2.2 Antecedents of Listening in Organizational Management

Direct research on listening antecedents in organizational management is relatively scarce and fragmented (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022), primarily reflected in the following aspects: (1) Demographic factors. For example, Neill and Bowen (2021) found that gender, management role, and position level affect employees' perceived listening quality in organizations, with women, non-managers, and lower-level employees perceiving lower listening quality. (2) Attention. Any stimuli that attract listeners' attention (such as distractions, stress, and preconceived notions) reduce listening quality (Itzchakov et al., 2018). (3) Content authenticity. Authenticity refers to the degree of truthfulness in speakers' expressed content; higher authenticity means more genuine content and more sincere expressers, which enhances listening quality (Tyler, 2011). Organizational leaders listen to multiple stakeholders (such as customers and employees), and when listening becomes a tool serving interests, listening quality declines (Tyler, 2011). (4) Mindfulness. Jones et al. (2019) demonstrated that mindfulness helps individuals regulate negative emotions and prevent over-investment, thereby promoting listening. (5) Listening training. One study found that after receiving relaxation and communication skills training, individuals' listening and empathy abilities significantly improved (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). (6) Expresser emotions. Behfar et al. (2020) argue that when expressers convey ideas and feelings with anger, listeners may be less willing to listen. Additionally, Imhof's (2010) listening mind map suggests that expressers' verbal expression ability, trustworthiness, motivation, and relationship quality with listeners affect listening quality, as do situational formality and organizational culture. In summary, scholars have explored listening antecedents from four aspects—listener, listening content, expresser, and context—but focus more on the listener perspective, and empirical research on listening antecedents remains relatively lacking, war-

ranting future exploration.

### 2.3 Outcomes of Listening in Organizational Management

Scholars have primarily conducted qualitative analyses and a few empirical studies on listening outcomes. At the organizational level, scholars generally agree that good listening enhances organizational performance. At the team level, listening is positively related to team performance and team learning (Pery et al., 2020). At the individual level, existing literature finds listening behavior closely related to many positive leadership styles and discusses employees' work behaviors, psychological perceptions, work attitudes, and interpersonal relationships mainly from exchange and affective perspectives.

**Leadership.** Listening is considered an important skill for leaders to exert influence and leadership. In leadership literature, listening often contrasts with extroverted, top-down leadership approaches (Owens et al., 2013). Multiple studies show that listening to employees is highly correlated with employees' perceptions of leadership ability. For example, managers' perceptions of superiors' listening ability are highly correlated with their perceptions of superiors' transformational leadership (Sharifirad, 2013). Listening has been shown to relate to servant leadership (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006), spiritual leadership (Reave, 2005), and inclusive leadership (Hirak et al., 2012). Managers who understand listening are also perceived as having higher openness (Ashford et al., 1998).

**Outcomes based on social exchange theory.** According to social exchange theory, when leaders provide various resources to employees, an exchange relationship develops, motivating employees to reciprocate through actions (Blau, 1964). Schroeder (2016) found that when employees perceive superiors listening, they receive emotional support from supervisors, which not only enhances employee well-being but also makes them willing to reciprocate through actual actions, such as engaging in more organizational citizenship behavior. Leader listening means employees' expressed ideas and suggestions receive leader appreciation, which facilitates leader-member exchange relationships, thereby enhancing employee job satisfaction and interpersonal justice (Lloyd et al., 2017). Additionally, good listening signals to speakers that listeners are attentively and continuously processing content cognitively, which can enhance mutual trust and intimacy (Drollinger & Comer, 2013) and increase speakers' psychological safety (Castro et al., 2018).

**Outcomes based on affective events theory.** Affective events theory posits that specific workplace events trigger employees' emotional reactions, which subsequently affect their attitudes and behaviors (Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Lloyd et al. (2015a) applied affective events theory to treat perceived supervisor listening as a workplace event that may not only trigger employees' positive emotions and further increase organizational citizenship behavior or reduce turnover intention but also mitigate negative emotions, thereby reducing turnover inten-

tion or emotional exhaustion.

## 2.4 Review of Existing Research

First, the connotation and measurement of leader listening need clarification. Previous research has primarily defined interpersonal listening from process, behavior, and perception perspectives, neglecting the dyadic nature of leader listening in organizational contexts (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Moreover, listening in organizational management often borrows scales from marketing contexts (Castro et al., 2018) or positive empathic listening scales (Lloyd et al., 2017), ignoring situational applicability. Therefore, it is necessary to further explore and clarify leader listening's connotation and measurement and develop an indigenous leader listening scale with high reliability and validity, which would greatly benefit subsequent research in this field.

Second, research perspectives on leader listening are relatively singular, and effect mechanisms need further in-depth exploration. Existing research mainly discusses listening's effects on leadership, employee well-being, and job satisfaction at the individual level, but most studies remain at the level of "whether a certain effect occurs," with only a few scholars revealing underlying mechanisms from affective or exchange perspectives. That is, existing research mostly analyzes and infers at the conceptual level, rarely exploring the "black box" between variables and neglecting internal theoretical mechanisms. Therefore, it is necessary to explore leader listening's multi-level effects from new perspectives to expand research on its mechanisms and enrich theoretical perspectives.

Finally, research levels on leader listening are limited, and research methods need enrichment. Current listening research mainly focuses on organizational and team-level performance and individual-level subjective perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. Therefore, it is necessary to examine listening's effects across different levels, which would facilitate in-depth analysis of leader listening's mechanisms on leadership effectiveness. Additionally, listening research across multiple disciplines is primarily theoretical, lacking empirical studies, and the few existing empirical studies mostly rely on single-source questionnaires. Therefore, it is necessary to combine qualitative and quantitative research, emphasizing mutual verification through multiple methods to enhance the scientific rigor and systematic nature of research conclusions.

This study's content includes two modules: Module 1 (Study 1) focuses on clarifying leader listening's connotation and measurement, serving as the logical starting point of this project; Module 2 (Studies 2-4) focuses on exploring leader listening's multi-level effects based on leadership effectiveness theory, representing the project's core. According to leadership effectiveness theory, in leadership development processes, the leadership effectiveness produced by leadership behaviors can not only evaluate the validity of leaders' behaviors but also reflect the degree to which employees or teams recognize leaders' influence and achievement of common goals (Lü et al., 2018). Performance and employee psychology

and behavior have been regarded by many scholars as important indicators of leadership effectiveness (Li, 2006). Therefore, to examine leader listening's predictive effect on leadership effectiveness, Module 2 explores leader listening's multi-level effects from the perspective of leadership effectiveness evaluation targets, specifically leaders themselves and other targets (teams and employees). Study 2 examines leader listening's double-edged sword effect on leader job performance from the leader perspective, revealing underlying mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions; Study 3 explores leader listening's effect on team followership behavior from the team perspective and the mediating mechanisms and boundary conditions; Study 4 reveals leader listening's dual effects on employee voice and employee silence from the employee perspective and explores its black-box mechanisms and boundary conditions. The overall research framework is shown in [Figure 1: see original paper].

### 3.1 Study 1: The Connotation, Measurement, and Nomological Network of Leader Listening

[Figure 1: see original paper] shows this study's overall research framework. This study aims to explore leader listening's specific connotation and strictly follow psychological scale development procedures to develop a leader listening measurement scale. Hinkin (1998) notes that for a new construct, it is necessary to use a nomological network to seek corresponding construct evidence externally and clarify the new construct's conceptual characteristics. Therefore, this study will select constructs theoretically highly related to leader listening as antecedents and outcomes to build a nomological network (see [Figure 2: see original paper]).

Through literature review, we find that leaders should pay attention to two important goals when understanding information: (1) **Accuracy**, meaning leaders must correctly understand the content employees express; and (2) **Support**, meaning leaders demonstrate care and support for employees by sensing attitudes behind their expressions (Yip & Fisher, 2022). Ruck (2021) believes listening to employees is mainly reflected in two aspects: (1) paying attention to what employees say (such as suggestions, viewpoints, and ideas); and (2) understanding what employees say and responding. Therefore, we conceptualize leader listening as a work communication behavior occurring between leaders and employees, including both communication information (leaders receiving, attending to, understanding, and responding to information from employees) and supporting employees (leaders providing emotional, respect, and care support to employees) (see ). This study defines leader listening as a proactive response by leaders to upward employee communication, a leadership behavior where leaders attend to, understand, and respond to information expressed by employees and provide support to facilitate work communication and achieve organizational goals. This study will obtain textual materials through in-depth interviews and use grounded theory to deeply explore and verify leader listening's connotative dimensions.

shows leader listening dimensions and sample items. Existing leader listening measurement tools have several limitations: (1) Lloyd et al. (2013) developed a unidimensional 8-item scale for leader-employee contexts. Although widely used in subsequent empirical research (Lloyd et al., 2015a, 2015b, 2017), it has shortcomings: (a) the scale conceptualizes supervisor listening as subjective perception of listening quality rather than specific behaviors (Lloyd et al., 2015b), potentially compromising content validity when used to measure listening behavior; and (b) the scale lacks discriminant validity verification, overlapping conceptually with responsiveness measures (Lloyd et al., 2015b). (2) Castro et al. (2018) adapted a sales listening scale from marketing contexts to measure leader listening, ignoring situational applicability and raising validity concerns. (3) Lipetz et al. (2020) developed a unidimensional 10-item scale based on four contexts. As listening is a dyadic experience where each dyadic context is unique (Lipetz et al., 2020), directly applying this tool to measure leader-employee dyadic listening also lacks situational applicability, compromising external validity. Moreover, existing measures were developed in Western contexts and may lack certain behavior characteristics of leader listening in Chinese cultural settings. In summary, we believe it is necessary to develop a more scientific, indigenous leader listening scale based on clarified connotation and construct validity, providing high-quality measurement tools for subsequent theoretical development and empirical research.

Based on our dimensional analysis, this study will follow standard scale development procedures (Hinkin, 1998) to develop a two-dimensional scale comprising “task-oriented listening” and “relationship-oriented listening.” First, we will combine inductive and deductive approaches to define leader listening’s conceptual structure, extract initial scale items, and invite domain experts to assess content validity. Based on current materials, we have identified leader listening dimensions and potential measurement items, as shown in . Second, we will conduct pre-testing and validation, using exploratory factor analysis to examine the scale’s factor structure, determine measurement items, and confirmatory factor analysis to test factor structure stability and construct validity. Finally, we will test convergent, discriminant, and criterion validity, validate and revise its psychometric properties, and develop an operational leader listening measurement scale.

### 3.1.2 The Nomological Network of Leader Listening

The proactive motivation process model posits that proactive behavior is conscious and can be motivated, emphasizing three motivational pathways: “Can Do,” “Reason to,” and “Energized to” (Parker et al., 2010). Specifically, “Can Do” motivation focuses on self-efficacy, control appraisal, and action costs, emphasizing capability; “Reason to” motivation focuses on action desirability, emphasizing pressure; and “Energized to” motivation focuses on activated positive affect, emphasizing drive. This study selects leader attention, change climate perception, and mindfulness to represent these three motivational constructs as

antecedents in the nomological network.

First, **attention** refers to the behavioral and cognitive process of selectively focusing on specific aspects of subjective or objective information while ignoring others. Facing numerous messages expressed by employees, leaders must expend attention resources to select and process information (Li et al., 2021), representing the action cost required when judging whether they can listen. Cognitive resource limitation theory explicitly states that individual attention resources are scarce and selective (Sweller, 1988). Therefore, attention resources reflect leaders' perceptions of listening behavior costs and self-efficacy to some extent, informing their assessment of whether they can listen. Research shows that sufficient attention resources make leaders more willing to listen attentively (Castro et al., 2018). Thus, when leaders have abundant attention resources, they are promoted to listen through the "Can Do" motivational pathway. Second, **change climate perception** refers to organizational members' perception of internal environmental characteristics where the organization expects to implement change (Bouckennooghe et al., 2009), reflecting a strong change orientation within the organization. The stronger leaders' change climate perception, the more they sense organizational expectations and demands for implementing change and driving development, motivating them to engage in behaviors adapted to this climate (Han et al., 2021). Voice and upward expression research shows that employees' constructive ideas or suggestions facilitate organizational development (Wei & Zhang, 2014), thus strong change climate perception provides leaders with important reasons to engage in listening behavior. Therefore, when leaders have strong change climate perception, they are promoted to listen through the "Reason to" motivational pathway. Finally, **mindfulness** refers to the process by which individuals, through self-regulation of attention, focus on the present moment and increase awareness of current events with a curious, open mindset (Bishop et al., 2004). Mindful leaders not only hold open attitudes toward work-related matters but also easily generate positive emotions (Liu & Zhang, 2023). High leader mindfulness means stronger cognitive function and fewer cognitive biases, thus greater willingness to listen to work information expressed by employees (Frizzell et al., 2016). Therefore, when leaders have high mindfulness, they are promoted to listen through the "Energized to" motivational pathway. Based on this analysis, we propose:

**Proposition 1-1:** Attention positively influences leader listening.

**Proposition 1-2:** Change climate perception positively influences leader listening.

**Proposition 1-3:** Mindfulness positively influences leader listening.

In work contexts, employees learn and imitate leaders' values and behaviors due to admiration and trust. When employees experience good leader listening, they feel trusted and respected, proactively learning superiors' positive behaviors and applying them to work. For example, employees may voluntarily work overtime, conserve, and protect organizational resources for organizational benefit. Organizational citizenship behavior is a typical positive workplace behavior referring

to employees' voluntary extra-role behaviors beyond formal job requirements (Lee & Allen, 2002). Therefore, when leaders demonstrate good listening behavior, employees are willing to implement more organizational citizenship behavior for common development. Work thriving is the joint experience of “vitality” and “learning” at work (Spreitzer et al., 2005). Leader listening can reduce subordinates' sense of awe, enhance value and identity feelings, and make them feel respected and trusted (Lloyd et al., 2015a), thereby strengthening employees' work enthusiasm and motivation to learn new knowledge. Some scholars believe leader listening sends subordinates a safety signal—that leaders are willing to attentively process subordinates' expressed information cognitively—which enhances employees' psychological safety (Castro et al., 2018), providing them with higher psychological and relational resources. Based on this analysis, we propose:

**Proposition 1-4:** Leader listening positively influences employee organizational citizenship behavior.

**Proposition 1-5:** Leader listening positively influences employee work thriving.

### 3.2 Study 2: Empowerment or Burden? The Double-Edged Sword Effect of Leader Listening on Leader Job Performance

This study examines the double-edged sword process mechanisms and boundary conditions of daily leader listening on daily job performance from a dynamic perspective, focusing on leaders as leadership effectiveness evaluation targets. Specifically, based on resource perspective, we analyze three questions: How do leaders perceive daily listening behavior? How does daily listening behavior affect their own daily cognition, emotions, and job performance? Furthermore, how does leader cognitive need moderate these processes? Study 2's theoretical model is shown in [Figure 3: see original paper].

[Figure 3: see original paper] shows the schematic diagram of the double-edged sword effect model of daily leader listening.

#### 3.2.1 Daily Leader Listening and Daily Leader Self-Reflection, Daily Leader Emotional Exhaustion

Increasing empirical research shows that leaders' within-individual behaviors vary daily (Qin et al., 2018). From a dynamic perspective, daily leader listening is defined as listening behavior exhibited by leaders each day. Conservation of resources theory posits that people constantly strive to maintain and protect resources they value, and resource injection is crucial for resource replenishment and defending against resource loss (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Leader listening means leaders can obtain information from employees while needing to attend to attitudes behind employees' expressions to provide care and support. Therefore, leader listening not only brings leaders new information but also consumes leaders' energy, mental resources, and other resources. Combining cognitive-

affective personality system theory, individuals evaluate how situational factors affect their resources, activating cognitive-affective units during evaluation (Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Thus, we believe leaders' daily listening behavior affects their daily cognitive and emotional resources. On one hand, leader listening can obtain good work suggestions and information from employees, enriching leaders' perspectives on current work, improving cognitive flexibility, and enabling self-reflection combined with existing knowledge and experience. On the other hand, listening requires leaders to expend time and energy, depleting physical, attention, and other resources, making them feel exhausted and emotionally drained (Lloyd et al., 2015a). Integrating conservation of resources theory and cognitive-affective personality system theory, we propose that daily leader listening may bring changes in daily cognitive and emotional resources. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 2-1:** At the within-individual level, daily leader listening positively influences daily leader self-reflection.

**Proposition 2-2:** At the within-individual level, daily leader listening positively influences daily leader emotional exhaustion.

### **3.2.2 Empowerment Mechanism: The Mediating Role of Daily Leader Self-Reflection**

Research examining individual behavior from a dynamic perspective shows that daily work behavior is influenced by daily cognition and attitudes (Kim et al., 2018). Leader self-reflection refers to leaders' active, deliberate thinking about their beliefs and knowledge based on internal and external confusion (Dewey, 1933), representing a dynamic psychological process determining their attitudes and behavioral performance (Wang et al., 2021). Research shows that self-reflection can strengthen leaders' cognitive processing of experiences, form clear self-understanding, and make effective improvements (Itzhakov et al., 2017). According to conservation of resources theory, leader listening can help leaders engage in self-reflection, obtain work resources, and gain achievement in guiding employees, thereby enhancing job performance. Thus, the empowerment mechanism is: Leader listening helps leaders obtain more work information and good suggestions, leaders engage in self-reflection, cognitive resources increase, and job performance improves. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 2-3:** At the within-individual level, daily leader self-reflection mediates the relationship between daily leader listening and daily leader job performance, such that leader listening increases self-reflection, thereby enhancing job performance.

### **3.2.3 Burden Mechanism: The Mediating Role of Daily Leader Emotional Exhaustion**

Research examining individual behavior from a dynamic perspective also shows that daily work behavior is influenced by daily emotions (Kim et al., 2018).

Leader emotional exhaustion refers to leaders' overwork and emotional depletion due to excessive job demands and continuous distress (Sonnentag et al., 2010). Research shows that emotional exhaustion is a typical symptom of psychological overwork that depletes individuals' emotional and psychological resources (Lin et al., 2019), weakening work enthusiasm and passion, which is detrimental to daily performance output. According to conservation of resources theory, when individuals perceive resource loss, they adopt defensive strategies, investing energy in retaining and avoiding further resource loss, unwilling to continue investing in resource-consuming tasks, which weakens daily job performance. Thus, the burden mechanism is: To maintain good communication with employees, leader listening may consume limited emotional resources, trigger emotional exhaustion, and reduce performance levels. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 2-4:** At the within-individual level, daily leader emotional exhaustion mediates the relationship between daily leader listening and daily leader job performance, such that leader listening increases emotional exhaustion, thereby weakening job performance.

### 3.2.4 The Moderating Role of Leader Cognitive Need

Conservation of resources theory emphasizes that resource injection is important for resource replenishment and avoiding resource loss, and notes that individuals' subjective assessment of resource value (helpfulness for goal achievement) plays an important role in resource gain and loss pathways (Halbesleben et al., 2014). Leader cognitive need refers to leaders' adoption of meaningful, integrated approaches to understanding situational demands—specifically, whether leaders are willing to expend more cognitive effort and attention resources for deep thinking during information acquisition and whether they can enjoy the pleasure of thinking (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982). Therefore, we speculate that leaders' judgments of resource value obtained from listening behavior will vary according to their cognitive need. Leaders with high cognitive need tend to enjoy thinking, desire useful information from employees (Coutinho et al., 2005), are more likely to focus on core information in listening content (Rosen et al., 2021), are more willing to expend their energy and time resources, and engage in self-reflection combined with existing knowledge and information processing strategies. Conversely, leaders with low cognitive need may be confident in their knowledge and abilities, lacking motivation for elaborative information processing (Rosen et al., 2021). Therefore, when employees express task information, leaders may consider it a waste of their time and energy, unwilling to consume cognitive resources thinking about task information or psychological resources listening to what they consider irrelevant information.

Based on the above analysis, we propose:

**Proposition 2-5:** Leader cognitive need at the between-individual level moderates the positive relationship between daily leader listening and daily self-reflection, such that the positive relationship is stronger when cognitive need is

high and weaker when cognitive need is low.

**Proposition 2-6:** Leader cognitive need at the between-individual level moderates the positive relationship between daily leader listening and daily emotional exhaustion, such that the positive relationship is weaker when cognitive need is high and stronger when cognitive need is low.

Integrating the above arguments, we further propose that leader cognitive need also moderates the mediation effects proposed in Propositions 2-3 and 2-4, constituting moderated mediation. According to conservation of resources theory, when experiencing daily listening, compared with low cognitive need leaders, high cognitive need leaders are more willing to obtain cognitive resources, enhance job performance through increased self-reflection, but also deplete emotional resources, weakening job performance through increased emotional exhaustion. Based on this reasoning, we propose:

**Proposition 2-7:** Leader cognitive need at the between-individual level moderates the mediating effect of daily leader self-reflection on the relationship between daily leader listening and daily leader job performance, such that the mediating effect is stronger when cognitive need is high and weaker when cognitive need is low.

**Proposition 2-8:** Leader cognitive need at the between-individual level moderates the mediating effect of daily leader emotional exhaustion on the relationship between daily leader listening and daily leader job performance, such that the mediating effect is weaker when cognitive need is high and stronger when cognitive need is low.

### 3.3 Study 3: The More Leaders Listen, the More Teams Follow? The Roles of Leader Approachability and Team Power Distance

Although high-quality leader listening narrows interpersonal distance, organizations often maintain cognitions of “superior-subordinate order” and “distinction between high and low,” which may not always lead to genuine team followership. Based on this interesting and contradictory phenomenon in organizations, this study examines from a followership perspective how team members perceive leaders’ listening behavior in teams, reveals how leader listening generates leadership effectiveness at the team level, and further examines the moderating role of team power distance. Study 3’s theoretical model is shown in [Figure 4: see original paper].

[Figure 4: see original paper] shows the schematic diagram of the effect model of leader listening on team followership behavior.

#### 3.3.1 Leader Listening and Leader Approachability

Leader listening reflects work communication and interpersonal interaction between superiors and subordinates (Pasupathi, 2001). Research shows that individuals decide whether to continue interacting and communicating in the future

and under what circumstances based on expected outcomes in interpersonal interaction relationships (Lawler, 2001). On one hand, leader listening means leaders attend to, understand, and provide feedback on team members' expressed information, making team members feel respected and understood. On the other hand, leaders also provide care, help, and emotional support when listening, thereby promoting interpersonal relationship establishment and enhancing intimacy and trust (Drollinger & Comer, 2013). Therefore, team leaders' willingness to listen makes team members feel valued and affirmed, reduces awe, provides significant spiritual motivation, and establishes emotional connections. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 3-1:** Leader listening positively influences leader approachability.

### 3.3.2 The Mediating Role of Leader Approachability

Leader distance theory posits that social distance between leaders and employees affects employees' impressions and behavioral judgments of leaders and highlights that different leadership behaviors may produce different leadership effects (Guo et al., 2023; Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Social distance indicates differences in status, authority, and power between leaders and employees, affecting the degree of social contact and relationship intimacy (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). Therefore, based on social distance, distance between team leaders and members can be divided into "intimate" and "distant" categories. Team followership behavior is a leader-directed behavior where team members implement leader decisions, help leaders, assist in solving problems and taking responsibility, and fully promote leader and team success (Cao et al., 2019). From the follower perspective, team followership behavior implies good interactive relationships between team members and leaders (Du et al., 2016). Therefore, we believe the relationship between leader listening and team followership behavior may be transmitted through their social distance.

As Antonakis and Atwater (2002) emphasize, leaders exert different influences on subordinates based on distance. On one hand, close distance implies an intimate relationship, making team members more willing to approach leaders and make positive evaluations. On the other hand, moderate distance often makes leaders more charismatic (Katz & Kahn, 1978), preserving some mystery for team members. Because too close distance leads to overly frequent interaction, increasing the possibility of exposing weaknesses, which may gradually fade leaders' idealized prototype among team members. Based on this analysis, we propose that when leader approachability is low, this "long distance" may make team members feel leaders are unapproachable, making it difficult to build intimate bonds and creating fear, thus unwillingness to follow. When leader approachability is moderate, this "appropriate distance" satisfies leaders' extraordinary individual image in team members' minds, promoting admiration and willingness to genuinely follow. When leader approachability is high, this "close distance" increases interaction frequency, making team members more likely to perceive leaders' weaknesses during frequent communication, thus re-

ducing willingness to follow. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 3-2:** An inverted U-shaped relationship exists between leader approachability and team followership behavior, where too low or too high leader approachability weakens team followership behavior compared to moderate approachability.

**Proposition 3-3:** Leader approachability mediates the relationship between leader listening and team followership behavior, such that leader listening produces an inverted U-shaped impact on team followership behavior through increasing leader approachability.

### 3.3.3 The Moderating Role of Team Power Distance

Power distance at the societal level is defined as the degree to which a society accepts power inequality in organizations (Hofstede, 1980). At the team level, it refers to the degree to which team members accept and recognize unequal power distribution within the team, reflecting team members' respect and obedience to leader authority and recognition of uneven power distribution (Yang et al., 2007). Research shows that team members' cognition of cultural values like power distance affects their reactions to leadership behavior information (Lian et al., 2012). Given team power distance's important influence on superior-subordinate interaction in organizations (Liao et al., 2010), we believe the relationship between leader approachability and team followership behavior is constrained by team power distance strength.

In high power distance teams, team members have high acceptance of leaders' absolute authority and status, believing they need to maintain certain social distance in interactions and should not be overly close (Loi et al., 2012). This indicates team members consider maintaining appropriate social distance with leaders as natural, making them insensitive to leader approachability levels and weakening the inverted U-shaped relationship between leader approachability and followership behavior. Conversely, in low power distance teams, team members have low acceptance of leaders' status and power, believing power is evenly distributed and leaders lack absolute authority. Moreover, in superior-subordinate interactions, team members believe they can communicate closely with leaders and are sensitive to leader approachability levels. Therefore, low team power distance may strengthen the inverted U-shaped relationship between leader approachability and team followership behavior. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 3-4:** Team power distance moderates the inverted U-shaped relationship between leader approachability and team followership behavior, such that the inverted U-shaped relationship is weaker when team power distance is high and stronger when team power distance is low.

Proposition 3-3 has established that leader approachability mediates the relationship between leader listening and team followership behavior. Therefore, we

further propose that team power distance may moderate this mediating effect, constituting moderated mediation. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 3-5:** Team power distance moderates the mediating effect of leader approachability on the relationship between leader listening and team followership behavior, such that the mediating effect is weaker when team power distance is high and stronger when team power distance is low.

### 3.4 Study 4: Does Leader Listening Make Employees “Continue to Voice” or “Remain Silent”?—A Motivation Attribution Theory Perspective

Due to differences in leadership behavior orientations (such as interpersonal versus task orientation), listening levels, listening habits (such as self-centered versus other-centered), and listening techniques (Kluger & Zaidel, 2013), it is necessary to clarify the motivation behind leader listening behavior. Employees are not only recipients of leader behavior but also direct observers who attribute motives to leader behavior (Martinko et al., 2007). Li et al. (2023) propose that motivations behind leader behavior generally fall into two categories: “authentic” and “strategic.” Authentic leaders focus on others and the organization, caring about collective interests and organizational performance goals; strategic leaders focus on self, aiming to achieve personal goals and well-being. Following this logic, this study distinguishes between “leader genuine listening” and “leader pseudo listening.” Leader genuine listening refers to leader-centered, information-focused, employee-caring, and intention-insightful positive listening behavior aimed at promoting work communication and improving organizational performance. Leader pseudo listening refers to self-centered, information-distorting, pretense-agreeing negative listening behavior, a self-presentation strategy aimed at achieving personal well-being and enhancing reputation and image. As leader process attribution theory emphasizes, employees’ attributions of leader behavior motivation affect their psychological states and subsequent behavioral reactions (Gardner et al., 2019). Therefore, this study examines employees as leadership effectiveness evaluation targets, builds a dual-process model of leader listening and employee behavior, and deeply explores whether employees choose “voice” or “silence” under positive attribution conditions and what choices they make under negative attribution conditions, aiming to clarify what leadership effectiveness leader listening produces at the employee level. Study 4’s theoretical model is shown in [Figure 5: see original paper].

[Figure 5: see original paper] shows the schematic diagram of the dual-process model of leader listening and employee voice/silence.

### 3.4.1 Leader Listening and Voice Efficacy, Psychological Safety from Positive Motivation Attribution Perspective

Leader listening reflects leaders' understanding and response to subordinates' expressed information and their expressed care and emotional support, representing a positive interaction (Kluger et al., 2021). When employees express work-related information and constructive suggestions to leaders, if leaders not only focus on information itself, understand it based on existing cognition and experience, and provide positive feedback and substantive responses, and if leaders are employee-centered, caring about employees' psychological feelings, providing work concern and greetings, even generating empathy, then employees will make a positive attribution, believing leaders demonstrate genuine listening. In other words, employees believe leader listening aims to promote work communication and improve organizational performance, willing to sincerely listen to employees, ask appropriate questions and respond, and is a positive listening behavior that insightfully understands employee intentions. **Voice efficacy** refers to employees' beliefs about whether they can achieve voice outcomes (Duan & Wei, 2012). **Psychological safety** indicates employees feel they can authentically express their suggestions and ideas (Edmondson, 1999). Employees attributing leader listening as genuine listening means leaders have understood and positively responded to employees' expressed information. This successful experience creates positive psychological states, strengthening employees' cognition of personal expression and work ability, enhancing their beliefs about subsequent voice success, thus increasing voice efficacy and psychological safety. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 4-1:** Leader listening interacts with positive leader motivation attribution to influence employee voice efficacy, such that when employees attribute leader listening as genuine listening, they have stronger voice efficacy.

**Proposition 4-2:** Leader listening interacts with positive leader motivation attribution to influence employee psychological safety, such that when employees attribute leader listening as genuine listening, they have stronger psychological safety.

### 3.4.2 Leader Listening and Voice Efficacy, Psychological Safety from Negative Motivation Attribution Perspective

As mentioned earlier, leader listening reflects not only leaders' understanding and response to employees' expressed information but also emphasizes leaders' expressed attitudes and support (Kluger et al., 2021). When employees express work-related information and constructive suggestions to leaders, if leaders distort employees' real content, even acting perfunctorily, interrupting, or terminating, responding to information without processing, and if leaders are self-centered, pretense-agreeing with employees, disregarding employees' inner feelings, only superficially expressing recognition of opinions, then employees will make a negative attribution, believing leaders demonstrate pseudo listening

with inconsistent words and actions. In other words, employees believe leader listening aims to achieve personal well-being and enhance reputation and image, is pretense listening for face-saving, and is a negative listening behavior. Voice efficacy indicates employees believe they can fulfill the voice role and have sufficient confidence to achieve voice success (Duan & Wei, 2012). Psychological safety refers to employees feeling comfortable authentically expressing ideas to leaders without fearing potential risks (Edmondson, 1999). Employees attributing leader listening as pseudo listening means leaders have provided negative feedback or perfunctory responses to employees' expressed information and suggestions. Therefore, leader pseudo listening makes employees feel leaders' inconsistent words and actions, and this experience of not receiving genuine feedback makes employees feel disappointed, greatly weakening employees' voice beliefs, thus reducing voice efficacy and psychological safety. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 4-3:** Leader listening interacts with negative leader motivation attribution to influence employee voice efficacy, such that when employees attribute leader listening as pseudo listening, they have weaker voice efficacy.

**Proposition 4-4:** Leader listening interacts with negative leader motivation attribution to influence employee psychological safety, such that when employees attribute leader listening as pseudo listening, they have weaker psychological safety.

### 3.4.3 The Mediating Logic of Voice Efficacy and Psychological Safety

According to leader process attribution theory, employees cognitively attribute leader behavior, thereby affecting their psychological states and corresponding behavioral reactions (Martinko et al., 2007). **Employee voice** refers to employees' work-related ideas, suggestions, and problems proposed to improve organizational development (Liu et al., 2010). **Employee silence** refers to employees' withholding valuable information and suggestions for organizational development (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). Employees with high voice efficacy possess higher psychological resources and energy to act, firmly believing they can express useful suggestions and ideas to leaders and receive genuine listening, thus willing to continue voicing in the future. Therefore, according to leader process attribution theory, after making positive attributions of leader listening, employees develop positive psychological experiences of voice efficacy, making positive reactions to leader behavior and its underlying motivation—that is, continuing to voice rather than remaining silent. Conversely, when employees make negative attributions of leader listening, their voice efficacy decreases, making them more likely to remain silent rather than voice actively. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 4-5:** Voice efficacy mediates the relationship between the interaction of leader listening and positive leader motivation attribution and employee voice, such that when employees attribute leader listening as genuine listening,

stronger voice efficacy makes them more likely to voice.

**Proposition 4-6:** Voice efficacy mediates the relationship between the interaction of leader listening and negative leader motivation attribution and employee silence, such that when employees attribute leader listening as pseudo listening, weaker voice efficacy makes them more likely to remain silent.

Additionally, employees with low psychological safety fear negative impacts on self-image and career when expressing their true selves. Therefore, when employees can anticipate negative consequences from speaking up, they increase silence behavior and reduce voice behavior (Zhao & Liu, 2017). Moreover, psychological safety provides psychological protection and motivation for employees' work risk-taking, so only employees with higher psychological safety are more willing to engage in voice behavior and reduce silence. When leader listening is attributed as pseudo listening, employees experience low interpersonal trust and distant communication, triggering defensive psychology to avoid negative outcomes, thus choosing to remain silent. Therefore, according to leader process attribution theory, after making negative attributions of leader listening, employees reduce positive psychological experiences of psychological safety, making negative reactions to leader behavior and its underlying motivation—that is, reducing voice behavior and remaining silent. Conversely, when employees make positive attributions of leader listening, their psychological safety increases, making them more likely to voice actively rather than remain silent. Based on this, we propose:

**Proposition 4-7:** Psychological safety mediates the relationship between the interaction of leader listening and positive leader motivation attribution and employee voice, such that when employees attribute leader listening as genuine listening, stronger psychological safety makes them more likely to voice.

**Proposition 4-8:** Psychological safety mediates the relationship between the interaction of leader listening and negative leader motivation attribution and employee silence, such that when employees attribute leader listening as pseudo listening, weaker psychological safety makes them more likely to remain silent.

## Discussion

Leader listening is pervasive in organizational contexts and plays a crucial role in promoting work communication. Existing research has not unified the concept of leader listening in organizational contexts, and most studies theoretically infer leader listening's effects on employee work attitudes and interpersonal relationships, with few scholars systematically conducting empirical research on its diverse effects across levels. Therefore, this study places listening in leader-employee dyadic interaction contexts, clarifies leader listening's connotative dimensions, and explores measurement scales suitable for Chinese organizational contexts. On this basis, from a leadership effectiveness perspective, this study attempts to construct a multi-level theoretical framework of leader listening effects through three hierarchical, closely related studies, specifically examining

how leader listening affects different psychological perceptions and behaviors of leaders themselves, teams, and employees, systematically and completely demonstrating the leadership effectiveness produced by listening at three levels. This study clarifies leader listening's connotative dimensions, enriches research levels and theoretical perspectives on leader listening, and deepens theoretical understanding of leadership effectiveness produced by listening.

First, this study explores leader listening's connotative dimensions from task and relationship aspects and develops an indigenous leader listening measurement scale. The basic issues of leader listening's connotation and measurement have not received unified viewpoints or validation, hindering leader listening research development. This study's clarification of leader listening's connotation lays a foundation for subsequent in-depth exploration of leader listening phenomena and reveals its multi-level effects. The indigenous measurement scale also provides reliable research tools for subsequent studies, thereby deepening leader listening theoretical research.

Second, this study examines whether leader listening "empowers" or "burdens" leader job performance from a dynamic perspective. Previous research has emphasized listening's static characteristics, with few studies examining leader listening's double-edged sword effect on leaders themselves. This study builds a double-edged sword effect model of leader listening's impact on leader job performance based on conservation of resources theory, examining empowerment and burden mechanisms through "resource gain" and "resource loss" paths, with daily leader self-reflection and daily leader emotional exhaustion as mediators, and revealing the moderating effect of leader cognitive need. This better tests leader listening's role in leadership effectiveness from the leader level. This not only enriches leader listening research outcomes at the leader level but also provides new perspectives for leader listening research.

Third, this study examines how team members view leader listening from a followership perspective. Previous scholars mostly examined leader listening's effects on team performance and team learning, with little research on its internal mechanisms (Pery et al., 2020), and regrettably, few studies have focused on how team members view and evaluate leader listening behavior. This study examines leader listening's effect mechanism on team followership behavior at the leader-team interaction level, not only cleverly explaining the interesting and contradictory phenomenon about leader distance in organizations by revealing the inverted U-shaped relationship between leader approachability and team followership behavior but also enriching our theoretical understanding of listening's leadership effectiveness at the team level through examining team power distance's moderating role.

Finally, this study distinguishes the authenticity of leader "listening" from a motivation attribution perspective and builds an influence mechanism model of leader listening on employee voice (silence). In leadership research, scholars have long called for dialectical views of positive leadership behavior (Li et al., 2023). Given differences in listening levels, habits, and techniques, this study

explores leader listening types based on leader process attribution theory, examining leader listening's dual effects on employee voice and employee silence from positive attribution (leader genuine listening) and negative attribution (leader pseudo listening) perspectives. This not only enriches leader listening theoretical perspectives and provides new research directions for subsequent studies but also expands understanding of leader listening effects from the employee perspective.

This study also has practical implications. First, the leader listening concept proposed from leader-employee interaction contexts provides a novel perspective for organizational leaders' management activities. In the digital economy era, as everything becomes interconnected and communication becomes more convenient, the tasks and information requiring processing increase. Organizational leaders must learn to become excellent listeners to enhance information exchange and task processing effectiveness. Second, this study's multi-level effect model of leader listening's impact on leadership effectiveness helps organizations recognize leader listening's important value, motivates organizations to adopt more effective measures to promote high-quality leader listening, and thereby helps leaders unleash positive leadership and improve management efficiency.

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*Note: The reference list continues with English-language references in their original format, which are preserved exactly as in the original text.*

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