

Robert Bostrom's Contribution to Listening in Organizational Contexts

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Abstract

Robert Bostrom has not only left a listening legacy, but he was also a pioneer in the larger discipline of communication. Bostrom was one of the first scholars to focus on the dynamics of interpersonal contexts, thereby directly contributing to the transition of our field from “speech” to “communication.” Early on he recognized the importance of relational issues and reciprocity, concepts that would later become particularly important to listening researchers and practitioners. In this early work, when the discipline was concerned almost exclusively with the creation and sending of messages, he emphasized the importance of “listener involvement” in the communication process and, from the beginning, demonstrated a commitment to reveal the relevance of communication in everyday contexts (Andersch, Staats, & Bostrom, 1969).

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Bostrom's focus on interpersonal encounters provided a much richer research environment than in previous work and expanded the usefulness of communication studies. Throughout the 1970s, Bostrom called for a functional approach to listening that emphasized situation and purpose (Bostrom & Waldhart, 1980). Consequently, when I first developed an interest in exploring listening in managerial contexts, one of the few studies I found on the importance of listening in organizations was by Sypher, Bostrom, and Seibert (1989). Their research opened the door for others who, like me, were anxious to find out more about the impact of effective listening on organizational outcomes. This work remains one of the seminal studies linking listening to workplace success.

As Sypher et al. noted, "an individual's listening ability has implications for the effectiveness of his/her work group, the overall organization, and perhaps for the individual's own success" (1989, p. 295). Here again, Bostrom was quick to pose the most important and pressing research questions. Examining listening as it related to other social-cognitive and communicative abilities, he continuously called for studies to determine the relationship between listening and job level, upward mobility, and other success factors. He expressed interest in self-monitoring and perspective taking, in differences between supervisors' and nonsupervisors' listening abilities, and other key listening-related topics. Answers to these questions provided important information to practitioners and brought increased credibility and significance to listening research. As Sypher et al. and his co-authors concluded, effective listening "can enhance one's job performance, and perhaps promotions, raises, status, and power are more attainable for the better listener" (p. 301). Developing an understanding of the role of listening in organizations served not only to increase our knowledge of organizational communication in general, but also illustrated its relationship to important individual and organizational outcomes.

This focus on organizational outcomes led naturally to studies that addressed communication in one of the most common and critical workplace contexts, the small group. Bostrom's findings had for several decades influenced thinking about the communication process and the role listeners played in interactive group settings. As early as 1970, Bostrom asked such questions as, "What are the relationships among the frequencies of occurrence of various types of communicative acts in small groups? Is there any relationship between various communicative patterns and other factors, such as perceived leadership or member satisfaction?" (1970, p. 258). His ability to hone in on the key elements of group process gave particular impact to his work and increased its significance when practitioners turned their focus to such organizational activities as quality circles, teambuilding, and participative leadership.

This body of small group research yielded a number of key findings. Early work by Riecken (1958) suggested that the amount of member participation could be viewed as an indicator of the amount of influence an individual had on the outcome of the group process—an experience that seemed to be "satisfying" for a group member. Bostrom built on this finding, noting that when the receive-send index is down, satisfaction drops off. Further, he concluded that group member satisfaction apparently comes from talking, not listening (1970, p. 263), a fact that may explain an important dynamic in small groups.

The growing interest in better understanding individual-level factors within group settings also facilitated interest in listener-related variables and, subsequently, brought listening research closer to the "mainstream" of communication research. Bostrom had long argued that listening itself was a complex human behavior that encompassed a variety of components, and throughout the 1980s he contributed to our understanding of listening assessment. Bostrom was, at heart, a dedicated teacher who had long been interested in how student learning was evaluated (Bostrom, 1964, 1968; Bostrom, Vladis, & Rosenbaum, 1961). One of his most significant contributions to listening assessment was the development of the Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test (1981b), which addressed five related but distinct abilities: short-term listening, short-term listening with rehearsal, interpretive listening, lecture listening, and selective listening.

Bostrom's pioneering work in assessing listening behavior paved the way for many who followed. Bostrom noted that listening assessment had consistently relied on a "lecture test" type of instrument to obtain a measure of listening ability, focusing on retention of what was heard over time. He argued that such lecture-comprehension assessment related more closely to general mental ability than to actual listening behavior. In the interactive settings he had studied, short-term listening more closely related to the oral communication skills that educators sought to develop. His rigorous and scholarly approach enabled others to build on the ideas and the findings he put forth, particularly with regard to the role of short-term memory in the listening process (Bostrom, 1981a; Bostrom & Bryant, 1980; Bostrom & Waldhart, 1988). In creating my HURIER model of listening behavior, I, like so many others, built on the foundation of listening assessment Bostrom had established.

Listening researchers are continuing to recognize the many ways in which Bostrom has influenced thinking about the listening process and paved the way to increased credibility and productivity in the field. From the beginning, Bostrom insisted that listening researchers be rigorous and precise, and he worked to ensure that the listening process was not oversimplified. At a time when listening professionals were criticized for focusing too heavily on methods and applications, he asked difficult and important questions of himself and others. While much early work in listening was based on practice and common sense, Bostrom set about uncovering assumptions and testing hypotheses.

The closing thoughts Bostrom presents with regard to educational administration undoubtedly reflect his views on listening research as well. He notes that "competence and integrity never change and, while they do not always produce appreciation . . . one will have the pleasure of having done his or her best" (1986, p. 25). Robert Bostrom always did his best and, for that, we are forever in his debt.

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