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R&C risk & compliance

CREATING VALUE THROUGH EFFECTIVE CONTINUOUS LISTENING STRATEGIES

REPRINTED FROM:
RISK & COMPLIANCE MAGAZINE
JUL-SEP 2018 ISSUE



www.riskandcompliancemagazine.com

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Published by Financier Worldwide Ltd
riskandcompliance@financierworldwide.com
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www.riskandcompliancemagazine.com

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R&C: What do you believe are the key objectives and elements of a continuous listening strategy? How can continuous listening strategies create value?

Vincent: A continuous listening strategy contributes to how an organisation builds its culture. It can encourage employee engagement, mitigate risk, drive innovation and build trust, both inside and outside the organisation. The value from a continuous listening strategy comes from the development of a healthy culture, and a healthy culture equals a high-performing organisation. A continuous listening strategy is multifaceted. Organisations should focus on the following critical elements: identifying the instances and times when 'listening' can occur; the methods and mechanisms for collecting the feedback and a way to consolidate and analyse the information received; determining how to follow-up on feedback received and what stakeholders should be involved in this process; and developing a strategy to communicate how employees and stakeholders were 'listened' to.

Moosmayer: First, we must acknowledge that there is an issue regarding 'listening' in some companies. It is a common experience that the ability and willingness to listen decreases the higher you move up in a company's hierarchy. Management often requests a 'speak up' culture among their

employees but forgets that speaking up requires a listening partner. Companies not only need a 'speak up' culture, they also need to 'listen up'. To start a continuous listening strategy, this issue must be acknowledged by senior management. If this is done effectively, it will create value because collaboration will significantly increase.

Debnath: One of the key objectives of any successful corporate listening strategy is that it reveals as much as possible of what is going on at a 'root-to-branch' level within the company. This requires more than just an annual employee or customer and vendor survey. It should, certainly for the reporting of compliance or legal violations, be continuous, encompass the whole business, including subsidiaries and majority-owned joint ventures and be aware of cultural nuances which may impact on people freely voicing their concerns and feelings. Understanding not only what is being done well, which is extremely important of course, but also what needs to be improved and the issues that are concerning customers, suppliers and employees at all levels, is very valuable information which should help the company to anticipate, and thus be better equipped, to respond to challenges and opportunities. This deep, holistic listening strategy also sends out a clear and important message internally and externally that the company is a conscientious and ethical company.

R&C: What is the importance of corporate response and feedback as an element of a listening strategy? How do organisations ensure they are doing this effectively?

Moosmayer: Within the compliance and integrity sector, a listening strategy is of paramount importance. It requires a visible and unequivocal offer, but the company must then also be able to fulfil expectations to the extent possible. Companies should consider offering an accessible, confidential and cost-free whistleblower hotline, as well as utilise the services of an independent ombudsman. Both 'listening channels' should function alongside the operations of the company's compliance department. Companies should have dedicated experts manning these communications channels and listening to complainants. They should be there to try to start and maintain a dialogue. In addition, companies should annually publish the number of complaints they receive in order to demonstrate that they are listening and taking action.

Debnath: Having the best listening strategy in the world counts for very little without a mechanism to feedback and give assurance that what is being said

has been taken on board and, where appropriate, taken forward. There are various ways for a company to provide feedback, for example through internal networking or chat communication tools, video blogs or emails. Giving individually-tailored feedback on reports to the company's ethics and compliance hotline is essential for maintaining trust in the company's compliance programme and

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*Klaus Moosmayer,
Siemens*

corporate governance framework overall. It can also go some way to curbing uncontrolled reporting to external authorities. The level of engagement and the responses to the company's feedback will often be a useful barometer of whether the company is giving feedback effectively.

Vincent: Corporate response and feedback is paramount and is an element of a continuous listening strategy that should not be ignored. If it

is not done well or not done at all, employees will feel as though they are talking into a 'black hole' and may not see any value to providing feedback. This will lead to cynicism and disengagement from the process. Furthermore, the feedback must be authentic and lead to change, where appropriate. Responses must also be prompt and considered in order to be effective. If it is done well, it can buttress the values of the organisation, and can bring them to life in a practical way.

R&C: Could you explain why listening is a key component of effective working relationships among a company's employees and between management and staff? How can continuous listening impact employee engagement?

Vincent: We know that tone comes from the top. When an organisation has an effective continuous listening strategy in place, listening becomes part of the culture of the organisation. Everyone in the organisation can voice their ideas and speak up about issues or concerns, leading to additional collaboration and more effective decision making. Once listening is part of the management and team culture of the organisation, employees are likely to feel more empowered and there will be higher levels of trust within the organisation, which naturally leads to higher levels of employee engagement.

Debnath: Continuous listening is, in effect, a 'cultural contract' between the company and its employees, part of a two-way street for the flow of information. The company proactively listens and, where required, acts on what employees are saying, and at the same time provides relevant and useful information to employees, which are essential elements of good working relationships. Employee engagement may be improved through meaningful dialogue on practical issues, such as industry hot topics or government, legal or compliance difficulties being faced by other companies in the sector. By the company informing its employee of the position it takes in a matter or the measures it has in place to avoid the issues afflicting other companies, it gives a clear message that it is listening to what is going on around it and being proactive.

Moosmayer: Modern management requires companies to move away from traditional communication within the solid lines of hierarchies. To work effectively you need to explore the knowledge and intelligence of the 'crowd'. Particularly in a big organisation, success depends on finding out where the good ideas are buried within the organisation. And only if the company develops a culture and practical way of deploying a continuous listening strategy, will it begin to appeal to young people who definitely want to have an impact. One practical example of this is the use of

'skip-level meetings', where management opens a dialogue with employees, intentionally skipping levels of the company's hierarchy.

R&C: How can effective listening contribute to more effective leadership?

Debnath: One of the ways effective listening can help leaders to perform even better is the insight it can provide into what really motivates people and how those people and the company can develop. Perhaps most importantly, effective listening allows people to get to know others within the company on a deeper, more personal level, rather than on just a surface level. It can also be a very valuable way for leaders to understand their weaknesses and areas for development. By effectively listening to external stakeholders, leaders will understand what is impacting their stakeholders and how they and the company can assist and meet any needs.

Moosmayer: The first question to consider is what is 'effective leadership'? Modern leadership should comprise both the giving of guidance and the promotion of a culture of collaboration. The latter starts with effective listening. What is 'effective listening'? Arguably, what is needed is a tailored and timely response. If you just listen but there is no follow up or visible action, this will discourage employees. There is no harm in explaining, after listening, why a decision was taken the other way.

Creating a dialogue is important. Effective listening is not a one-way street.

Vincent: Communication is the key to a leader's ability to lead successfully. Communication is critical to building relationships, solving problems, reducing conflict and getting the job done. 'What do you think?' is one of the best questions a leader can ask to open up communication. That question can be asked in many ways, settings and methods. Progressive leaders ensure they have multiple channels set up for listening purposes. Listening, when done well, creates an environment of safety for all employees. It is our experience that leaders who listen are able to create relationships that are trustworthy, transparent and encourage loyalty. Leaders who listen well are also in a much better position to lead their increasingly diverse and multigenerational workforce.

R&C: To what extent can continuous listening be a factor in building trust outside the organisation, among vendors, customers and other stakeholders?

Moosmayer: If we consider the compliance and integrity sector, vendors, customers and other stakeholders should have access to whistleblower hotlines and similar channels for listening because the culture and reputation of a corporation is not built on employees alone, but also on a fair and

open dialogue with the 'outside world'. Compliance teams must listen to third parties outside the company and treat their issues the same way as internal complaints.

Vincent: Providing communication channels to vendors, customers and other stakeholders encourages them to speak up about issues, concerns, violations or suggestions. In turn, this contributes to better service and reputation. If continuous listening becomes part of the culture of the organisation, employees are more likely to listen to, engage with and pass on feedback from customers and stakeholders. This can lead to better services or products. It also helps to build trust between the organisation and those outside the organisation, reflecting that the organisation cares, wants to hear and will take appropriate action. Creating channels for stakeholders to participate in a continuous listening strategy is a way to publicise the values of the organisation and make them real, in a way that a policy or document posted online cannot do. Mechanisms like ethics reporting systems are one of the ways that outside stakeholders like vendors, customers and others provide information and feedback to the organisation.

Debnath: Within the concept of a 'cultural contract', two-way information flow can be extended to a company's business partners through methods such as allowing externals to use

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*Michelle Vincent,
ClearView Strategic Partners Inc.*

compliance reporting hotlines, and holding events to share ideas and learning with one or two key business partners at a time. Having meaningful dialogue and really hearing business partners on important issues are critical elements of building and maintaining successful relationships with them. Companies operate through their human actors. Those human actors interact considerably with external parties and business partners, which is the area with the greatest regulatory and business risks. This interface also gives rise to considerable business opportunity. Business partners who feel confident in the company's offerings and its

employees' competence and trustworthiness are much more likely to do business with it.

R&C: What is the relationship between a continuous listening strategy and corporate risk? Can continuous listening mitigate risk?

Debnath: Continuous listening, be it in the form of an ethics and compliance reporting hotline, an internal ombudsman programme or reports to line management, is an essential feature of an effective corporate risk mitigation strategy. There are many ways for employees to externally vent their concerns, or 'whistleblow', not to mention the considerable incentive of eye-wateringly high whistleblower rewards in some jurisdictions. It does not bear contemplation for a company not to have a strategy and mechanism, which is proportionate to its size, business sector, jurisdiction and so on, for the reporting of concerns to the company. A company that receives and investigates whistleblower allegations itself is more able to retain control over what happens next, even if the authorities do subsequently become involved. However, a company that does not have mechanisms to receive and respond to whistleblower allegations is more likely to be on the

back foot by discovering serious issues for the first time when the authorities come knocking on the door.

Vincent: At its core, listening is the gathering of information which leads to knowledge. The trends and patterns that emerge from this information can lead to the identification of risk, be it systemic,

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*Tapan Debnath,
Nokia Corporation*

industry wide or organisation specific. Certain listening methods, such as ethics reporting systems, allow for the identification and mitigation of specific risks, such as ethics risks. Continuous listening moves beyond internal controls and is part of a forward-looking organisation, providing an organisation with information and knowledge, permitting it to correct course and mitigate risks. Once employees know there is an effective

continuous listening channel in place, they are more likely to speak up sooner to avoid or mitigate a risk.

Moosmayer: I once heard a manager say, “If you want to report a risk, you need to be able to give me a solution”. This is definitely not an effective listening strategy and will not mitigate risk; it will just force employees to hide risks. Such a culture of ‘non-listening’ is often the origin of a corporate catastrophe, such as a systematic compliance issue or long hidden and then suddenly exploding technical or commercial business risk. A modern enterprise risk management system must be based on a kind of workshop atmosphere where listening and open dialogue takes place.

R&C: What has been the impact of new technology on corporate listening strategies?

Vincent: The greatest impact that new technology has had on continuous listening has been on the methods and mechanisms that an organisation can employ. We believe new technology presents a great opportunity to organisations. We see three main ways organisations can use new technological tools. First, to ‘listen’, companies can utilise tools such as employee idea tracking and voting software, online platforms for former employees to review their experience, ethics reporting systems or surveying

tools. Second, technology can offer a forum to provide feedback to the organisation, through channels such as senior leadership blogs or intranet sites. Third, technology can consolidate their findings and identify trends and patterns. These tools can be leveraged to address the transformation of the traditional workforce. With employees and contractors located around the world, the rise of the gig economy and younger and more technologically inclined workers, organisations use technological feedback mechanisms that allow them to engage their diverse workforces in a continuous listening strategy.

Moosmayer: New technology has had a considerable impact, some of it good, some not so good. Social media has created ‘speak-up’ possibilities nobody would have envisaged 10 years ago. As a company leader, you can now be much more engaged and listen to thousands of employees by using social media channels, getting real-time feedback in a fast and agile way. The ‘not so good’ derives from the misuse of social media and substance-less or defamatory comments and statements made by individuals. Attempts to institute a ‘code of conduct’ for social media have enjoyed very limited success in society, and corporations are part of that society. Effective and continuous listening requires two key factors, an attentive listener and a fair-minded speaker.

Debnath: Perhaps the greatest impact of new technology for corporate listening strategies is the ability to leverage new and sophisticated tools to provide real-time and holistic data on business issues, challenges and opportunities, and on the company's response and the effectiveness of such responses. Additionally, the growth of machine learning as a 'listening' mechanism in compliance, for example to spot potential 'red flags' in vast quantities of data by analysing patterns and looking for minute anomalies, is an extremely exciting area. However, harvesting vast quantities of data requires awareness and respect for data privacy legislation. Data privacy is now very much intertwined with the strategies a company implements to listen and respond to what it hears, what it can glean from analysing the data it has available to it, and how it utilises all this information to mitigate risks and takes advantage of business opportunities. **RC**





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ClearView Strategic Partners connects people and organisations. ClearView specialises in ethics reporting and whistleblowing solutions for organisations of all sizes and serves clients who share its passion for best practice in workplace culture, ethics and corporate listening. ClearView’s solutions support its clients’ listening strategies by allowing them to listen, analyse and respond to their employees and stakeholders. ClearView’s purpose is to empower people to make safer, more responsible organisations and is committed to upholding its reputation for delivering a superior product, a robust security platform and outstanding client service.

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