

Active listening by managers can reduce employees' feelings of job insecurity

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Between the financial disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic and the pervasive lack of stability throughout a rapidly shifting global economy, many workers will face job insecurity at some point in their careers.

Researchers at Penn State, MacEwan University, and University of Central Florida have collaborated on a new study that examined how managers' [active listening](#) relates to their employees' sense of [job insecurity](#) during difficult times within companies. Active listening by managers can improve employees' senses of personal control over their careers, and thereby reduce their anxiety about potential job loss.

Job insecurity, the state of worrying about possible layoffs, can harm workers' well-being as much as actually being laid off. Worrying about layoffs can lead to [chronic stress](#), and many studies have documented the harmful effects of stress including sleep loss, poor eating, and higher blood pressure. In the workplace, this stress leads to a decrease in job satisfaction, less adherence to safety behaviors, and poorer performance. When people face long-term job insecurity, their well-being decreases continually over time. Both employees and employers have many reasons for wanting to reduce the amount of time that employees suffer from job insecurity.

Phillip Jolly, Elizabeth M. King Early Career Professor and assistant professor of hospitality management at Penn State, and his collaborators conducted research in a large corporation where layoffs had been announced but not executed. Their work was published in the *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology*.

"Managers in organizations generally do not have control over whether layoffs occur or who will get laid off," Jolly explained. "Unfortunately, when layoffs are imminent, managers often become withdrawn because they do not possess much more information about the future than their employees. Fortunately, there is something managers can do to support their employee's wellbeing. They can increase their active listening about employee's concerns."

Active listening comprises three basic elements: Attention,

comprehension, and acceptance. The listener demonstrates careful attention to the speaker through body language. The listener also demonstrates comprehension, often by restating what the speaker has said. Additionally, the listener shows that they are open to the speaker's point of view and concerns. Research shows that this engagement and understanding facilitate a deeper connection than typically results from passive listening in routine conversation.

Active listening helps workers in a couple of ways. When managers increase active listening, workers feel like they are supported and valued within their company. When a person feels valued by their manager, they are more hopeful about their employment future.

Additionally, when a manager engages in active listening, it provides a safe space for the worker to verbalize and process their experiences and concerns. When provided with this safe space, the worker can often identify resources at his or her disposal, both within the company and outside of it. Understanding their resources can enable the worker to feel that they have more control over their personal situation.

"People want to believe they will be rewarded for hard work, and layoffs underscore how external forces can affect someone's employment more than the quality of their work," said Mindy Shoss, associate professor of psychology at University of Central Florida. "Being actively listened to can help people understand that they are still valued and that they are not helpless in the face of uncertainty."

The researchers found that though active listening is always important, a change in active listening during a time of insecurity can be traced to changes in the way an employee thinks and feels.

"Our work suggests that employees are sensitive to even small changes in a manager's listening when their job is potentially on the line," said

Tiffany Kriz, assistant professor of organizational behavior, human resources management, and management at MacEwan University.

"People tend to take note of what their managers do at any time, but in an environment of uncertainty they are paying even closer attention to what their managers do. A change in listening quality can send a powerful signal to the employees, while also helping them process the situation they find themselves in."

Research on active listening originated in the field of counseling psychology, and the researchers emphasized that active listening can be useful anytime people face anxiety.

"The active listening described in this research can be applied in families or non-profit organizations or wherever groups face uncertainty," Jolly said. "Listening is a powerful tool in every aspect of our lives. As we look forward to the post-pandemic world, we know that change and upheaval are inevitable in key industries like travel, hospitality, and retail. Hopefully, managers will learn the skills they need to support their employees during uncertain times."

More information: Tiffany D. Kriz et al, Coping with organizational layoffs: Managers' increased active listening reduces job insecurity via perceived situational control., *Journal of Occupational Health Psychology* (2021). [DOI: 10.1037/ocp0000295](https://doi.org/10.1037/ocp0000295)

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