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## Listening beyond the self: How organizations create direct involvement

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## Listening beyond the self: How organizations create direct involvement

### Abstract

A two-year ethnographic study examines how two U.S. investment banks managed bankers' uncertainty differently and achieved distinct forms of participant transformation, including listening outcomes. People Bank reduced uncertainty by conveying abstract concepts. Socialized bankers exhibited a preferential orientation toward abstractions, including their own identities, and often failed to listen to and use concrete cues for action. To highlight situational uniqueness, Organization Bank amplified uncertainty. Since situational demands thus exceeded what the bankers knew and appeared too complex to be forced into pre-existing categories and scripts, bankers could not resort to abstractions. Over time, bankers' initial preoccupation with abstractions was cleared away, enabling them to more effectively listen and use situational cues. We develop the notion of direct involvement to explain this transformation away from self-involvement and toward heightened situational sensitivity.

### Keywords

listening, identity, uncertainty, cognition, transformation

### Comments

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## 3 **Listening beyond the self: How organizations create** 4 **direct involvement**

5 **Alexandra Michel · Stanton Wortham**

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20  
21 **Keywords** Listening · Identity · Uncertainty · Cognition · Transformation  
22

### 23 **Introduction**

24 Good listeners must do some of what L. Waks (in preparation) calls "apophatic" listening,  
25 opening the self to the other and holding one's own categories in abeyance. If a listener  
26 reacts to another by immediately categorizing the experience and the information using  
27 pre-existing categories, it is impossible to learn something genuinely new. In this article we  
28 describe our own version of apophatic listening, which we have called "direct  
29 involvement" (Michel and Wortham forthcoming), and we describe how one investment  
30 bank socialized new members into being more directly involved and less self-involved. We

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31 present brief illustrations from these data, although this short article cannot present an  
32 empirically compelling case.

33 Working and learning are traditionally structured in people-centric ways. This approach  
34 attends closely to people's existing knowledge and abilities, and assumes that people only  
35 work and learn effectively when the demands placed on them are close to their abilities.  
36 For example, organizations typically structure roles such that they are associated with clear  
37 goals, standards, and responsibilities. Role occupants are systematically selected and  
38 prepared accordingly, often by advancing them gradually to more central roles. Basic  
39 principles and techniques of learning—such as keeping the learner in a zone of proximal  
40 development or scaffolding—are all based on assessing what a person currently knows and  
41 stretching the person gradually beyond this current state of knowledge. This article  
42 sketches the organization-centric work structure at “Organization Bank,” a highly  
43 successful U.S. investment bank. In this structure, the bankers' cognitive limits were  
44 irrelevant. Bankers were assigned to projects purely based on availability, irrespective of  
45 roles and existing knowledge. To complete their tasks, they were not only forced to draw  
46 on the organization's resources, including their own skills, but also other people, templates,  
47 and technology. The article documents how the participants who experienced these work  
48 structures changed fundamentally, both in how they approached tasks and other people and  
49 in how they conceived of their selves.

50 Drawing on data from a two-year ethnography of two U.S. investment banks that also  
51 included “People Bank” (Michel and Wortham, forthcoming), the article compares two  
52 alternative ways of structuring work and learning—what we call a “people-centric”  
53 perspective and an “organization-centric” perspective—examining their consequences for  
54 the people and organizations that experience them. It shows that when work and learning  
55 are structured in the traditional people-centric way, participants often fail to recognize and  
56 listen to the important contribution of social resources and resort more often to their own  
57 mental resources. While social resources still matter in such cases, their impact is blunted  
58 and distorted by how people put them to use. Since our informants in these structures  
59 oriented towards abstractions—general types of situations, pre-established scripts, and  
60 typical kinds of people—they often failed to listen to, notice, and use concrete cues for  
61 action. When work and learning are structured in the more organization-centric way,  
62 informants keenly listened to and used social resources more effectively because their  
63 preoccupation with abstractions and their own personal characteristics were cleared away.  
64 People could not resort to abstractions, because situational demands usually exceeded what  
65 the bankers knew and thus appeared too complex to be forced into pre-existing categories  
66 and scripts. One of the article's central tasks is to generate an understanding of these  
67 distinct ways in which people can attend to and use the social resources available to  
68 them—the different forms of resource involvement—by tracing how these forms evolved  
69 over the period of two years. There were two primary research questions:

- 70 (1) How do the two banks structure working and learning differently?  
71 (2) What are the distinct consequences for the banks' participants?

72 Our distinction between people-centric and organization-centric ways of attending to tasks  
73 illuminates the question of how people can listen, because listening in these two ways has  
74 quite distinct results. The examples illustrate similar distinctions made by J. Garrison (in  
75 preparation), Haroutunian-Gordon (in press), L. Waks (in preparation), and others. Our  
76 examples also show how people not only listen to other people, but also can “listen” to the  
77 cues given by task structures and objects, along the lines suggested by accounts of situated



78 cognition (Hutchins 1999). We argue that listening is not only achieved through personal  
79 discipline aimed at self-transformation, but also as a by-product of organizational  
80 processes aimed at other goals. One can become a more or less self-involved listener by  
81 virtue of participating in distinct types of organizational environments, without intending  
82 or explicitly reflecting on these modes of listening.

83 In sketching answers to our research questions, the first section below reviews the  
84 contrasting practices employed in the two banks. The following section describes how  
85 these different practices affected the development of the participants, with a focus on their  
86 differential ability to listen.

## 87 **Reducing uncertainty at People Bank**

88 Both banks faced a changing environment in the late 20th century, which increased the  
89 uncertainty of a banker's job, as they had to attend to a wider range of sometimes  
90 conflicting economic, legal, cultural, and accounting factors. The two banks responded to  
91 this increased uncertainty in different ways. People Bank's work practices tried to reduce  
92 uncertainty and simplify banker decision making. Organization Bank's practices tried to  
93 amplify uncertainty so that the bankers could notice and use it, as described in the  
94 following section.

95 People Bank reduced uncertainty through an integrated system of plans and roles. One  
96 aspect of this system was that top management formulated strategies in the form of general  
97 principles and that employees were assigned tasks in accordance with this strategy. For  
98 example, when top management introduced a strategic focus on healthcare business, one  
99 part of the investment banking division was restructured from a focus on products, such as  
100 mergers and acquisitions or corporate finance, to a focus on industry groups, including  
101 healthcare. This system influenced the daily work of the bankers, how they were trained,  
102 assigned to roles and tasks, and evaluated. Bankers in the healthcare focus group, for  
103 instance, were given lists of healthcare companies to call on and specific revenue goals on  
104 which they were regularly reviewed and rewarded.

105 This integrated system reduced uncertainty, because bankers did not need to understand  
106 the bank's external environment, or the fit of their transactions with that of bankers in other  
107 groups. Each banker only needed to focus on one small piece of the bank's business, such  
108 as the list of healthcare companies, and to satisfy a clear standard like an annual revenue  
109 goal. This system reduced uncertainty by orienting bankers towards abstractions, toward  
110 concepts that applied independently of concrete circumstances. People Bank's system did  
111 not allow bankers to make decisions solely with reference to a concrete situation; they were  
112 encouraged to judge the appropriateness of a decision based on its consistency with general  
113 strategies and goals.

114 One illustration of the people-centric aspect of this system is that bankers were staffed  
115 on projects to match their personal expertise. For example, when the bank received a  
116 healthcare sell-side mandate, it staffed bankers with experience in both the healthcare  
117 industry and sell-side assignments. This was an important part of the bank's business  
118 model, which involved selling the knowledge of individual "superstars." Client  
119 presentation books, for instance, highlighted the relevant experience of individual bankers.  
120 Also, individual bankers sought to cultivate a public profile by seeking opportunities to  
121 speak to the press. They tried to attract the attention of potential clients, who often gave the  
122 bank business under the condition that a particular banker works on a deal. This staffing



123 practice reduced banker uncertainty, because bankers only had to master a relatively  
124 limited domain of knowledge.

## 125 **Amplifying uncertainty at Organization Bank**

126 People Bank believed that the bank's business was too uncertain for individual bankers to  
127 comprehend and navigate. As a solution, it oriented bankers *away from* this uncertainty and  
128 towards a limited number of abstract decision making standards. Organization Bank also  
129 recognized that its business was highly uncertain. But it made the unusual choice to orient  
130 bankers *toward* this uncertainty—thus amplifying it—such that bankers would notice and  
131 use it better. Instead of orienting bankers to such abstractions as strategies, roles, and goals,  
132 it withheld them. Bankers were not given plans or targets, and they were not referred to as  
133 having identities as one kind of expert or another. The bankers consequently made  
134 decisions with reference to the concrete details of specific situations. For example,  
135 Organization Bank's top management did not design strategies, but executed deals like  
136 other bankers. The bank did have strategies, but these were not typical top-down plans that  
137 dictated what bankers at lower levels should do. Rather, they were bottom-up and  
138 retrospective, emerging from the choices that bankers at lower levels had made in response  
139 to noticing market opportunity: "We looked back and noticed: 'Gee, we have a healthcare  
140 strategy.'" Instead of telling bankers what to do, the bank guided bankers by continuously  
141 making the consequences of their actions salient. For this purpose, bankers received an  
142 enormous amount of information on a daily basis, including reports about the revenues  
143 they generated, the cost of the resources they used, the time they were allocating to specific  
144 types of transactions, and the deals they had lost to competitors. This information deluge  
145 contrasted not only to People Bank's practices but also contradicted deeply held tenets of  
146 cognitive organization theories, which recommend that organizations should reduce the  
147 information that confronts decision-makers and give them interpretation guidelines. In  
148 contrast, Organization Bank trusted bankers to react productively to often conflicting  
149 imperatives and believed that the person who knows the most concrete detail would make  
150 the best decision.

151 One illustration of Organization Banks more organization-centric approach is that it  
152 staffed bankers purely based on availability versus based on their individual expertise.  
153 When clients requested a particular banker to work on a deal, the banker who staffed  
154 projects usually said: "Our bankers are fungible." When one Organization Banker went on  
155 vacation or was overloaded, other bankers could seamlessly substitute on projects. These  
156 unexpected substitutions onto unfamiliar projects were one important source of persistent  
157 uncertainty for bankers at all levels. This approach to staffing meant that bankers often had  
158 to deal with situations for which they had not yet formed concepts that they could apply,  
159 either because they were inexperienced or because the situations were inherently unpre-  
160 dictable. A People Bank VP noted that this was "unthinkable" at People Bank: "It just  
161 doesn't work that way. You can't replicate what your colleague knows at the drop of the  
162 hat." Also, Organization Bank's client presentations primarily focused on the resources of  
163 the bank. They did not make reference to the backgrounds of individual bankers.

164 In summary, the description of Organization Bank reveals practices that amplified  
165 uncertainty and thereby prevented participants from approaching situations with a set of  
166 abstract rules and concepts. Due to the absence of such general guidance, newcomers had  
167 to attend keenly to the concrete guidance available in particular situations, including task



168 structures, data, technology, and other people. In this more direct involvement, it was not  
169 clear to the participants what the relevant norms and concepts were.

## 170 Participant transformation at People Bank

171 The data show how the work practices in People Bank reinforced in participants what  
172 Heidegger (1962) calls an “abstract attitude.” That attitude appears as the participants’  
173 tendency to approach situations in a deductive manner, oriented relatively more by the  
174 schemas and scripts the organizations made salient and relatively less by the concrete  
175 aspects of particular situations. This attitude prevented participants from listening  
176 attentively to the social resources they need to complete their task.

177 Newcomers at People Bank and Organization Bank behaved in similar ways when they  
178 entered the banks, which is evident that the differences in development described in this  
179 section did not result from selection effects, but instead stemmed from the distinct  
180 organizational practices at the two banks. Each set of newcomers identified strongly with  
181 their bank. They displayed bank paraphernalia in their cube and at home, talked the bank  
182 up to their friends and family, and took criticism of the bank personally. A majority of  
183 them agreed with the statements that “fulfilling my role expectations is at least as  
184 important as fulfilling the expectations of my family” (76% of People Bankers, 71% of  
185 Organization Bankers) and that “I accept the bank’s expectations as my own” (90% of  
186 People Bankers, 93% of Organization Bankers). All bankers also initially experienced task  
187 and identity related uncertainty. They wanted to know what was expected of them on  
188 specific tasks and what kind of person they were going to be in this context, which was  
189 partly determined by the social categories available in the new context. For example, one  
190 People Banker explained:

191 Whenever you are in a new group of people, things sort themselves out. In high  
192 school there were the jocks and the geeks kind of thing. In college, people looked at  
193 each other and thought who was most likely to succeed. ... I am curious what the  
194 groups are here, like you want to know what kind of person you are going to be here.

195 One important practice through which People Bank reduced this uncertainty was assigning  
196 bankers to organizational roles, such as analysts or associates, which were associated with  
197 explicit behavioral expectations and which provided an identity.

198 Over the next two years, the People Bankers developed more elaborate concepts,  
199 behavioral scripts, tastes, and narratives to represent themselves as members of their social  
200 context. During the first six months, bankers learned the meaning of such social concepts,  
201 but were not supposed to apply these concepts to themselves, because they were told that  
202 this was a time of learning. As the bankers integrated the bank’s concepts into their  
203 identity, however, these social standards nonetheless became infused with personal  
204 significance. This personal significance then influenced how bankers interpreted and acted  
205 in situations. For example, bankers often stayed longer than needed at work, to fit in with  
206 the hard-driving work-ethic:

207 When you leave before 10 or 11 [at night], people say things like “Half a day  
208 today?” or “Thanks for stopping by,” making you feel like a slacker. ... And I just  
209 don’t want to be that kind of person. (People Bank analyst)

210 This example illustrates how bankers made decisions based on the desire to be a particular  
211 kind of person. After six months, when the official learning time was over, the bankers’





212 self-reported stress levels rose from “high” to “extremely high,” revealing the terror they  
213 felt at the prospect of failing on standards that they now considered part of their identities.  
214 Since these identity standards became so significant to the bankers, and because bankers  
215 used them so often to interpret situations, these standards eventually became activated  
216 *automatically*—that is, without the bankers’ knowledge or ability to control this  
217 activation—even when standards were not relevant to a particular situation. For example,  
218 because the People Bankers identified with being experts—which meant that they would  
219 give advice to a client based on their superior knowledge—they often did not recognize  
220 situations in which the client had superior knowledge. In these situations, the People  
221 Bankers sometimes failed to ask questions of the client and acted with confidence on their  
222 incorrect assumptions. This evidence indicates that People Bankers most often based their  
223 actions on what was relevant to their identities. In doing so they often failed to notice what  
224 was relevant to the situations they were acting in. The internalization of social standards  
225 resulted in a highly charged, self-oriented psychological situation that prevented the  
226 bankers from noticing and acting on cues in a specific social situation. In such examples of  
227 *identity induced involvement*, behavior was relatively more determined by a banker’s inner  
228 mental resources—their habitual identity schema—and relatively less by available social  
229 resources.

### 230 **Participant transformation at Organization Bank**

231 The work practices at Organization Bank, in contrast, encouraged in their participants a  
232 more immediate or *direct involvement*. In this alternative, more concrete orientation that  
233 enhanced participants’ ability to listen, relevant concepts emerged more inductively, from  
234 a relatively immediate or direct connection among the organization resources that together  
235 produced particular solutions. While participants drew on their prior notions, they also  
236 opened themselves to new understandings.

237 Identity development took place differently at Organization Bank. Like the People  
238 Bankers, the Organization Bankers were assigned to roles. But these roles were mere  
239 formalities. Role responsibilities were constantly over-ridden by changing task demands  
240 and thus neither guided action nor served as a basis for self-definition. In general, the  
241 bankers found it difficult to find basic principles of orientation:

242 I know that this ain’t going to be 8-hour days. But, I mean, can you at least give me  
243 some guidelines beyond that? Sometimes people work around the clock for weeks in  
244 a row, 7 days a week. But then people also sometimes come to work at 1 pm, go to  
245 the gym during all hours of the day, sometimes they don’t show up at all because  
246 they just decided that they had been working too hard and are taking a day off, and  
247 then there is the Barney’s warehouse sale when people are just out the door and come  
248 back later with huge shopping bags, walking right by Joe [the head of the depart-  
249 ment].

250 When they asked senior bankers what made a banker successful, they usually heard that it  
251 was “task-orientation.” We derived the analytic construct of direct involvement from this  
252 task-orientation concept used by our participants. One VP explained that: “Task-orienta-  
253 tion means that you do what needs to get done in the way most appropriate to the task at  
254 hand.” Task-orientation differed from the general standards at People Bank because it  
255 pointed bankers to the needs of specific situations, as opposed to stable abstractions. But  
256 the junior Organization Bankers initially misinterpreted task-orientation by judging it with





257 reference to the banker who displayed this attribute. Their underlying question was: “How  
258 will I complete the tasks that are assigned to me?” They tried to use their task performance  
259 to demonstrate identity traits to themselves and others. For example, one junior banker  
260 worked all night despite severe pneumonia and continued to work while vomiting blood.  
261 The banker explained his behavior with a desire to “prove myself and show that I can get  
262 the task done.” This behavior, although extreme, was similar to the junior People Bankers  
263 who also prioritized identity concerns.

264 But while the People Bankers persisted in this pattern of behavior throughout our  
265 observation period of two years, after about six months the Organization Bankers’ focus  
266 shifted to “How will I complete the tasks that are assigned to me?”—emphasizing the  
267 “how” instead of the “I.” They moved away from a concern with identity and towards a  
268 concern with tasks. At this time, the Organization Bankers’ self-reported stress level  
269 dropped from “extremely high” (“these are the most grueling times of my life”) to  
270 “high” (“intense but manageable”), reversing the change that we observed in the People  
271 Bankers. According to the Organization Bankers, the pivotal experience that reduced their  
272 stress level was that they were consistently able to complete the projects that were assigned  
273 to them, regardless of their own amount of knowledge and skill, because the bank’s  
274 resources complemented their own resources. Whatever one banker did not know, he or she  
275 could get from this resource pool.

276 You know, I eventually figured it out. This is not about me, it’s not about how smart  
277 I am. This is about what you can do when you pull extraordinary resources together. I  
278 might not know whether the client should sell the business, spin it off, whatever. I  
279 might not even be able to do half of the analyses that I am responsible for. But I can  
280 still get it done and get it done well every single time because of the resources here.

281 Different bankers had the same insight because the bank’s organizational processes  
282 facilitated this particular insight. The bank did so not by circulating norms, rules, and  
283 shared understandings and encouraging internalization—which is how culture normally  
284 operates—but by *blocking* norms and rules, by foregrounding uncertainty, and not letting  
285 junior bankers develop stable scripts and identities.

286 Once they achieved this insight, Organization Bankers approached situations differ-  
287 ently. For example, they paid careful attention in meetings to match what the client’s needs  
288 with the most suitable organizational resources:

289 Before, I used to have this knot in my stomach in each and every meeting because I  
290 was just waiting for someone to ask me something that I was clueless about and  
291 worrying about what to say and about losing credibility....Now these are the moments  
292 I live for....I ask tons of questions...then I literally say it flat out: I don’t have the  
293 answer for you right now. But we’ll get our heads together and make sure you get the  
294 best advice possible.

295 This quote shows that the Organization Bankers continued to experience high-task  
296 uncertainty (“I don’t have the answer”) but that their attitude towards this uncertainty had  
297 changed. While they previously disguised their lack of knowledge to protect their identities  
298 as competent bankers, they subsequently used it as a cue to guide data collection (“I ask  
299 tons of questions”). They had to listen attentively in order to identify the relevant  
300 organizational resources. In contrast, the People Bankers usually completed many different  
301 analyses before a meeting and spent the meeting giving advice, as opposed to asking  
302 questions and listening. They avoided admitting incomplete knowledge, explaining their



303 behavior with comments like: “I am supposed to be the expert. That’s why they pay me the  
304 big bucks.”

305 As the Organization Bankers’ focus shifted from a preoccupation with their identities to  
306 an orientation toward the task, their identity-related statements and actions changed, too.  
307 For example, after about six months Organization Bankers had more difficulty responding  
308 to ongoing questions about banker identity, such as “How would you describe your self or  
309 your identity?” While the People Bankers continued to respond to such questions  
310 immediately and with great elaboration, the otherwise eloquent Organization Bankers  
311 started stuttering, eventually saying something like “I just don’t think about these things  
312 that much.” This sort of response is difficult to explain given the existing literature. Since  
313 people use their identities consistently for self-regulation (Carver and Scheier 1981) and  
314 because schemas that are used more frequently are more cognitively accessible (Bargh  
315 1989; Higgins and King 1981), it should have been easier over time for the Organization  
316 Bankers to talk about their identities. The bankers also started to refer to themselves as  
317 “resources.” According to existing theories, an identity is an attribute of a person that it is  
318 stable across situations. In contrast, a resource cannot be defined apart from the particular  
319 situation to which it contributes. We found that the Organization Bankers came to conceive  
320 of themselves in a fundamentally different way—not as a biologically or psychologically  
321 bounded entity that can be classified via abstract categories but as one aspect of a larger  
322 process. The situation-specific attributes of this process, not the situation-independent  
323 attributes of a banker identity, determined what the banker did. The bankers thus enacted  
324 “self” more as a process of contributing—a kind of doing—instead of as a stable way of  
325 being. For example, in sharp contrast to the People Bankers, the Organization Bankers over  
326 time became *less* likely to act as socially recognizable kinds of people. After about six  
327 months, the Organization Bankers were *less* likely to supply general identity scripts to  
328 situations and more likely to display “new” behaviors that were called forth by the  
329 concrete attributes of particular situations—a sensitivity to the concrete that they refined  
330 over time.

## 331 Conclusions and discussion

332 In this brief article we have only been able to give a flavor of the difference between  
333 People Bank and Organization Bank. Our larger work (Michel and Wortham, forthcoming)  
334 provides more detail on the banks and on two sets of classrooms, in which similar people-  
335 and organization-centric learning processes could be observed. But this brief sketch  
336 suffices to show how opening oneself to the situation and backgrounding one’s identity and  
337 habitual ways of thought can be a more productive form of listening, learning, and problem  
338 solving. We have also sketched how Organization Bank socialized newcomers into this  
339 alternative mode of listening and learning—by augmenting uncertainty and withholding  
340 stable identity categories. This strategy creates significant anxiety initially, as newcomers  
341 struggle to determine relevant categories in the way that they have always done. But after  
342 several months, most learn to approach tasks through more direct involvement, sensitive to  
343 the resources of the situation instead of oriented by stable pre-existing categories.

344 The article hints at a theme that is prominent in our larger data set. It shows that when  
345 individuals listen to the cues provided by a broad range of organizational resources—  
346 including other people but also objects and reports—they thereby interconnect the  
347 organization’s resources to achieve a more collective form of cognition described by



348 Hutchins (1999), Sandelands and Stablein, (1987); Tyre and von Hippel (1997); and  
349 Tsoukas (1996), among others. More complex cognitive systems are better able to  
350 understand and adapt to complex environments (Weick and Roberts 1993). When indi-  
351 viduals fail to listen to such cues, the organization's resources remain unconnected and are  
352 reduced to the more limited capacity of the individual mind. It is, therefore, important to go  
353 beyond the study of listening as an interpersonal phenomenon.

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356

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