

Active Listening, Storytelling, and the Employee Experience: A Phenomenological Study of Leadership Communication, Stress, and Work-Life Balance

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Abstract: This phenomenological study explores how employees experience leadership communication, focusing on active listening and storytelling as relational practices that influence work-life balance, stress, and the employee experience. Guided by Moustakas's qualitative framework, data were collected through a two-step process consisting of a written reflection questionnaire, followed by semi-structured interviews, to capture participants' lived experiences. Data were analyzed using iterative coding procedures to identify meaning units and develop thematic clusters. Findings show that active listening provides validation, clarity, and emotional support, while storytelling aids sensemaking and strengthens shared purpose. Together, these behaviors shape employees' well-being, boundary management, and commitment. The study contributes new insight into how communication functions as a psychological and relational resource in contemporary workplaces.

Keywords: Active Listening, Storytelling, Work-Life Balance, Employee Stress, Turnover Intention, Leadership Communication, Phenomenology

Introduction

Leadership communication is crucial in shaping how employees interpret their work environment, handle competing demands, and manage organizational pressures. Recent research emphasizes the growing importance of relational and emotional communication processes, especially in hybrid work contexts characterized by increased uncertainty and changing employee expectations (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022; Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Post-pandemic work setups have amplified boundary-related stressors, making empathetic, clear, and supportive communication vital for employee well-being and engagement (Lundqvist & Wallo, 2023; Mazzetti & Schaufeli, 2022).

Work-life balance, workplace stress, and turnover intention are widely recognized indicators of organizational health. Although structural conditions such as workload, flexibility, and job design influence these outcomes, research consistently shows that communication quality plays a key role in shaping how employees interpret demands and experience stress (Haar et al., 2014; Cho et al., 2025). Active listening and storytelling have become two communication behaviors that promote psychological safety, strengthen leader-member relationships, and improve emotional connection through validation, clarity, and shared understanding (Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021; Auvinen et al., 2013).

Active listening helps employees by decreasing uncertainty, validating concerns, and promoting open dialogue. Storytelling aids in sensemaking by helping employees understand organizational expectations, identity, and purpose. Together, these practices shape how individuals experience balance, stress, and attachment to the organization,

serving as relational resources within frameworks like the Job Demands–Resources model and psychological safety theory.

The literature on work-life balance, stress, turnover intention, listening, and storytelling offers a multidimensional view of employee experience. These connected areas show how communication functions not just as information sharing but also as a process of creating meaning and building relationships that influence well-being and retention.

Questions That Guide the Research

This study is guided by the following phenomenological research question: How do employees experience leadership communication behaviors, specifically active listening and storytelling, and how do these behaviors influence perceptions of work-life balance, stress, and retention?

Method for Reviewing and Analyzing the Literature

This study uses a narrative synthesis based on qualitative evidence review, focusing on conceptual, thematic, and contextual analysis rather than statistics. It follows guidelines for transparent search, clear screening, and consistent analysis (Bengtsson, 2016; Nowell et al., 2017). The goal is to understand how leadership communication, especially active listening and storytelling, affects employees' work-life balance, stress, and turnover intentions.

Keywords and Search Strategy

Searches were conducted in PsycINFO, APA PsycArticles, EBSCOhost, ABI/INFORM, Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar for studies published between 2015 and 2025. Backward and forward citation tracing was also used to identify additional sources relevant to leadership communication, active listening, storytelling, work-life balance, stress, and employee well-being.

The following representative Boolean search terms were applied and adapted for each database:

- "(active listening OR empathic listening) AND (leadership communication OR supervisor)."
- "(storytelling OR narrative communication) AND (employee well-being OR turnover intention)."
- "(work life balance OR boundary management) AND (hybrid OR remote) AND communication."
- "(psychological safety) AND (communication OR leadership)."
- "(job embeddedness) AND (communication OR support)."
- "(JD-R OR job demands resources) AND (leadership OR communication OR listening)."
- "(workplace well-being OR stress reduction OR turnover intention) AND leadership communication"

Search syntax was adjusted as needed for individual databases.

Inclusion/Exclusion Criteria

This review examined 118 peer-reviewed sources from 2015 to 2025, spanning organizational communication, leadership, psychology, and workplace well-being. Studies were included if they focused on leadership communication, active listening, storytelling, work-life balance, stress, or turnover intention within organizational or occupational settings. Non-scholarly pieces, studies unrelated to workplace communication, articles lacking methodological clarity, and research outside organizational contexts, unless their

findings were clearly relevant to employee-leader dynamics, were excluded. This screening and selection process follows recommended standards for transparent and rigorous evidence synthesis (Page et al., 2021; Nowell et al., 2017).

Screening, Selection, and Analysis

The database search yielded 1,036 records. After removing duplicates, 684 titles and abstracts were screened, with 198 articles reviewed in full. A total of 118 sources met the inclusion criteria and were synthesized.

A PRISMA flow diagram summarizes the identification and screening process.

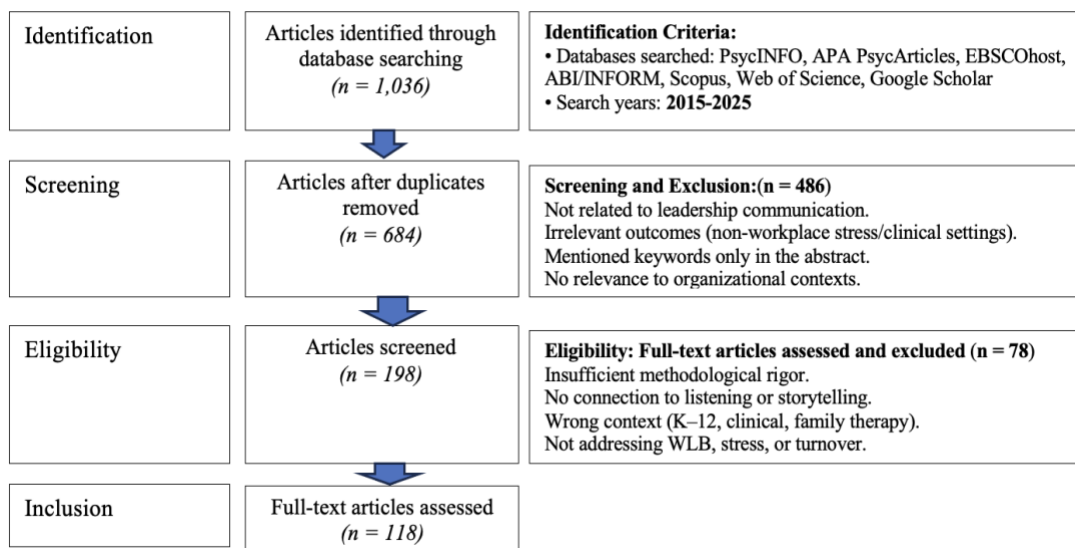


Figure 1. PRISMA procedure for this study

Literature Source Summary

A total of 118 sources were included in this review, of which 87 (72%) were peer-reviewed, and 58 (47%) were published between 2020 and 2025. Table 1 summarizes the evidence base.

Table 1. Literature Source

Metric	Count	Percent
Total references cited	118	—
Peer-reviewed scholarly sources	87	72%
Sources published between 2020–2025	58	47%

Historical Background

Research on leadership communication has evolved considerably, shifting from traditional, top-down models focused on control and efficiency toward relational and narrative approaches that emphasize meaning-making and employee experience. Early organizational scholarship saw communication mainly as a directive tool, but the human relations movement expanded this view by acknowledging interpersonal needs and the importance of supportive communication as vital to workplace function. Modern research highlights

communication as a psychological and relational resource that influences employee stress, engagement, work–life balance, and retention (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Edmondson, 2018). Narrative and relational leadership theories further stress the role of storytelling in creating shared understanding, facilitating sensemaking, and helping employees handle uncertainty (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000; Denning, 2006). In the post-pandemic context, the need for clear, empathetic, and supportive workplace communication has increased, underscoring the importance of examining leadership behaviors that affect employee well-being.

Theoretical Frameworks Relevant to the Study

Leadership communication, especially active listening and storytelling, functions within various foundational organizational and psychological theories that explain why these behaviors impact employees' experiences of work–life balance, stress, and turnover intention. These frameworks offer the conceptual foundation for the study by showing that employee perceptions evolve through relational, cognitive, and emotional interactions with leaders.

Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Model

The Job Demand-Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017) explains how job demands drain energy and increase stress, while job resources boost motivation, resilience, and well-being. Demands such as workload, emotional labor, and role ambiguity lead to strain and burnout, whereas resources like clear communication, organizational guidance, and supervisory support help buffer stress and maintain engagement (Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Active listening functions as an interpersonal resource because it offers validation, clarity, and emotional reassurance, which enhance an employee's sense of control and reduce stress (Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson, 2020). Storytelling acts as a cognitive and meaning-making resource that helps employees interpret challenges, grasp organizational purpose, and incorporate their experiences into shared narratives (Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 2000).

Together, these communication behaviors reduce ambiguity, support meaning-making, and reinforce resilience pathways that help employees manage stress, maintain balance, and lower turnover intentions even in demanding environments. Although the JD-R model recognizes communication as a core resource, it does not specify the relational processes through which leaders shape employees' psychological experiences. This gap emphasizes the importance of examining active listening and storytelling as distinct but complementary communication practices.

Social Exchange Theory

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964) explains workplace relationships as ongoing exchanges shaped by trust, reciprocity, and perceptions of fairness. Communication behaviors are central to these exchanges because employees assess a leader's actions to determine whether the relationship feels balanced and mutually supportive. Supportive communication shows investment and builds commitment, while inconsistent or neglectful communication indicates inequity and increases tension.

Empirical evidence demonstrates that leaders who practice empathetic and attentive listening build trust and foster reciprocity, thereby reducing withdrawal and enhancing commitment (Lloyd et al., 2015; Itzhakov et al., 2022). Conversely, communication inconsistency or emotional neglect often creates a sense of imbalance, leading to emotional exhaustion and higher turnover intentions (Wen et al., 2021). Storytelling also plays a role

in this exchange by conveying transparency, authenticity, and relational openness. This theoretical perspective explains why employees view active listening and storytelling as signs of respect and relational duty. When these behaviors happen consistently, employees are likely to respond with loyalty, engagement, and a stronger commitment to the organization. When they are missing, employees feel unsupported and may become disengaged or consider leaving. Social Exchange Theory, therefore, offers a key framework for understanding how communication quality affects well-being and retention.

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) Theory suggests that leaders form different types of relationships with employees, varying in quality based on trust, communication, and mutual support (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995). High-quality exchanges are marked by openness, emotional support, and shared confidence, while low-quality exchanges tend to be more transactional and distant.

Active listening promotes high-quality LMX by demonstrating attentiveness, affirmation, and relational regard, thereby building trust and strengthening the leader-member relationship (Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson, 2020). Storytelling also helps develop LMX by reducing power distance, humanizing leaders, and reinforcing a shared identity through organizational values and experiences (Auvinen et al., 2013; Gill, 2011). These communication practices enhance relational closeness and authenticity, boosting well-being and reducing turnover intention.

Participatory Management Theory

Participatory Management Theory highlights employee involvement, shared decision-making, and open communication. Research indicates that participative leadership boosts collaboration, supports autonomy, and increases psychological empowerment, which, in turn, fosters well-being and reduces workplace stress (Bregenzler et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2022; Usman et al., 2021; Ahad, 2024).

Active listening affirms employee contributions and shows that their views are valued. Storytelling strengthens shared purpose by blending individual experiences into the organization's larger narrative (Denning, 2006; Trabucchi et al., 2022). Work environments where employees feel both heard and involved tend to have higher engagement, less stress, and better retention outcomes (Bregenzler et al., 2020).

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety is a climate in which employees feel comfortable speaking up, asking questions, or admitting mistakes without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999, 2018). Active listening helps create this environment by validating employee experiences and reducing interpersonal risks (Reynolds-Kueny & Shoss, 2020). Telling stories that include vulnerability or shared learning encourages authenticity and supports open dialogue (Gleeson, 2025).

Psychological safety correlates with lower stress, better well-being, and less turnover intention, making it a key concept in modern organizational research (Edmondson, 2018).

Job Embeddedness Theory

Job Embeddedness Theory describes employee retention using the concepts of links, fit, and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001). Communication enhances embeddedness by shaping relational ties and strengthening meaning-based connections.

Active listening strengthens connections by boosting relational support, while storytelling reinforces fit by helping employees understand how their work aligns with organizational values and shared purpose (Gill, 2011). These communication practices increase the perceived sacrifice of leaving and thus reduce turnover intention (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Psychological Contract Theory

Psychological Contract Theory explains the informal expectations employees have about fairness, respect, communication, and support at work (Rousseau, 1995). Attentive listening and clear storytelling show that leaders are fulfilling these expectations, which builds trust and encourages mutual commitment (Lloyd et al., 2015).

In contrast, inconsistent or unclear communication can be seen as a breach of the psychological contract, causing stress, distrust, and increased turnover intentions (Wen et al., 2021). Storytelling can also help repair or clarify expectations by highlighting shared values and aligning experiences with organizational realities (Denning, 2005).

Affective Events Theory (AET)

Affective Events Theory suggests that workplace events trigger emotional responses that influence employee attitudes, satisfaction, and behavioral intentions (Weiss and Cropanzano, 1996). Communication events, including listening interactions, induce positive emotional reactions such as validation, relief, and connection (Iqbal et al., 2025). Storytelling also fosters shared meaning and emotional resonance, especially during times of uncertainty or organizational change (Auvinen et al., 2013).

Because emotional responses are closely connected to stress, engagement, and turnover intentions, communication plays a key role in shaping employees' emotional experiences.

Work-Life Balance

Work-life balance involves the ongoing process where employees manage work duties alongside personal, family, and community roles (Greenhaus & Allen, 2011). Modern research indicates that blurred boundaries of time and space, especially in hybrid and remote settings, compel employees to engage in more active sensemaking about what balance means in everyday life (Cho et al., 2025; Gagnano et al., 2020). A strong balance is associated with higher job satisfaction, greater organizational commitment, and lower burnout, with similar patterns observed across cultures and industries (Haar et al., 2014; Hashim et al., 2022). Organizations that foster boundary clarity through open, communication-rich practices report stronger engagement and better retention, showing that balance is both a structural and relational achievement (Popoola & Fagbola, 2020; Tayfun and Çatır, 2014; Marecki, 2024; Bahrain et al., 2023).

Two mechanisms are essential to the balance process. Spillover affects how emotions and behaviors move across different areas, with positive spillover increasing satisfaction and negative spillover causing conflict and stress (Edwards and Rothbard, 2000; Lee et al., 2021). Quality communication influences balance by helping employees understand expectations, coordinate roles, and manage conflicting demands. Clear and predictable communication promotes coordination and minimizes misunderstandings (Bucăța & Rizescu, 2017; Shockley & Allen, 2013). Leadership behaviors like empathetic listening enhance daily well-being and emotional stability (Jónsdóttir and Kristinsson, 2020; Abrahams and Groysberg, 2021). Within the Job Demands-Resources model, supportive communication acts as a resource that lessens stress and buffers the effects of high job

demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017). Active listening, especially, helps employees express stress, define boundaries, and maintain psychological balance (Tennant et al., 2025; Weston Smyth, 2025).

Narrative and sensemaking research further show that employees interpret workloads, expectations, and identity through ongoing processes of meaning-making (Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000). Leadership communication offers narrative frameworks that help employees handle competing demands and understand organizational expectations. Stories that emphasize coping strategies, autonomy, or boundary protection normalize healthy practices and reinforce resilience (Denning, 2002; Serrat, 2017; McCann et al., 2019). Storytelling also supports the sharing of tacit knowledge and strengthens shared norms in complex environments (Wijetunge, 2012; Bietti et al., 2019).

A growing body of evidence shows that balance improves when communication is clear, consistent, and emotionally supportive. Leaders who set expectations and protect boundaries promote healthier alignment between work and nonwork roles (Levin, 2022; Shockley & Allen, 2013). Research in international contexts similarly finds that relational communication enhances psychological safety, well-being, and flourishing (Azila-Gbetteo et al., 2024; Bahrain et al., 2023). Listening and perspective-taking reduce anxiety, build trust, and reinforce boundary stability (Weston Smyth, 2025; Tennant et al., 2025). Cultural values shape how employees interpret roles and boundaries, making narrative framing and modeling important for cross-cultural balance outcomes (Huang, 2024; Komariah & Nihayah, 2023).

Although there is widespread agreement, findings remain mixed on flexibility and remote work. Some studies show that flexibility boosts autonomy, while others find it can increase stress when communication norms are weak (Cho et al., 2025; Levin, 2022). Remote work might give some employees more control but blur boundaries for others (Gragano et al., 2020; Albright et al., 2022). Professional identity can also make it harder to detach from work (Bester, 2012). Digital communication provides clarity but can also lead to overload and intrude on personal time (Chang, 2024; Tsipursky, 2023). These tensions emphasize that communication quality is a key factor that influences whether flexibility helps or hinders work-life balance.

Stress Reduction

Workplace stress has increased in the post-pandemic era, becoming a significant threat to employee health, engagement, and retention (APA, 2023; Howard & Houry, 2024; SHRM, 2025). Stress occurs when job demands exceed available resources, leading to emotional, cognitive, and physiological strain (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Maulik, 2017). Digitally driven environments heighten these pressures as employees struggle to disconnect from nonstop notifications, faster work cycles, and higher expectations (Chang, 2024). These conditions contribute to emotional exhaustion, absenteeism, and turnover intent, emphasizing the need for sustainable organizational strategies to manage stress (Bhui et al., 2012; Uzonwanne, 2014; APA, 2023). Occupational health research indicates that unmanaged stress can cause anxiety, chronic fatigue, cardiovascular issues, and burnout, making stress both an individual and organizational concern (CDC, 2017; Henderson et al., 2013; Lacerda et al., 2018; Mariotti, 2015).

Research consistently shows that the quality of communication is a key factor influencing workplace stress. Clear, supportive, and emotionally sensitive communication reduces uncertainty and lessens both physical and mental strain, while vague or dismissive communication increases tension and role ambiguity (Conrad & Poole, 2012; Ganster & Rosen, 2013; Biggio & Cortese, 2013; Men et al., 2021; Adnan et al., 2022). Stress is thus relational and affected by how leaders communicate expectations, frame demands, and create the emotional environment at work (Conrad & Poole, 2012; Said, 2024). When

communication is inconsistent or emotionally distant, employees tend to feel more threatened and perceive more dysfunction (Ganster & Rosen, 2013). Conversely, consistent and compassionate communication helps employees view demands as manageable and reduces cognitive overload (Biggio & Cortese, 2013; Grossman, 2025). These results support the Job Demands–Resources model, which considers supportive communication a resource that lessens the impact of heavy job demands (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017).

Studies in occupational communication consistently identify clarity, responsiveness, and psychological safety as strong predictors of reduced stress (Conrad & Poole, 2012; Men et al., 2021). When leaders clearly communicate expectations, acknowledge concerns, and foster emotionally safe environments, employees report lower anxiety, greater resilience, and improved perceived control (Howard & Houry, 2024). Public health guidelines also highlight communication practices that normalize discussions about well-being and offer transparent information about organizational support (CDC, 2019; National Fund for Workforce Solutions, 2022). Qualitative findings indicate that active listening improves emotional stability by helping employees feel seen and validated (Adnan et al., 2022; Nemec et al., 2017). In remote and hybrid settings, where digital overload increases stress, supportive communication becomes even more essential (Albright et al., 2022; Kim & Stoner, 2008).

Despite strong evidence, several tensions persist. Scholars disagree on which communication practices most effectively reduce stress: some emphasize structured clarity and expectation-setting, while others focus on emotional presence and empathic engagement (Henderson et al., 2013; Said, 2024). Digital communication adds complexity, while regular check-ins can lessen uncertainty; excessive connectivity can increase cognitive load and blur recovery time (Chang, 2024; Tsipursky, 2023). There are also mixed findings on whether stress is better alleviated through structural changes (e.g., workload distribution) or relational approaches (e.g., listening, validation, collaborative problem-solving). These tensions indicate that communication functions as a context-dependent resource within the Job Demands-Resources framework, shaped by organizational norms and interpersonal dynamics.

Understanding how employees interpret leaders' communication is therefore crucial. Feeling heard boosts psychological safety, a well-known buffer against workplace stress and a key factor in emotional regulation (Edmondson, 2018; Howard & Houry, 2024). Psychological safety influences whether employees see workplace pressures as threatening or manageable, highlighting the relational aspect of stress assessment.

Although quantitative studies have established the link between communication and stress, less is known about how employees experience communication during stressful moments. Few studies examine how listening behaviors influence emotional and physiological stress responses, even though qualitative findings suggest that feeling heard can significantly change how employees process strain (Archibald et al., 2019; Alhazmi and Kaufmann, 2022). Research is also limited on how storytelling supports sensemaking during pressure, helping employees turn challenges into shared narratives of resilience and identity (Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 2000; Keith, 2024; Bietti et al., 2019). Little evidence looks at how these communication behaviors work in hybrid environments where cues are limited and expectations are often unclear. These gaps highlight the need for more in-depth qualitative research on how leadership communication influences employees' lived experiences of stress in today's organizations.

Turnover Intention

Turnover intention is defined as an employee's careful and conscious consideration of leaving an organization, and it remains one of the most widely studied outcomes related to workplace well-being, stress, and communication patterns (Hom et al., 2017). Because

turnover intention reflects cumulative experiences of strain, unmet needs, and relational breakdowns, it serves as a critical indicator of how workplace stress and leadership communication shape employee well-being over time (Hom et al., 2017; Lambert et al., 2001; Park & Shaw, 2013). Scholars consistently highlight that turnover intention rarely results from a single event; instead, it develops through the accumulation of unmet needs, perceived unfairness, weakened identity alignment, and communication breakdowns that diminish trust over time (Lambert et al., 2001; Park & Shaw, 2013; Bester, 2012). Post-pandemic changes, including burnout, emotional exhaustion, and extended role overload, have intensified these trends, making turnover intention an urgent concern for organizations, society, and public health (Men et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2023; SHRM, 2025). In this context, leadership communication has become a key factor in determining whether employees disengage or deepen their commitment to their work relationships (Berson & Stieglitz, 2013; Bregenzler et al., 2020; Willett, 2023).

Classic turnover theories, including Mobley's (1977) model and Hom and Griffeth's (1984) refinement, conceptualize turnover intention as a cognitive process that moves from dissatisfaction to withdrawal thoughts and ultimately voluntary exit. Contemporary research expands these models by showing that relational and emotional experiences greatly influence this process. Communication quality, especially transparency, responsiveness, listening, narrative framing, and authenticity, can either accelerate disengagement or completely disrupt that path (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Petrilli et al., 2024). When leaders minimize concerns, communicate sporadically, or fail to acknowledge employee perspectives, psychological safety diminishes and attachment weakens (Cho & Song, 2017). Conversely, empathetic communication serves as a stabilizing force, safeguarding organizational relationships even in demanding situations (Hashim et al., 2022; Rave et al., 2022; Bahrain et al., 2023).

Social Exchange Theory (Blau, 1964, 2017) clarifies that communication signals fairness, reciprocity, and relational respect. Leaders who listen, respond thoughtfully, and follow through on commitments reinforce mutual trust, loyalty, and discretionary effort (Lloyd et al., 2015). Communication neglect, ranging from ignored feedback to inconsistent expectations, breaches the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995), leading to cynicism, emotional withdrawal, and increased turnover intentions (Wen et al., 2021; Bothma & Roodt, 2013). Studies across sectors show that communication quality and perceived relational fairness often outweigh compensation, workload, or job design in predicting intention to stay (Carter, 2025; Grossman, 2025; Yue et al., 2023).

In addition to these findings, a growing body of qualitative research offers further insight into how employees experience turnover intention. Qualitative studies reveal that employees rarely cite pay or workload alone as reasons for leaving. Instead, they describe relational ruptures, feeling unheard, unrecognized, dismissed, or invisible, as critical turning points in their decision-making (Kriz et al., 2021; Rave et al., 2023). Feeling ignored during stressful moments worsens withdrawal thoughts and harms belonging. Active listening serves as an early intervention, helping leaders identify concerns before they lead to disengagement (Itzchakov et al., 2022; Nemeč et al., 2017). Storytelling also supports retention by reinforcing shared purpose, strengthening meaning and identity alignment, and helping employees see challenges as part of a larger story of collective resilience (Denning, 2006; Gill, 2011; Bietti et al., 2019; Bostanli & Habisch, 2023).

The Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model provides a comprehensive explanation for these effects. Communication acts as a job resource that alleviates emotional demands, increases engagement, and preserves psychological availability, thereby decreasing withdrawal thoughts (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Tummers & Bakker, 2021). Leaders who practice listening and storytelling create a communication environment that is relational rather than transactional, fostering fairness, meaning, and trust. These conditions

enhance job embeddedness, a concept encompassing interpersonal connections, cultural alignment, and perceived sacrifices associated with leaving an organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). Embeddedness strengthens when employees receive relational support, experience identity affirmation, and participate in transparent communication.

Across the literature, communication quality consistently emerges as one of the strongest predictors of turnover intention. Empathetic listening, transparency, and narrative alignment strengthen trust, psychological safety, and emotional bonds, thereby reducing turnover intentions across industries (Yue et al., 2023; Itzhakov et al., 2022; Berson & Stieglitz, 2013). Communication breakdowns, including ignored concerns, unclear expectations, and inconsistent messages, are repeatedly associated with early signs of withdrawal and disengagement (Cho & Song, 2017). Additionally, evidence indicates that relational communication predicts retention even in high-demand environments, outperforming structural factors such as workload or scheduling (Bahrain et al., 2023; Carter, 2025; Rave et al., 2022).

Despite the widespread agreement on the importance of communication, some studies report varying results. Some scholars argue that structural factors (such as job design, workload, and scheduling) have a greater impact on turnover intention than communication (Hom et al., 2017). Others contend that the quality of communication is more important than structural aspects, especially during times of uncertainty or organizational change (Kriz et al., 2021). Researchers also debate which communication behaviors are most significant: clarity, empathy, listening, responsiveness, or narrative cohesion. Remote and hybrid settings introduce additional contradictions: digital responsiveness might strengthen connections for some employees but cause distance or fragmented relationships for others.

Taken together, these mixed findings highlight the need for deeper understanding of how employees interpret communication during critical decision-making moments. Significant gaps still exist in the literature. Few studies investigate how employees describe the relational moments that influence their decisions to stay or leave, especially experiences of being heard or unheard during stressful times. There is limited qualitative insight into how leadership storytelling shapes belonging, identity, or sensemaking during periods of uncertainty. Very little research examines how communication quality interacts with job embeddedness or identity fit to influence turnover intentions. These gaps support a phenomenological approach focused on how employees experience leadership communication, especially listening and storytelling, as essential factors in their commitment or withdrawal.

Active Listening

Active listening is widely recognized as a key leadership communication skill that improves workplace relationships, boosts psychological safety, and supports employee well-being (Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2015). Its importance lies in how listening influences employees' views of support, fairness, and relational value, which directly affect emotional regulation, engagement, and trust in leadership (Lloyd et al., 2015; Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021). Based on the humanistic communication work of Rogers and Farson, active listening involves paying full attention, showing empathy, and reflecting understanding in ways that recognize and affirm the speaker (Rogers & Farson, 1987, 2021). In organizational settings, employees see attentive listening as a sign of respect and interpersonal regard (Guo et al., 2022; Nemec et al., 2017). These signals influence whether they feel safe raising concerns, clarifying expectations, and managing relational or workload pressures (Edmondson, 2018; Men et al., 2021). Consequently, active listening plays a vital role in work–life balance, stress management, job satisfaction, and reducing turnover intentions (Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021; Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson, 2020).

Bodie's Active Empathic Listening Scale defines listening as a multi-step process that includes sensing, processing, and responding (Bodie, 2011). This approach highlights that listening involves more than just hearing; it requires interpreting emotional cues, assessing meaning, and showing genuine cognitive and emotional connection. Research indicates that employees judge listening quality through both spoken and unspoken behaviors, such as reflective engagement and sensitivity to emotional tone (Guo et al., 2022). These processes explain why active listening leads to positive results. When employees feel cognitively understood and emotionally validated, they are better able to manage stress and stay motivated (Lloyd et al., 2015; Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021). Studies confirm that supervisors who practice active listening help reduce emotional burnout, increase emotional commitment, and lessen workplace stress (Lloyd et al., 2015). Evidence from high-pressure fields like healthcare also shows that communication based on listening boosts morale, builds trust, and lowers anxiety (Jahromi et al., 2016; Mineyama et al., 2007).

Qualitative research further shows that being listened to is a powerful emotional experience. Listening acts as a form of recognition that affirms employees' identities, contributions, and emotional realities (Iqbal et al., 2025; Pasupathi and Billitteri, 2015). This recognition supports psychological stability and motivation and helps lessen distress, disengagement, and relational tension (Kriz et al., 2021). Conversely, interruptions, dismissive responses, and inattentiveness are linked to cynicism, increased stress, and withdrawal, often becoming turning points in employees' feelings of being undervalued (Reynolds-Kueny and Shoss, 2020). Research on communication skills emphasizes that paraphrasing, reflective responses, and emotional validation significantly boost perceived listening quality and relational trust (Nemec et al., 2017; Weger et al., 2010). In the Job Demands-Resources model, active listening functions as a relational resource that helps employees reframe demands, reduce perceived stress, and prevent burnout (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017; Tummers & Bakker, 2021).

Active listening has become even more vital in hybrid and remote work settings. Fewer nonverbal cues, blurred boundaries, and increased digital demands create new types of stress that require leaders to communicate more clearly and with greater empathy (Lundqvist and Wallo, 2023). Research shows that deliberate listening in virtual environments reduces role confusion, maintains engagement, and lessens emotional disconnection (Cho et al., 2025; Men et al., 2021). Listening also fosters trust and stability during times of rapid change or uncertainty, especially when communication varies across digital channels (Lyzwinski, 2024; Willett, 2023). By practicing listening behaviors in virtual interactions, leaders help employees feel seen and supported despite physical distance, encouraging psychological safety and relational continuity (Men et al., 2021; Willett, 2023).

A strong pattern in organizational communication, psychology, and leadership research highlights active listening as a crucial factor in building trust, psychological safety, employee commitment, boundary management, and well-being (Jónsdóttir and Kristinsson, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2015; Itzhakov et al., 2022). Effective listening lowers burnout, supports meaning-making, and helps employees handle competing demands. In hybrid and remote environments, its role becomes even more important, as employees increasingly rely on relational cues to understand expectations and stay connected (Cho et al., 2025; Men et al., 2021). In all workplace settings, listening serves as a relational resource that enhances clarity, belonging, and alignment.

Although scholars generally agree on its significance, there is variation in what defines effective listening. Some focus on empathy and emotional reflection, while others emphasize responsiveness, clarity, and collaborative problem-solving. Digital communication introduces additional complexity. Researchers differ on whether virtual listening can match the depth of in-person interactions, with some suggesting comparable

results and others arguing that limited nonverbal cues weaken relational depth (Reynolds-Kueny and Shoss, 2020). There is also discussion about whether listening reduces stress directly through emotional support or indirectly by increasing trust, psychological safety, or improving communication environments (Edmondson, 2018; Lloyd et al., 2015).

While research clearly shows that active listening builds trust, reduces stress, and enhances commitment (Jónsdóttir and Kristinsson, 2020; Lloyd et al., 2015; Itzchakov et al., 2022), few studies explore how employees experience being listened to during times of stress, imbalance, or uncertainty (Kriz et al., 2021; Nemeč et al., 2017). Limited scholarship also investigates how listening interacts with storytelling to support sensemaking, resilience, and emotional grounding (Denning, 2006; Bietti et al., 2019). There is a significant lack of phenomenological research on how employees experience listening as a relational and emotional process that affects their well-being, identity, and retention. These gaps underscore the need for qualitative research exploring the lived experience of active listening in modern organizational settings.

Storytelling

Storytelling has become a key leadership communication practice because it conveys information, emotion, and experience into shared understanding (Denning, 2006; Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001). Denning (2006) described storytelling as a strategic communication method that engages both thought and emotion to shape understanding, motivate action, and strengthen connections. In organizational contexts, stories help employees interpret expectations, manage change, and see their experiences within larger organizational values and goals (Gill, 2011; Gargiulo, 2005). Current research indicates that narrative communication supports psychological resilience, purpose, and alignment by connecting emotional insights with strategic direction, especially during times of uncertainty or transition (Trabucchi et al., 2022; Lyzwinski, 2024). As a relational practice, storytelling reduces ambiguity, boosts engagement, and enhances well-being, making it a vital factor in work-life balance, stress reduction, and employee retention (Auvinen et al., 2013; Gleeson, 2025).

Foundational narrative scholars argue that storytelling is a key mechanism for sensemaking rather than just a communication tool (Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001). Gabriel (2000) demonstrated that employees use stories to interpret complex situations, manage emotions, and create meaning. Boje (2001) expanded this view by framing storytelling as a continuous, collective process rather than a collection of isolated narratives. These insights highlight the powerful role stories play in shaping employees' understanding of organizational life, especially when facing conflicting demands, rapid change, or emotional stress (Boje, 2001; Bietti et al., 2019). Empirical research supports this perspective. Leaders who share authentic, value-driven stories build stronger trust, increase identification with the organization, and boost commitment (Auvinen et al., 2013; Gill, 2011). Research in cognitive and social psychology further indicates that narrative communication improves memory, emotional engagement, and meaning-making by connecting experiences to larger themes and shared purpose (Bietti et al., 2019).

Contemporary research builds on this foundation by demonstrating how storytelling enhances psychological bonds, ethical participation, and collective identity (Bostanli and Habisch, 2023). Gajić (2020) discovered that storytelling decreases resistance to change by fostering a sense of belonging and shared meaning. Evidence from healthcare, education, and community professions shows that narrative methods reduce stress, boost empathy, and promote engagement by helping people find meaning in challenging situations (Brockington et al., 2021; Stringer et al., 2024). Applied leadership studies highlight that stories assist employees in mentally reframing challenges, understanding pressure through resilience narratives, and maintaining emotional stability during uncertain times (Willett,

2023; Weston Smyth, 2025; Grossman, 2025). These findings illustrate that storytelling serves as a psychological resource that supports adaptation, motivation, and relational bonds. A qualitative view enriches these insights by emphasizing the emotional and relational aspects of storytelling that quantitative research often misses. Mitchell (2019) explained that stories reflect identity and personal experience, making them powerful tools for validating employees' subjective realities. Schultz and Boal (2007) highlighted that storytelling lets leaders interpret complex events, include multiple perspectives, and build shared understanding in changing organizational settings. In work-life balance, narrative openness shows emotional authenticity and demonstrates how leaders handle competing priorities. Stories about coping, stress, or growth normalize employees' experiences and subtly encourage boundary-setting, help-seeking, and resilience (Denning, 2005; Gleeson, 2025). Storytelling also boosts psychological safety by making vulnerability acceptable and aligning personal experiences with collective goals (Willett, 2023).

Research consistently shows that storytelling enhances meaning-making, reinforces alignment with organizational values, and deepens relational bonds (Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001; Gill, 2011; Auvinen et al., 2013). Studies suggest that stories reduce ambiguity by providing emotionally grounded frameworks through which employees interpret demands, events, and expectations (Gill, 2011; Denning, 2006; Auvinen et al., 2013). Narrative leadership research further indicates that storytelling boosts retention by fostering shared purpose, clarifying identity, and strengthening emotional bonds with the organization (Bostanli and Habisch, 2023; Trabucchi et al., 2022).

Despite strong support for storytelling's benefits, disagreements appear in the literature. Some scholars describe storytelling as a path to authenticity and trust, while others argue that overly strategic or inconsistent stories can seem manipulative or insincere (Gabriel, 2000; Boje, 2001). Researchers also differ on which narrative styles are most effective. Personal stories, vulnerability narratives, value-based stories, and future-focused visions all trigger different relational and emotional responses (Denning, 2004; Serrat, 2017; Bietti et al., 2019; Green, 2004). Digital communication adds complexity. While virtual storytelling increases access and speed, it may reduce emotional richness and shared meaning-making (Lyzwinski, 2024; Men et al., 2021). These tensions suggest that storytelling is context-dependent and requires relational authenticity to be effective.

Scholars also identify several gaps. Few studies investigate how employees experience leadership storytelling during stress, imbalance, or organizational change, despite calls for more qualitative research into narrative experiences (Gabriel, 2000; Mitchell, 2019; Bietti et al., 2019). Limited research explores how leaders translate insights from active listening into narrative forms that create meaning. The link between listening, storytelling, and psychological safety remains underdeveloped (Serrat, 2017; Pery et al., 2020). Additionally, there is a lack of phenomenological research examining the lived experience of narrative communication and its relational role in today's workplaces. These gaps emphasize the importance of this phenomenological study, which investigates storytelling as an interpretive and relational leadership practice that influences employee experience.

Conceptual Synthesis

Research across organizational communication, leadership, and psychology consistently shows that employee well-being, work-life balance, stress, and turnover intention are influenced by the quality of relational communication between leaders and employees (Edmondson, 2018; Bregenzer et al., 2020). Studies indicate that active listening and storytelling affect how employees interpret their work environment by fostering empathy, clarity, meaning, and emotional validation (Jónsdóttir & Kristinsson, 2020; Abrahams & Groysberg, 2021; Gajić, 2020). Listening meets core needs for recognition and reduces ambiguity, while storytelling aids in sensemaking and strengthens collective identity

through shared narratives (Denning, 2005; Gabriel, 2000; Auvinen et al., 2013; Bostanli & Habisch, 2023).

Across major theoretical frameworks, communication is consistently regarded as a vital relational resource. In the Job Demands–Resources model, listening and storytelling serve as psychological and social resources that buffer against high job demands and help reduce stress (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007, 2017). Social Exchange Theory and Leader–Member Exchange Theory emphasize empathy, responsiveness, and acknowledgment as the foundations of trust, fairness, and reciprocity that support well-being and commitment (Itzhakov et al., 2022; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Gill, 2011; Rousseau, 1995). Narrative leadership research reveals that storytelling communicates core values, deepens understanding, and normalizes challenges (Schultz & Boal, 2007; Bostanli & Habisch, 2023). Psychological safety theory explains how listening and openness to narrative foster environments where employees feel safe raising concerns, thereby reducing stress and lowering turnover intentions (Edmondson, 2018). Job Embeddedness Theory adds that supportive communication enhances relational bonds, cultural alignment, and the perceived costs of leaving (Mitchell et al., 2001).

Taken together, the literature presents active listening and storytelling as complementary communication practices. Listening identifies concerns, affirms emotions, and fosters trust, while storytelling helps employees interpret experiences through coherent, meaningful narratives that support alignment and shared purpose (Mitchell, 2019; Boje, 2001). When combined, these behaviors create a relational cycle in which employees feel individually recognized and collectively connected (Auvinen et al., 2013; Gill, 2011). This integrated view underscores a broader conclusion across the literature: communication practices grounded in empathy, clarity, and narrative meaning are closely linked to improved work-life balance, reduced stress, and lower turnover intentions (Yue et al., 2023).

Conclusion

Research shows leadership communication influences employee well-being, work-life balance, stress, and turnover. It acts as both a relational and psychological resource, fostering clarity, trust, resilience, and emotional bonds. Active listening offers recognition and reduces ambiguity; storytelling aids sensemaking and shared understanding. These behaviors shape employees' perceptions and responses to organizational demands. While quantitative studies link communication to well-being and retention, there is limited qualitative insight into daily employee experiences, highlighting the need for deeper exploration.

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