The multiple mediation role of message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference in listening and feedback

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Abstract

Purpose – Listening is often considered the cornerstone of the communication process, with feedback being a crucial skill for effective management. The primary objective of this article was to investigate the relationship between managers' listening skills and feedback skills from their subordinates' perspectives. Moreover, it explores the mediating effect of message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference in this relationship.

Design/methodology/approach – This article deployed a quantitative, descriptive research design. The authors developed and distributed a self-administered questionnaire via non-probability convenience sampling, resulting in 304 useable responses.

Findings – The results of the main direct effect test (model 1) indicate that listening is positively associated with feedback. Model 2 established that message-sending skills did not directly mediate that relationship. On the other hand, the ability to deal with interference was found to mediate the relationship. Finally, model 4 showed the multi-mediating effect of message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference in the relationship between listening and feedback.

Originality/value – As far as the researchers are aware, this paper is the first of its kind to show the ability to deal with interference as a mediating factor in a statistical model. Moreover, this study is the first to present a continuous intermediary role played by message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference in the relationship between listening and feedback.

Keywords Managers, Listening skills, Feedback skills, Message-sending skills, Ability to deal with interference, Subordinate perspective

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The business environment is constantly in flux, from relentless changes in the country's laws to perpetual political unrest and particularly volatile economic conditions. Adapting to the ever-changing nature of the business world means dealing with increasing complexity (Brandt, 2021, p. 1; Doroodi and Mohammadi, 2015, p. 301; Faysse and Onsamrarn, 2018, p. 23). In Africa's volatile economic and business landscape, competent managers and their subordinates are often the difference between business success and failure. These businesses are increasingly becoming more diverse. It is the managers' task to not only harvest the potential for innovation that emerges from diversity but also to minimise the potential strife that it may bring by promoting a collaborative decision-making organisational culture

(Hitchcock, 2020, p. 479; Qian *et al.*, 2015a, p. 77). This challenging task can only be achieved by competent managers (Crawford *et al.*, 2015, p. 151).

Various managerial competencies are required to retain customers and ensure long-term success in any industry. Likewise, effective task execution depends on many managerial competencies, including but not limited to communication, creative problem-solving, teamwork, interpersonal relations, self-management, decision-making, networking, global awareness and strategic action (Veliu and Mimoza, 2017, p. 63). Communication is one of the more crucial managerial competencies for effective management and employee task execution (van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015, p. 1665).

Communication is the process wherein ideas, values, information, opinions, thoughts, instructions and plans are exchanged and understood by two or more people. In business, these people are often managers, subordinates, colleagues (or peers) or external stakeholders. Typically, this process intends to inform, motivate and/or influence behaviour (Qian *et al.*, 2012, p. 1478; Qian *et al.*, 2015b, p. 336; Qian *et al.*, 2017b, p. 803). In this study, the researchers are interested in the communication process between managers and their subordinates. In a post-COVID-19 era, current, relevant, accessible and accurate information is considered a crucial resource when seeking competitive insights (Brandt and Donohue, 2022, pp. 17–18).

Managers mistakenly overemphasise the importance of their message-sending skills, particularly in an industry where they typically initiate the communication process as they are required to give instructions to their subordinates (Brandt and Donohue, 2022, p. 18). This process is also commonly begun by managers when they provide performance guidance in the form of feedback (Dobbelaer *et al.*, 2013). At any point during the communication process, interference, also known as disruptions, noise and breakdowns, can arise, which can have a detrimental effect on interpersonal relationships, self-actualisation and the achievement of business goals (Qian *et al.*, 2017a, p. 496; Song *et al.*, 2017, p. 1167; van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015, p. 1665).

The current study proposes and validates a model highlighting the importance of managers' listening skills by exhibiting it as a communication-based construct that acts as an antecedent of their feedback behaviour. This relationship was hypothesised to be mediated by managers' aptitude to send messages and their ability to deal with interference during the communication process. These constructs were formed by data gathered from the managers' subordinates, which might be a more accurate assessment of the managers' communication behaviour.

According to van Vuuren *et al.* (2015, p. 1665), the manufacturing industry suffers particularly damaging consequences when communication breaks down. This could be attributed to the notion that as the industry becomes more technology-driven, these managers become more removed from ground-level operations (Williams, 2012), causing mismatches in communication preferences and practices that could have been mitigated by regular engagement (Longweni and Kroon, 2016, p. 1245). Although the authors of the current manuscript do not believe that the statistical model under discussion is industry-specific, this industry was targeted due to prior publications showing that it may benefit from the study's findings (Longweni and Kroon, 2016; van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015; Williams, 2012).

The manufacturing industry refers to businesses that involve producing and processing items of excellent or middling quality. Therefore, this industry creates new commodities or adds value to existing products. In South Africa, this industry occupies a significant portion of the country's economy, which, despite its relative importance, has recently seen a decline of 0.2% in sales compared to 2021. This is largely due to a drop in fuel, chemical and plastic demand (Stats SA, 2022).

This article adds to the growing body of knowledge pertaining to constructs that lead to feedback behaviour in various settings. However, it is unique in two ways. First, the model

presented is based on subordinates' perceptions. Preceding studies predominantly featured participant's perceptions of their own skills. Second, the constructs are based on managers' communication skills, meaning the interactions shown are within the manager's control. Previous research mostly featured feedback-seeking behaviour, which is not within managers' direct control.

Notwithstanding, the study's main contribution is highlighting the importance of listening skills for effective feedback. Equally so, this article empirically validates the crucial role of the ability to deal with interference in the feedback as well as communication process. The ability to deal with interference not only mediates the relationship between listening and feedback skills but also clarifies messages to the extent that message-sending skills also mediate this relationship.

Additionally, this manuscript will make managers aware of the relationships between various elements in and during the communication process with subordinates. To this end, the authors contend that this awareness will improve managers' communication competency and particularly enhance their communication with subordinates.

Theoretical basis and hypothesis
Background
The current manuscript measured subordinates' perception of managers' communication skills as recommended in past research (van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015, p. 1666), as they are likely to be less biased in their assessment than their managers in self-assessments. Empirical investigations of antecedents and mediators of feedback have increasingly become more prominent research topics in recent years (Li and Qian, 2016, p. 5; Qian *et al.*, 2012, p. 297, 2017b, p. 1205, 2019, p. 803). Improving managers' feedback is a strategically sound goal to pursue. This owes to the fact that effective feedback behaviour promotes creativity within businesses, elevates subordinates' job satisfaction and ultimately increases their overall performance (De Stobbeleir *et al.*, 2017, p. 824; Gong *et al.*, 2014, p. 1258; Saks *et al.*, 2011, p. 45). Exceptional message senders are perceived as authentic, trustworthy and transparent, which in turn enhances the feedback process and aids the flow of communication and information and subordinate engagement behaviour (Qian *et al.*, 2012, p. 297). Managers adept at providing feedback typically maintain collaborative and supportive internal working environments. Below are brief definitions of each construct presented in the conceptual framework at the end of the section.

Listening is a cognitive process wherein an individual purposefully obtains, senses, interprets, evaluates and reacts to information provided through verbal and non-verbal messaging (Castleberry and David Shepherd, 1993; Dobbelaer *et al.*, 2013, p. 99). Effective listening skills between managers and their subordinates have been linked with enhanced task execution, improved interpersonal relationships and long-term sustainability of businesses (Itani *et al.*, 2019, p. 128; Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022, p. 140). The ultimate goal of effective listening is comprehension of what was said, how it was meant and the feelings behind the message delivered (Du and Man, 2022, p. 8).

Feedback is a communication skill used by managers to relay performance assessment information to their subordinates (Dai *et al.*, 2010, p. 213; Gingioveanu Lupulescu and Zamfir, 2023, p. 138). Feedback, nevertheless, may also serve as a check if the initially received message was understood during the communication process (Jones and George, 2013, pp. 416–417; Ragusa, 2011, p. 21). Moreover, managers also use feedback to gauge and assess peers' and subordinates' performance compared to defined criteria, standards and norms (Daft and Marcic, 2009, p. 573). The more experienced the feedback provider is, the more impactful the feedback is on the feedback receiver's future behaviour (Kesebir *et al.*, 2022, p. 17136). Its importance lies in its ultimate goal of promoting growth, improving productivity

and enhancing optimal goal realisation (Biswas and Rakshit, 2022, p. 7). The distance between managers and their subordinates (particularly in manufacturing) can be bridged by a collaborative communication culture in the business (Jones and George, 2013, pp. 418–419). Naturally, the distance between current subordinate behaviour and exemplary behaviour is bridged by managers' feedback-providing behaviour (Longenecker, 2010, p. 34). Although the critical nature of feedback skills is known, both managers and employees often avoid engaging in it Song et al. (2017, p. 1171). Managers are advised to focus on pre-set standards when providing feedback to their subordinates, as this is geared towards promoting optimal and consistent performance (Kakkar and Vohra, 2021, p. 238).

Managers' message-sending skills involve a three-step process (Lynn, 1976, p. 39). Firstly, the messages decide the best medium for sending the information based on their preference and the message's contents. Secondly, they organise the information in the most appropriate way based on the message's recipient. Lastly, they show neutrality, approval and dismay at subordinates' performance (Hayah, 2022, p. 49). Simply stated, message-sending skills refers to managers' ability to convey that which is in their mind through verbal and non-verbal communication (van Vuuren et al., 2015, p. 1665).

The ability to deal with interference refers to the managers' knack for knowing how to mitigate and/or eliminate any disturbances in the communication process during their interactions with subordinates (Longweni, 2018, p. 955). Breakdowns during the communication process decrease employees' performance and can lead to a decline in the business' earnings and hinder the flow of information between managers and subordinates (van Vuuren et al., 2015, pp. 1665–1666). If not dealt with, interference can also lead to a decline in goal realisation.

The following section briefly discusses and organises preceding works related to the current article. In the past, there has been some research interest in the antecedents of effective feedback behaviour. Authentic leadership has been shown to encourage employees' feedback-seeking behaviour (Qian et al., 2012, p. 297), highlighting the importance of managers' ability to create and sustain a collaborative business culture on a cognitive and emotional level (Qian et al., 2016, p. 489). Future time orientation is proposed to be central to subordinates' motivation within businesses; Lin et al. (2015, p. 344) accentuate this learned behaviour construct by modelling it as a precursor to employees' feedback skills. Aided by task-specific psychological ownership, collaborative decision-making was a critical instrument for promoting favourable feedback behaviour among subordinates (Li and Qian, 2016, pp. 5–6). According to Wang et al. (2016, p. 1205), transformational leadership also relates to and promotes exemplary feedback cultures within businesses.

More recently, in 2018, empowering leadership was added to the knowledge pool of antecedents to feedback within businesses (Qian et al., 2018b, pp. 6–7). In the same year, Qian et al. (2018b, p. 6) tested and proved that managers' ability to be humble contributes to employees' feedback aptitude. This interaction was strengthened by employees not fearing being viewed as incompetent or lacking initiative, which is perceived as a cost image (Qian et al., 2012, p. 297, 2018a, p. 9). Humility is a skill that continues to be crucial for the interaction between managers and their subordinates. Managers who are perceived to be humble are likely to be relatable, and their employees heed their instructions willingly (Manix, 2022, pp. 43–44).

Professor Jing Qian and colleagues made significant contributions in these areas. Nevertheless, their models were largely based in the psychology domain. The current paper approaches feedback skills from a communication and management point of view. The current manuscript also stands out as it explores a precursor to managers' feedback-providing skills instead of antecedents of employees' feedback-seeking behaviours. In addition, this mediation article is also from the perspective of subordinates.

The authors cited in the passage above also exclaim the management-level and business-level benefits of the interactions; these sources prove the significance of studying antecedents of feedback; however, the constructs are not communication-based. As mentioned earlier in

this paper, feedback skills are essentially communication-based skills. For this reason, it may be more beneficial to focus on other communication-based constructs as antecedents for effective feedback behaviour.

Listening in relation to feedback
Managers who are apt listeners are likely to be skilled providers of feedback; van Vuuren *et al.* (2015, pp. 1665–1,666) suggest a statistically significant relationship between these two communication-based constructs. Improving the listening skill through training can potentially improve the feedback skill (and vice versa). Empirical studies that directly link managers' listening skills with their feedback skills are sparse. Previous authors have noted the positive influence it has on the communication process and other aspects within businesses (Kluger and Itzchakov, 2022; Longweni and Kroon, 2018; Qian *et al.*, 2019; van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015). It is generally accepted that active listening improves the communication process (Mineyama *et al.*, 2007). Feedback can be prohibited by individuals' need to preserve their image; however, this effect is diminished by attentive listening during the communication process (Ashford *et al.*, 2003; Qian *et al.*, 2012). In addition to this, apt listeners tend to understand what speakers (in this study's case, employees) value and encourage them to divulge more crucial information, which in turn aids the feedback process. To the best of the researchers' knowledge, only Qian *et al.* (2019, p. 807) have published a manuscript showing statistical evidence of a positive association between listening and feedback. Thus, managers' listening skills clearly impact their feedback skills. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H1. Listening is positively associated with feedback.

Qian *et al.* (2019, p. 804) suggest that managers' listening skills are an antecedent for the feedback-seeking behaviour of their subordinates. Even though these authors proved this suggestion statistically, one could argue that listening is a skill happening internally (in the managers' mind) and that testing relationships between variables that the managers have direct control over might have been equally insightful. Thus, the current study seeks to empirically test the interaction between managers' listening skills and their feedback skills. Moreover, how this relationship is affected by their message-sending skills and whether their ability to deal with inference has any bearing on these interactions.

Message-sending skills in relation to listening and feedback
Locker and Kaczmarek (2014, p. 4) suggest that verbal cues are not always sufficient in conveying the total breadth and depth of messages in a consistent and effective manner. Therefore, managers should master both types of communication to limit misinterpretations.

Active listening serves as a driver for significant amounts of information that flows between members of a communication process within businesses (Castleberry and David Shepherd, 1993; Ramsey and Sohi, 1997), not only does it lead to a deep sense of comprehension, but it also exhibits empathy for the speaker (Lloyd *et al.*, 2015). As beneficial as listening is to feedback and the communication process as a whole, it should not be viewed in isolation; the bigger picture should be considered. Since managers' role in the communication process with subordinates largely involves giving instructions, providing additional information and aiding motivation through encouragement, their message-sending skills ought to have some bearing on the feedback process (Hayah, 2022, p. 41). The researchers believe that managers message-sending skills mediate the association between listening and feedback.

H2. Message-sending skills mediate the relationship between listening and feedback.

Since the communication process is littered with disturbances, being good listeners and messengers is likely still insufficient for being the most optimal feedback provider possible.

Ability to deal with interference in relation to listening and feedback
van Vuuren *et al.* (2015, p. 1665) posit that managers who are effective listeners and exceptional providers of feedback are poised to reach mutual comprehension with subordinates during their communication; this will streamline the achievement of their business objectives. In addition, a lack of attentive listening skills compounds and exacerbates the occurrence of noise. Managers with asperous personality traits hinder interactions with employees. These managers are likely to drive their subordinates to silence, which stifles their opportunity recognition and ability to listen empathically and provide informed and detailed feedback (Song *et al.*, 2017, p. 1171).

Although the ability to deal with interference is regarded as necessary, as highlighted with the aid of various sources throughout this manuscript, this skill's presence in statistical models is sparse. Managers' ability to deal with interference cannot continue to be empirically neglected. Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H3. The ability to deal with interference mediates the relationship between listening and feedback.

Message-sending skills and ability to deal with interference in relation to listening and feedback
Being simultaneously preoccupied with various tasks has been detrimental to overall goal realisation. Furthermore, multitasking dampens individuals' ability to listen attentively. Managers are advised to be particularly cautious to let their busy schedules hinder their conversations and/or feedback sessions with their employees (Kushniryk and Levine, 2012; Longweni and Kroon, 2016, p. 1249). An old experimental study found that speakers' ability to deal with interference during the message-sending phase of the communication process was more likely to be understood by their listeners (Hazan and Simpson, 2000, p. 290). This signifies a direct linkage between message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference. Hazan and Simpson (2000, p. 290) also posit that this relationship is due to those speakers being exceptional non-verbal communicators who use their unspoken messages to clarify their intentions, ultimately advancing the comprehension achieved in the interaction by limiting noise. Recently, on the other hand, abrasive messages sent through verbal as well as non-verbal cues have been found to cause disruptions when managers give instructions and even when they provide feedback (Qian *et al.*, 2017a, p. 7). Therefore, the following hypothesis is proposed:

H4. Message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference play a continuous intermediary role in the relationship between listening and feedback.

Figure 1 below is a visual representation of the conceptual framework underlying this research. It outlines the theoretical constructs and the hypotheses of the relationships between them.
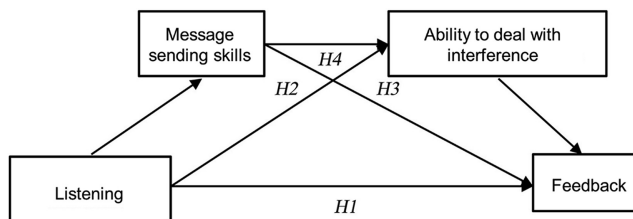

Figure 1.
Hypothesised model

Source(s): Authors' own compilation

Methodology

The research methodology employed in the current study started with an overview of preceding publications related to constructs under discussion; this was done to contextualise and position this study (Felix and Smith, 2019, p. 6; Neuman, 2014, p. 125).

Research design

The empirical portion of this descriptive study was executed by utilising a survey involving a quantitative research method (Burns *et al.*, 2016, p. 93).

Target population and sampling

This study focuses on the intervening effects of managers' message-sending skills and their ability to deal with interferences on the relationship between listening and feedback from the subordinates' perspective. Therefore, we use the manager–subordinate relationship at the individual level as the unit of analysis. We sampled subordinates employed by businesses in the manufacturing industry of South Africa. The aim was to reach at least 350 employees in the manufacturing industry by employing seven fieldworkers tasked with distributing 50 questionnaires to businesses within the targeted industry (Struwig and Stead, 2007, p. 115). These fieldworkers utilised their networks to access businesses within their vicinity.

A total of 319 responses were received from which 304 useable questionnaires were obtained. The fieldworkers were required to be knowledgeable in business principles and ethical data collection. The reason for this sampling choice is due to the significant role of communication in task execution in manufacturing. The participants had to hold a minimum of a grade 12 qualification. The focus was on the Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Generation Yers; the Silent Generation was excluded due to its small representation in the study population. The sample was obtained using a non-probability, convenience sampling method using quotas (Berndt and Petzer, 2007, p. 175). The useable questionnaires were collected from the following provinces: 189 from Gauteng, 43 from the North-West Province, 37 from the Free State and 35 from the Northern Cape. Table 1 below summarises the fieldwork.

Measuring instrument

The measuring instrument used in the study was a self-administered questionnaire that gauged subordinates' perceptions of their managers' overall communication competency (Struwig and Stead, 2007, p. 244). The current manuscript measured subordinates' perception of managers' communication skills as recommended in past research (van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015, p. 1666). The survey instrument was adapted from published scales that proved to be reliable and valid:

(1) Listening: $\alpha = 0.844$ (Longweni and Kroon, 2018, p. 7), along with $\alpha = 0.920$ (Tham *et al.*, 2022, p. 115)

(2) Feedback: $\alpha = 0.767$ (van Vuuren *et al.*, 2015, p. 1661), along with $\alpha = 0.788$ (Longweni and Kroon, 2018, p. 7)

Province	Number of fieldworkers	Target number of questionnaires	Useable completed questionnaires
Gauteng	4	200	189
North-West Province	1	50	43
Free State	1	50	37
Northern Cape	1	50	35
Source(s): Authors' own compilation			

Table 1.
Summary of fieldwork
conducted

(3) Message-sending skills: $\alpha = 0.684$ (Longweni and Kroon, 2016, p. 1239)

(4) Ability to deal with interference: $\alpha = 0.808$ (Longweni and Kroon, 2016, p. 1239)

These sources were selected because the preceding studies were comparable to the current study in their purpose and designs. The instrument comprised two separate sections. Section A comprised closed-ended questions that gathered data about the subordinates and their businesses. This was followed by Section B, which entailed a five-point Likert scale that gauged managers' various communication skills perceived by their subordinates. Participants were asked to specify the extent of their agreement with twenty-eight statements. The scales' endpoints were labelled "strongly disagree" and "strongly agree". Table 2 below categorises the twenty-eight statements according to their corresponding constructs.

Construct	Statement	Mean	Std. dev.
Ability to deal with interference	My manager does not interrupt me while I am speaking	3.33	1.182
	My manager stops what he is busy with when I talk to him	3.43	1.088
	My manager concentrates on making sure I hear all the information he conveys to me	3.55	1.215
	My manager makes sure I do not have an overload of information when giving an instruction	3.72	1.084
	My manager does not use technical language (jargon) that I do not understand	3.84	0.985
	My manager does not allow a poor relationship with a person to detract him from effective listening	3.51	1.129
Listening	My manager can sense how I feel without me having to tell him how I am feeling	3.87	1.014
	My manager reads my non-verbal messages when I am in a conversation with him	3.67	1.142
	My manager reflects my emotions to let me know that he understands how I am feeling	3.73	1.005
	My manager restates my words to make sure that he understands me correctly	3.74	1.029
	My manager makes sure he understands what I am saying in a conflict situation	3.64	1.024
	My manager does not justify his actions when I complain about something he has done wrong	3.68	1.126
	My manager does not get angry or defensive when I correct him	3.71	1.121
Feedback	My manager does not judge me by my past faults	3.71	1.180
	My manager does not have trouble handling conflict	3.78	1.047
	My manager leans towards me rather than away from me when talking	3.73	0.957
	My manager asks me for more information when someone has complained about me	3.61	1.076
	My manager encourages two-way interaction with me by inviting a response	3.59	1.059
	My manager probes for deeper information by asking questions during a conversation with me	3.91	1.006
Message-sending skills	My manager avoids looking over my shoulder during a conversation	3.74	1.094
	My manager is specific in telling me how I can improve my work	3.80	1.108
	My manager makes eye contact while communicating with me	4.07	0.976
	My manager states in his own words the interpretation of my message to prevent misinterpretation	3.57	1.192

Source(s): Authors' own compilation

Instrument assessment
Multiple tests for reliability and validity were conducted to assess the measuring instrument. Cronbach's alpha scores were calculated to confirm the reliability of the scale. Confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was performed to assess whether the measurement and overall structural models fit the data.

Cronbach's alpha scores measure discriminant validity and confirm the reliability of the practical meaning of the data (Field, 2012, p. 276). Cronbach's alpha coefficients equal to or exceed 0.80 indicate a high level of reliability, whereas a Cronbach's alpha coefficient lower than 0.60 indicates poor reliability. However, scores of 0.6 and above are acceptable in social sciences. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to determine the internal consistency of all scales measuring listening, feedback, message-sending skills and ability to deal with interference. The reliability of all the measurement scales used is reported in Table 3 below:

Table 3 indicates that Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each factor are larger than 0.60, indicating high reliability and consistency between items measuring each construct under study. This shows that all the items are internally consistent and reliable to measure the construct variables adequately. In addition, the inter-item correlation analysis was performed to detect any problematic inter-correlation between variables. The average inter-item correlations should fall between 0.15 and 0.55. Results from the average inter-item correlations were below the 0.55 threshold for the four scales.

The measurement model was analysed using covariance-based modelling in AMOS, version 27, through maximum likelihood estimation and modification indices. The chi-square statistic, RMSEA (Root Mean Square Error of Approximation), SRMR (Standardised Root Mean Square Residual), CFI (Comparative Fit Index) IFI (Incremental Fit Index) and TLI (Tucker-Lewis Index) were used to assess how well the model fits the data. The CFI > 0.90, TLI > 0.90, SRMR < 0.08 and RMSEA < 0.06 thresholds must be attained to conclude that the measurement model relatively fits the observed data. Modification indices were explored to improve the goodness-of-fit.

The fit statistics of the measurement model revealed that a relatively good model fit was achieved. The fit index values of CFI (0.926), IFI (0.927) and TLI (0.915) were well above the cut-off point of 0.90, and RMSEA (0.048) and SRMR (0.048) were less than the conservative cut-off of 0.06, with 90% confidence lower limit of 0.04 and upper limit of 0.06. Further, the CMIN/df value was found within the recommended range of 2–5 (1,695), demonstrating that the measurement model fits the data well. Once the model fit was established, validity tests were conducted to determine the accuracy of the measurement model.

Figure 2 below is a graphical representation from AMOS, showcasing the statistical relationships and covariances among different constructs involved in this study. This diagram features latent variable paths indicating the various direct relationships between the constructs and the covariances between items.

Before hypothesis testing on the observed variables, multivariate assumption tests were conducted to determine the existence of outliers, influential and multicollinearity in the structural model. No influential observations were identified as all observations were below the 0.1 threshold (Cook, 1977, p. 16). The variable inflation factor (VIF) method was

Construct	Items	Cronbach's alpha coefficients	Inter-item correlations
Ability to deal with interference	6	0.766	0.357
Listening	7	0.763	0.316
Feedback	6	0.763	0.352
Message-sending skills	4	0.660	0.326
Source(s): Authors' own compilation			

Table 3.
Cronbach's alpha
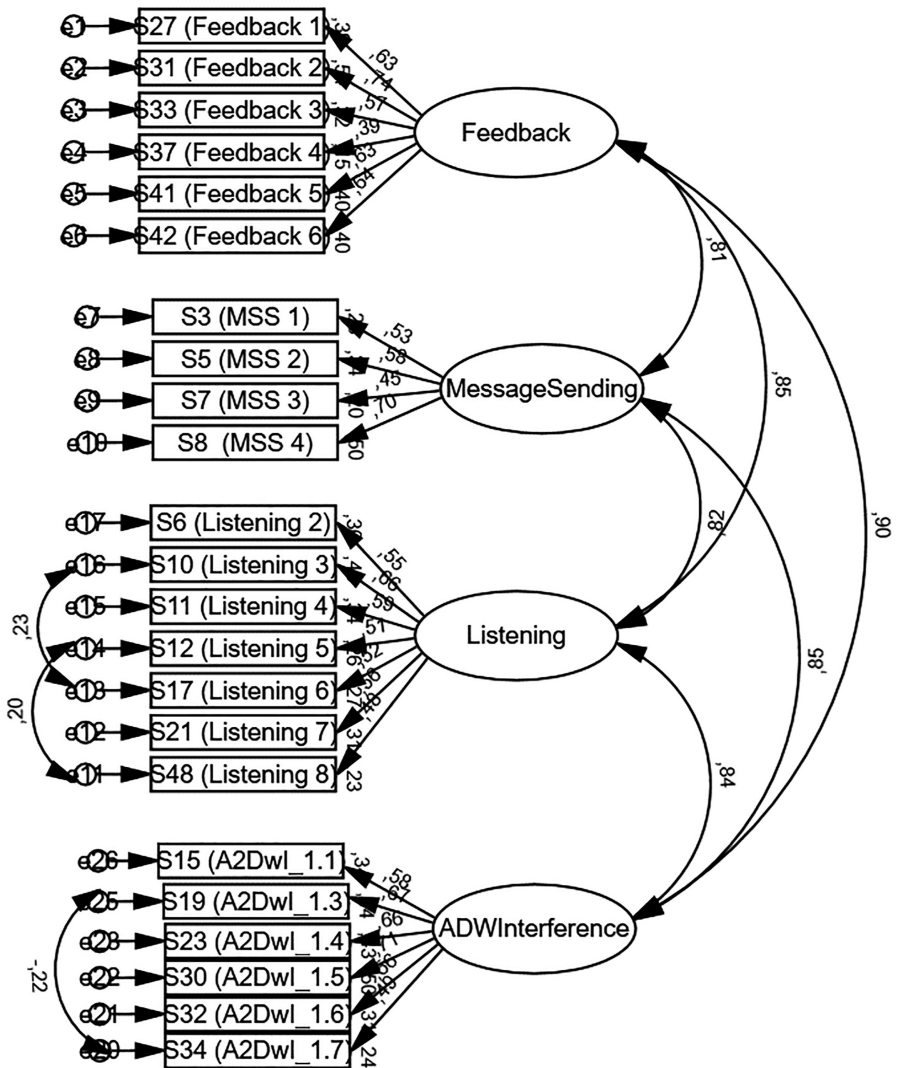coefficients and inter-
item correlations

Figure 2.
Measurement model

Source(s): Authors' own compilation

performed to detect multicollinearity. In all regression models, VIF values were far below 10 (Message-Sending = 1.724; Listening = 1.899; Ability to deal with interference = 1.965) and tolerance values were above 0.20 (Message-Sending = 0.580; Listening = 0.527; Ability to deal with interference = 0.509), indicating that multicollinearity was not a threat to interpretation (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 87; Field, 2012, p. 365).

Data analysis and interpretation
The examination of the gathered data involved a comprehensive analytical process facilitated by the utilisation of statistical software, specifically SPSS 27.0 and AMOS 27.0. This software combination enabled the execution of a series of regression analyses, aiming to

elucidate the intricate relationships among independent variables, the mediator and the dependent variable within the context of the study.

To robustly assess the mediation effects, the research methodology employed the bootstrapping technique, as elucidated by Preacher and Hayes (2008). This involved the generation of 5,000 bootstrapped samples derived from the dataset. Bootstrapping, a nonparametric statistical method, was employed to repeatedly resample the dataset, thereby enhancing the robustness of the analyses.

The subsequent phase of the analysis, particularly relevant in multiple mediations, involved the computation of indirect effects to establish a comprehensive sampling distribution. These indirect effects were subjected to rigorous significance testing, employing 95% confidence interval levels. The significance testing process, crucial in determining the presence of mediation, adhered to the approach delineated by Li et al. (2022), p. 302). Specifically, mediation was inferred within the model if the tests for indirect effects yielded results of statistical significance. This methodological rigour ensures the reliability and validity of the findings derived from the analytical procedures applied to the dataset.

Common method bias
Before presenting the results of a study, the researcher may present bias checks as rigour for quantitative research endeavours. Common method bias has increasingly become a point of contention in the rigour of quantitative research. It can be defined as comprised validity of interpretations due to collecting and determining all the constructs and variables (independent, dependent and mediating) from the same source (Jordan and Troth (2020, p. 3; Memon et al., 2023, p. 8). This is due to it inflating the actual correlation among the variables in the study. To mitigate the occurrence of this bias in the current study, the authors used a procedural and statistical technique.

Procedurally, the authors collected data from many different businesses within the manufacturing industry. In addition, the flow of the survey was split into two separate sections, as outlined by Jordan and Troth, 2020, p. 11). Statistically, the researchers applied the one-factor method (Harman, 1976) to assess whether common method bias is present in this study, meaning that an EFA (exploratory factor analyses) was performed where all the items were constrained to a single construct. The resulting construct should not explain more than 50% of the variance in the data set; if it does – that suggests the presence of common method bias. This study's test resulted in the single factor only explaining 33% of the variance. According to Fuller et al. (2016, pp. 3196–3197), Harman's single-factor test is sufficient because if common method bias were present to the extent that it impacts interpretations, this measure would be sensitive enough to detect it.

Results and discussion
Descriptive statistics
The participants were recruited through non-probability sampling from the four South African provinces. Questionnaires were distributed to 350, and 304 valid questionnaires were collected, giving a response rate of 86.85%. The demographic profile of the respondents in relation to their perspective on each construct is shown in Tables 4–6. The means, standard deviations and p-value of each construct are also provided.

Table 4 indicates that males accounted for 61% ($n = 186$) of the sample, while females accounted for 39% ($n = 118$). Considering this, they do not differ in their views regarding listening, message-sending skills, ability to deal with interference and feedback. The p-value is not smaller than 0.05, indicating no statistical or practical difference across gender.

Table 5 indicates that millennials (aged 32 and under) accounted for 52% ($n = 158$) of the sample, while Gen Xers (aged 33–52) accounted for 42% ($n = 127$) and baby boomers (aged 53+) accounted for 6% ($n = 19$) of the sample. Additionally, respondents share similar perceptions regarding listening, message-sending skills and ability to deal with interference and feedback, as no statistical nor practical difference across generations exists. This is in contrast with preceding publications that found differences in the perceptions of managers' listening, ability to deal with interference and general communication competence based on their generation cohort (Glass, 2007, p. 102; Kapoor and Solomon, 2011, p. 315; Longweni, 2018, pp. 966–967).

Table 6 indicates that the majority of respondents (49%, $n = 150$) operate in the operations and production departments of their respective organisations, followed by 12% ($n = 39$) who operate in administration. The remaining respondents operate in customer relations ($n = 13$), finance ($n = 29$), human resources ($n = 12$), information technology ($n = 13$) and marketing ($n = 26$), each accounting for less than 10% of the sample. Lastly, respondents do not differ in views regarding listening, message-sending skills and ability to deal with interference and feedback irrespective of the department in which they operate. In contrast to this finding, Hooker (2012, p. 397) states that there are generally differences in how different functional departments communicate within businesses.

Hypothesis tests
Firstly, the main direct relationship was tested, with listening as the independent variable and feedback as the dependent variable to construct the structural equation model 1. The

Construct	Descriptor	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	p-value
Listening	Male	186	3.72	0.684	0.948
	Female	118	3.70	0.691	
Message-sending skills	Male	186	3.89	0.738	0.864
	Female	118	3.76	0.765	
Ability to deal with interference	Male	186	3.58	0.784	0.243
	Female	118	3.52	0.700	
Feedback	Male	186	3.74	0.697	0.504
	Female	118	3.67	0.741	

Table 4.
Construct perception based on gender

Source(s): Authors' own compilation

Construct	Descriptor	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	p-value
Listening	Millennials (Gen Y)	158	3.65	0.703	0.160
	Gen Xers	127	3.77	0.614	
	Baby Boomers	19	3.91	0.933	
Message-sending skills	Millennials (Gen Y)	158	3.83	0.706	0.115
	Gen Xers	127	3.80	0.768	
	Baby Boomers	19	4.18	0.927	
Ability to deal with interference	Millennials (Gen Y)	158	3.52	0.726	0.283
	Gen Xers	127	3.58	0.753	
	Baby Boomers	19	3.81	0.929	
Feedback	Millennials (Gen Y)	158	3.69	0.672	0.408
	Gen Xers	127	3.72	0.0722	
	Baby Boomers	19	3.92	0.964	

Table 5.
Construct perception based on generations

Source(s): Authors' own compilation

Construct	Descriptor	N	Mean	Std. Dev.	p-value
Listening	Customer relations	13	3.51	0.761	0.668
	Finance	29	3.84	0.545	
	Human resources	12	3.54	0.572	
	Information technology	13	3.90	0.389	
	Operations/production	150	3.70	0.693	
	Administration	39	3.72	0.787	
	Sales/marketing	26	3.66	0.731	
	Other	22	3.85	0.732	
Message-sending skills	Customer Relations	13	3.58	0.753	0.656
	Finance	29	3.85	0.646	
	Human resources	12	3.50	0.674	
	Information technology	13	3.92	0.800	
	Operations/production	150	3.88	0.768	
	Administration	39	3.88	0.711	
	Sales/marketing	26	3.77	0.721	
	Other	22	3.85	0.881	
Ability to deal with interference	Customer Relations	13	3.06	0.812	0.460
	Finance	29	3.63	0.568	
	Human resources	12	3.61	0.478	
	Information technology	13	3.55	0.867	
	Operations/production	150	3.58	0.800	
	Administration	39	3.65	0.681	
	Sales/marketing	26	3.54	0.749	
	Other	22	3.57	0.0757	
Feedback	Customer Relations	13	3.42	0.792	0.834
	Finance	29	3.81	0.628	
	Human resources	12	3.68	0.529	
	Information technology	13	3.86	0.656	
	Operations/production	150	3.71	0.721	
	Administration	39	3.72	0.746	
	Sales/marketing	26	3.76	0.781	
	Other	22	3.78	0.764	

Source(s): Authors' own compilation

goodness-of-fit test for model 1 meets the requirements (χ^2/df = 0.998 CFI = 1.000, TLI = 1.000, IFI = 1.000, NFI (Normed Fit Index) = 0.939 and RMSEA = 0.000), therefore, indicating excellent model fit. The main direct effect test results show that listening is positively associated with feedback (β = 0.608, p < 0.001). Therefore, H1 is supported.

Second, model 2 was established with message-sending skills as the mediator. The results show that the model fits well (Model 2: χ^2/df = 1.502 CFI = 0.957, GFI (Goodness of Fit Index) = 0.905, TLI = 0.948, IFI = 0.957, NFI = 0.882 and RMSEA = 0.041). Thirdly, model 3 was established, and the goodness-of-fit was tested. Here, the ability to deal with interference was the mediator for the relationship between listening and feedback. Results indicate good fit (χ^2/df = 1.4, CFI = 0.957, TLI = 0.950, IFI = 0.958 NFI = 0.881 and RMSEA = 0.040).

In order to test the mediating effect, the bootstrap method was used to repeat the sampling 5,000 times. The mediating effect of message-sending skills was 0.384, with a 95% confidence interval [−0.052, 0.843]. The mediating effect of the ability to deal with interference is 0.528, with a 95% confidence interval [0.298, 1.125]. Therefore, H3, stating that the ability to deal with interference positively mediates the relationship between listening and feedback, was supported. However, H2 is rejected (p = 0.138).

Finally, the chain multiple mediation effect was tested. The 95% confidence interval of the mediating effect was estimated by extracting 5,000 bootstrap samples, and the chain multi-

mediation effect of message-sending skills and ability to deal with interference was tested. Firstly, the model fit was determined. Model 4 obtained an acceptable fit (χ^2/df = 1.695 CFI = 0.926, TLI = 0.915, IFI = 0.927, NFI = 0.839 and RMSEA = 0.048). The multi-mediating effect of message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference is 0.417, with a 95% confidence interval [0.070, 0.847], indicating that H4 is supported. Table 7 below summarises the model findings.

The result for H2 is surprising, considering the documented crucial role of message-sending skills within the communication and feedback process (Guadaim, 2019, p. 229; Hayah, 2022, p. 41; Hazan and Simpson, 2000, p. 290). Notwithstanding this, through the ability to deal with interference, message-sending skills become a mediator in the relationship between listening and feedback skills.

Managerial implications

In this section, the authors sought to highlight the importance of the study's findings in a practical sense by making suggestions to managers. This manuscript shows managers other crucial constructs to consider when providing feedback. Managers who seek to become as proficient feedback providers as possible should also enhance their listening, message-sending and ability to deal with interference. After highlighting its importance, this paper further emboldens the suggestion that managers start with seeking training in affective listening when looking to improve their communication competency. In particular, the study proves that improving their listening skills will have an impact on their feedback skills. This paper's authors recommend that managers seeking to improve their feedback abilities start with being attentive listeners. In line with that recommendation, managers should note that paraphrasing and posing appropriate probing questions after the listening phase of the communication process enhances the relationship between their listening and feedback skills. Finally, managers are made aware of the detrimental role of interference during the communication process. Thus, the model illustrates the mediating presence of the ability to deal with interference during the listening and feedback phases of the communication process. Considered as a whole, the current study shows the various interactions between four important constructs present in the communication process between managers and their subordinates.

Limitations and suggestions for future research

Although this article achieved its main purpose, it is not without limitations. A sufficient sample was realised; the study could have benefited from a sample of 500 or more since they

	Models	β weights	Standardised β weights	Confidence level (95%)		p-value
				Lower	Upper	
H1	Model 1: Listening → Feedback	1.077	0.846***	–	–	0.000
H2	Model 2: Listening → Message-sending skills → Feedback	0.384	0.306	−0.052	0.843	0.138
H3	Model 3: Listening → Ability to deal with interference → Feedback	0.628	0.528*	−1.298	0.125	0.011
H4	Model 4: Listening→ Message-sending skills → Ability to deal with interference → Feedback	0.299	0.417*	0.070	0.847	0.028

Note(s): *p < 0.05; **p < 0.01; ***p < 0.001
Source(s): Authors' own compilation

Table 7.
Structural equational model analysis results

are more apt for complex models (Jhantasana, 2023, p. 17; Kyriazos, 2018, p. 2216). The authors intentionally targeted the manufacturing industry as it requires additional academic attention; a single industry may have limited the potential sample size, and future researchers are advised to include and compare more industries. A mixed-method design is also encouraged for future research projects. This is because this study fails to prove that message-sending skills also mediate the relationship between listening and feedback skills. Applying a qualitative portion to forthcoming research could clarify the role of this skill in the larger communication conceptual framework. Managers and their subordinates are the first authority in their experience of the communication and feedback process in their businesses (Daniel and Harland, 2018, p. 38; Merriam and Tisdell, 2016, pp. 25–26), and future researchers should include them as interviewees along with completed questionnaires.

Contributions and conclusions
In the past, understanding how managers' feedback skills can be improved has duly received (and continues to receive) academic attention. This article adds to the conversation by hypothesising, testing and partly confirming a model in which listening skills are linked to feedback skills. This relationship is proven to be mediated by message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference. Notably, message-sending skills only mediate this relationship through the ability to deal with interference. This likely indicates that managers' messages only contribute to effective feedback when their messages are free of bias, errors and ambiguity. In addition, this illustrates that message-sending skills mediate the causal relationship between listening and feedback only when the ability to deal with interference clarifies the intended messages.

This manuscript is the first attempt to empirically link all these constructs in this manner. As such, it encourages further investigations of such relationships in various settings. Previous studies largely focused on the antecedents of effective feedback behaviour by employees (constructs that promote their feedback-seeking behaviour). Although this approach is clearly beneficial, there seems to be a need for studies that seek to understand antecedents that impact managers' effective feedback skills. The current study aims to contribute to bridging that gap.

Another contribution of this paper is increasing awareness of the impact of noise on the communication process by highlighting the benefits of being able to deal with this interference. Awareness is regarded as the first step needed to improve this skill and mitigate its impact on managerial and business performance (Longweni and Kroon, 2016, pp. 1250–1251; van Vuuren et al., 2015, p. 1666).

To the best of the researchers' knowledge, this article is the first to present the ability to deal with interference as a mediating factor in a statistical model. Moreover, this study is the first to present a continuous intermediary role played by message-sending skills and the ability to deal with interference in the relationship between listening and feedback.

The researchers believe that by empirically proving the relationships hypothesised, the current study contributes to the communication process body of knowledge specifically, the communication process between managers and their subordinates, as perceived by the subordinates. Adding credence to the findings, this article highlights the importance of each of the constructs discussed concerning their role within the communication process, especially when providing feedback. Thus, managers seeking to improve their communication with their employees are encouraged to start listening. Furthermore, improving their listening skills will advance their feedback skills. Being apt message senders enhances the process even more. Naturally, being able to deal with interference is the final piece to creating an effective feedback process puzzle.

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