



Cultivating Humility in Business Education: A Listening-Focused Pedagogy for Future Leaders

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Abstract

In an era when humility and connection are vital for peace and sustainability, many leaders in business and government fall short by prioritizing their self-interest over ethics. Business schools, as key institutions shaping future leaders, may inadvertently reinforce this imbalance. To shift this lean toward self-interest, we propose a listening-focused pedagogy to cultivate humility and character in business school students. High-quality listening fosters interpersonal connection and promotes complex reasoning. Complex reasoning about oneself and others is a cornerstone of humility, which is central to morality and business ethics. We hypothesized that acquiring listening skills would enhance both high-quality listening and humility. To test this, we conducted a longitudinal quasi-experiment over four academic years (2018–2021) with data from 260 MBA students. Our findings show that the listening-focused course significantly increased students' listening skills and humility compared to control courses. These results demonstrate the course's potential to have a meaningful influence on the character development of business students. We conclude by discussing theoretical and practical implications for business ethics education, offering our materials to support replication and the broader application of this pedagogy.

Keywords Humility · Listening · Character-development

Introduction

Business schools play a vital role in fostering the growth, skills, and future success of aspiring managers. At the same time, they are increasingly criticized for inadvertently inflating students' hubris (Garrard, 2018; Robinson & Garrard, 2016; Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021), potentially yielding unproductive, unethical, and even destructive consequences (Ghoshal, 2005; Gioia, 2002, 2003; Ladd, 2012; Petit & Bollaert, 2012). To address these concerns, scholars have proposed strategies to help business schools rehumanize leadership (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015) and develop

virtue-based, character-building education programs (Crossan et al., 2013, 2024). One suggestion to restrain hubris and build character in business schools is to educate future managers to be humble (Crossan et al., 2024; Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021). Yet, simply teaching the benefits of humility is like explaining how to swim—it provides knowledge but fails to instill the actual behavior (Roberts, 2015). To increase the humility of business students, we propose cultivating humility through a listening-focused pedagogy. This pedagogy leads to the acquisition of a new mindset and skills while immersing the students in a transformative experiential learning process (Kolb, 1984, 2014).

Our focus on listening is based on theory, supported by laboratory experiments showing that listening increases speakers' and listeners' humility (Lehmann et al., 2023a, 2023b), and on general findings about a multitude of desirable work outcomes associated with good leader listening (Kluger et al., 2024). Yet, listening training in business education is rare (Brink & Costigan, 2015, 2023). Specifically, “there is an inverse relationship between the specific types of OC [oral communication, including listening] skills that are important in the workplace and those that are emphasized in business school learning goals, reflecting misalignment”

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(Brink & Costigan, 2015, p. 214). Our proposed listening-focused pedagogy addresses this misalignment and helps cultivate listening skills and humility. Specifically, we hypothesize that listening training first increases listening skills and consequently cultivates humility. We provide evidence supporting our hypotheses from a semester-long listening-focused MBA course taught annually over four years at an AACSB-accredited business school, evaluated using a quasi-experimental design. In what follows, we first review humility as a character virtue essential for moral leadership and ethical decision-making and explain why listening training could cultivate it. We then critique existing approaches to developing listening skills in business education and present our pedagogy.

Humility

The virtue of humility is described as the golden mean that lies between arrogance and servility—between overconfidence and self-deprecation (Tangney, 2000; Van Tongeren, 2022). It is a character strength (Bhattacharya et al., 2017) that enables individuals to be “ethically aligned,” recognizing oneself as just one among many morally significant others, fostering an extended compassion that counters the natural tendency to chronically prioritize one’s interests at the expense of others (Wright et al., 2017). Humble leaders see themselves accurately, seek self-improvement, recognize others’ strengths and contributions (Owens et al., 2013), and provide informal mentoring (Chan et al., 2024), thereby modeling and promoting moral and ethical behavior in the workplace (Argandona, 2015; Kelemen et al., 2023; Owens & Hekman, 2012). Morality and ethics—standards of right and wrong conduct (Cohen & Morse, 2014)—are essential for individual, team, and organizational effectiveness. Indeed, leader humility is associated with more balanced and fair information processing (Rego et al., 2018), employee ethical behavior (Naseer et al., 2020), and challenging voice behaviors (i.e., advocating for change; Bharanitharan et al., 2019). Also, CEO humility is associated with occurrences of corporate social responsibility (Ou et al., 2024). More broadly, leader humility promotes a host of positive organizational outcomes such as authenticity (Oc et al., 2020), psychological safety (Hu et al., 2018), organizational citizenship behaviors (Cho et al., 2021), team effectiveness (Rego et al., 2017), and performance (Chiu et al., 2016), to name only a few benefits (Chandler et al., 2023; Kelemen et al., 2023).

Given the importance of the virtue of humility, an important question arises: Can humility be cultivated, or should organizations focus on selecting leaders who naturally possess it? Whereas humility is typically viewed as a stable trait (Davis et al., 2013; Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013), growing evidence suggests it also has a situational component. Research indicates that humility can be both a trait and

a state—a virtue that can change depending on context and potentially be developed through intervention (Davis et al., 2017; Kruse et al., 2017; Lehmann et al., 2023a, 2023b; Ruberton et al., 2016; Wang et al., 2024). Building on this view of humility as a state, we predict that listening training can increase humility. Below, we explain the rationale for this prediction.

Humility as Complexity

At its core, humility reflects a complex understanding of oneself and one’s place in relation to others. This complexity encompasses interpersonal and intrapersonal dimensions. Interpersonally, humility includes appreciating others’ strengths and contributions, maintaining low self-focus, being open to feedback and advice, and recognizing one’s smallness within the broader context of the world (Ou et al., 2014; Owens et al., 2013; Van Tongeren et al., 2019). This perspective enables individuals to see themselves as part of a larger, complex system, fostering an understanding of the *complexity of the world* and one’s place within it. We refer to this interpersonal component as *external complexity*. Intrapersonally, humility entails an accurate and balanced self-view—acknowledging both strengths and weaknesses, recognizing the fallibility of one’s beliefs, and accepting the multifaceted nature of the self (Tangney, 2000; Van Tongeren et al., 2019). We refer to this component as *internal complexity*. Thus, humility stems from the ability to perceive and integrate internal contradictions, enabling the capacity to navigate complexity *within themselves and between themselves and others*.

Humility and Listening

The ability to perceive contradiction and complexity increases when people experience that someone listens to them. This claim is grounded in Carl Rogers’s theory of listening (Rogers, 1951). Empathic, non-judgmental listening fosters psychological safety, promoting awareness and tolerance of internal complexity. To quote Rogers:

In this atmosphere of safety, protection, and acceptance [created by empathic, non-judgmental listening], the firm boundaries of self-organization relax. There is no longer the firm, tight gestalt which is characteristic of every organization under threat, but a looser, more uncertain configuration. He [the speaker] begins to explore his perceptual field more and more fully. He discovers faulty generalizations, but his self structure is now sufficiently relaxed so that he can consider the *complex and contradictory* [emphasis added] experiences upon which they are based. He discovers experiences of which he has never been aware, which are

deeply *contradictory* [emphasis added] to the perception he has had of himself.... (Location 3311)

In other words, listening increases awareness of contradictions alongside the ability to tolerate them. This hypothesis was supported by research showing that high-quality listening increases attitude complexity (i.e., objective-attitude ambivalence) and strengthens the speaker's capacity to tolerate such complexity (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017; Itzchakov et al., 2017, 2023a, 2023b; Moin et al., 2024). Therefore, we theorize that because listening increases complexity, it will also generalize to humility, as the essence of humility is a specific complexity about the self. Thus, listening promotes cognitive complexity, enhancing both internal complexity (awareness of strengths and weaknesses) and external complexity (recognition of one's smallness within the larger world), manifested in humility.

High-quality listening is also predicted to increase the *listener's* humility because it requires openness and a willingness to be changed (Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991/1952, p. 106). When listening well, people are exposed to new information, including perspectives that may contradict their own beliefs and attitudes. When listeners consider new information, it expands their cognitive schemas, creating a more complex view of themselves and their environment. This expansion of schemas fosters a more nuanced understanding of the self and the external world, enhancing both internal and external complexity. Through this process, listeners can better integrate contradictory information into their self-concept, fostering humility. Consistent with this prediction, recent experiments have demonstrated that listening causally increases humility of both speakers and listeners (Lehmann et al., 2023a). Because listening increases humility, we expect that *training* people in listening would first improve their listening skills and consequently their humility.

Listening Training

Current Approaches

Listening is widely recognized as a critical managerial skill (Brink & Costigan, 2023; Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). Moreover, listening skills are needed in many forms of experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) employed in business education, including role plays, simulations, question-and-answer components of presentations, student-led case studies, interviews, and peer feedback sessions. Yet, listening is rarely included in business-school curricula, and the skill is often assumed rather than explicitly taught or examined (Costigan & Brink, 2020; Hill, 2021; Hinz et al., 2022; Ruiz Rodríguez et al., 2018). Even when listening training is offered, it is typically confined to courses on negotiation, communication, or debate, limiting the depth, scope, and focus devoted

to listening-specific insights and practice (Costigan & Brink, 2020; Shrestha, 2021; Spataro & Bloch, 2018). When listening is addressed, it usually involves brief, role-play-based interventions focused on specific tactics, like nodding and rephrasing, treated as instrumental techniques (Hinz et al., 2022). This approach often lacks "real plays," where students engage in unscripted conversations with peers and practice listening through genuine connection and reflection (Hinz et al., 2022).

Outside business schools, one of the most well-known approaches for training managers in listening is *active listening* (e.g., Jahromi et al., 2016; Jonsdottir & Fridriksdottir, 2020; Kubota et al., 2004; See the emphasis it gets from one of the leading management training organizations: the Center for Creative Leadership, 2024). Active listening includes telling the speaker what one heard, summarizing the speaker's message, and labeling the speaker's emotions. Yet, active listening, which originated from Rogers's work, is a skill that is hard to acquire and easy to abuse and misapply. For example, Gordon—a student of Rogers—referred to active listening as "not a simple technique... it is a method of putting to work a set of basic attitudes. Without these attitudes, the method seldom will be effective; it will sound false, empty, mechanical, insincere" (1975a, p. 68). Furthermore, "...deep and attentive listening is a rarity in organizations, having been replaced with a functionalist, instrumental type of listening that is more connected with coercion and manipulation than with meaning-making and understanding" (Tyler, 2011, p. 144).

In summary, listening training is largely absent from business education. When included, it is limited to role-plays or instrumental techniques that fall short of fostering the complexity required to develop virtues like humility. Moreover, the common focus on active listening in management training has notable limitations. Training solely in techniques may not cultivate the "basic attitude" that listening is inherently valuable and transformative (Rogers, 1949), which is essential for motivating lasting behavioral change.

The Listening Pedagogy

Our proposed pedagogy is based on the assumption that effective listening skills require developing a broader skill-set and mindset, applying them in real-life situations, and engaging in reflection at the individual, dyadic, team, and class levels. Our approach builds on the theoretical observation that listening requires substantial effort (Yip & Fisher, 2022). Hence, to motivate students to invest the effort, we employ various exercises that produce psychological safety and opportunities for listening and self-disclosure, enabling students to gain meaningful insights about themselves and their social environment (Kluger & Itzchakov, 2022). We expect that engaging in these activities will provide students

with repeated experiences of listening and being listened to by their peers, prompting changes in how they listen both in and outside the classroom. These experiences aim to foster a belief in the value of listening and to cultivate what is known as the Rogerian Schema—“belief that listening can help the speaker, trusting the ability of the speaker to benefit from listening, and endorsing behaviors constituting good listening” (Kluger et al., 2022, p. 1).

Accordingly, the course includes exercises such as inviting stories to create better listening (Itzchakov et al., 2016), the feedforward interview (Budworth & Latham, 2025; Rechter et al., 2025), and listening circles (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017). Specifically, the course includes a range of techniques and activities: “Getting to know you” stories, the feedforward interview, the feedforward interview for a problem, the feedforward from a hobby, compliments, mindfulness, active listening, asking questions, the negotiational self, goal setting with a devil’s advocate, “What is your story?”, and weekly reflections in class. A complete description of these activities—including their purpose, reproducible instructions, and theoretical and empirical rationale—can be found in Appendix A at the Open Science Foundation (OSF) site (see the APPENDICES.docx file at https://osf.io/92js6/?view_only=8c042a8977d8477581293f134a75f74f).

To foster the development of both a complex skill (listening) and a transformative mindset (the Rogerian schema and humility), we structured the course around four deliberate pedagogical tensions: (1) validation versus challenge, where students learn to affirm others while also respectfully questioning their views (Dailey, 2023); (2) promotion versus prevention motivation, encouraging growth-oriented exploration while remaining mindful of risks (Higgins, 1997, 1998); (3) experiential learning versus direct instruction, blending hands-on activities with conceptual grounding (Hinz et al., 2022); and (4) the instructor’s vulnerability versus authority, modeling authenticity without compromising credibility (Coutifaris & Grant, 2022; Oyler & Becker, 2015). For example, consider the first tension. Validation—behaviors that make others feel “recognized, acknowledged, or endorsed” (Dailey, 2023, p. 1)—plays a crucial role in promoting healthy psychological, relational, and behavioral outcomes; however, mere validation without constructive challenge may be less effective (Dailey, 2023). Thus, listeners who respectfully challenge the speaker’s thoughts can contribute more effectively to problem-solving (Behfar et al., 2020), promote social integration, reduce distress (Nils & Rimé, 2012), and foster reappraisal (Itzchakov et al., 2020). We address this tension, for example, with the feedforward interview, where the first part of this listening protocol provides validation, and the last part challenges (Rechter et al., 2025). For more information about these tensions, see Appendix B in the APPENDICES.docx file on the OSF site.

In summary, we hypothesize that a listening-focused course, which provides students with opportunities to experience high-quality listening both as recipients and providers, will transform their experience of being listened to, their self-perception as listeners, and their belief in the benefits of listening (i.e., the Rogerian schema):

Hypothesis 1: *A listening-focused course improves students’ (a) listening experiences, (b) self-reported listening, and (c) belief that listening is effective (Rogerian listening schema).*

Additionally, we propose that a listening-focused course increases students’ humility, with this effect mediated by the course’s impact on their listening skills.

Hypothesis 2: *A listening-focused course increases the humility of students.*

Hypothesis 3: *The effect of a listening-focused course on students’ humility is mediated by an increase in their listening skills.*

To test our hypotheses, we collected data in an MBA listening-focused course using a quasi-experimental design described next.

Method

Participants

We collected data from 260 MBA students in an AACSB-accredited business school across four academic years (2018–2021). Their mean age was 27.9 ($SD = 5.40$), and 64% identified as female. We employed three listening measures and three humility measures, but only one humility measure was collected in all years, and for that measure, we had complete data from 126 students. For other measures, we had fewer observations, as detailed below. We analyzed all available data while modeling the effects of missing-data patterns. Yet, we noted that results based on observations that have missing data were similar to those with complete data. The data, codes, and supplementary materials for all studies are available at https://osf.io/92js6/?view_only=8c042a8977d8477581293f134a75f74f (see the “README.docx” file at this OSF site before running the codes).

Procedure

In all years, we collected data from students attending a “Theoretical Considerations in Organizational Behavior”

course dedicated to practicing listening skills and learning related theories. We refer to this as a listening-focused course. The students in this course formed the quasi-experimental group ($n=89$). Of these, 65 had complete data, 17 answered only the pretest, and seven only the posttest. For the quasi-control group, we collected data from different students attending the following courses: Investment and Securities (Year 1), Organizational Behavior (Year 2, Year 3, and Year 4), and Organizational Theory (Year 3), $n=171$. Of these, 61 had complete data, 66 answered only the pretest, and 44 only the posttest. These courses are taught with more traditional methods, including tests, uniform assignments, and didactic learning. All courses consisted of 13 meetings, each lasting three academic hours. The experimental and control groups had no overlapping students, constituting a between-subjects design. In Year 1 and Year 2, a research assistant gave out questionnaires at the start of the first (Time 1) and last (13th; Time 2) class meetings; Time 1 served as baseline. The assistant offered students a chocolate bar for completing the questionnaires. The questionnaires were anonymous, and the teachers were absent from class while students completed the questionnaires to avoid demand effects. In Year 3, classes were held on Zoom due to the COVID-19 pandemic; we offered coffee coupons to participants who completed questionnaires at both Time 1 and Time 2. In Year 4, we repeated the procedure of Year 3, but classes were delivered again in person. The business school's Research Ethics Committee approved the procedure in which the data were collected (October 10, 2018), and this approval was renewed annually.

Listening Measures

We measured three facets of listening to cover the conceptual space likely to be affected by the listening-focused course: (a) perception of being listened to by others, (b) self-perception of being a good listener, and (c) belief in the impact of listening. All measures were reported on an 11-point Likert scale, ranging from 0 = "Strongly disagree" to 10 = "Strongly agree," as recommended by Aguinis et al. (2009).

Others' listening. In all years except for Year 1, we used the "team listening environment" scale (TLE; Johnston et al., 2011) to measure the perception that others are listening to the reporting student. This measure includes six items. For the pre-course measure, we adapted items to fit daily interactions in the workplace (e.g., "My work colleagues genuinely want to hear my point of view"); for the post-course measure, we adapted the items to the course context (e.g., "The other class members genuinely wanted to hear my point of view"). This measure has been consistently used in listening training research (e.g., Itzchakov et al., 2025, 2022, 2023a, 2023b).

Self-reported listening. In Year 3 and Year 4, we used four items measuring students' perception of the quality of their listening to others, adapted from a scale used in other studies (e.g., Itzchakov et al., 2016, 2017). At Time 1, participants rated how well they listen to people close to them and, at Time 2, to their classmates. Sample items at Time 1 (Time 2): "People close to me (My classmates) think I am an excellent listener" and "People close to me (My classmates) feel I understand them." We dropped one item, "People close to me (My classmates) sometimes feel that I am judgmental," to increase reliability.

Listening belief. We used an adjusted version of the listening belief scale (Kluger et al., 2022), including the items: "A good listener ..." "...believes in the speaker's ability for self-understanding," "...believes that the speaker can deal with his/her psychological situation," "...believes that the speaker can solve his/her problems," "...trusts the speaker to have the ability to reach self-insight," "...trusts the speaker's ability to achieve an intelligent self-direction," "...trusts the speaker's ability to reach a constructive self-direction," and "...believes that the speaker has a significant capacity for integrating himself/herself."

Humility Measures

To capture situational changes in humility, we selected the only two available state-level measures at the time of data collection—the brief state humility scale (BSHS; Kruse et al., 2017) and the experiences of humility scale (EHS; Davis et al., 2017). Given the leadership-development context of our study, we also included the widely used leader-humility scale (expressed humility; Owens et al., 2013). Importantly, we ensured that the selected measures reflected both internal and external complexity. Appendix C in the APPENDICES.docx file on the OSF site details how each item maps onto these two dimensions.¹ All measures were reported on an 11-point Likert scale ranging from 0 = "Does not describe me at all" to 10 = "Describes me accurately."

Experiences of humility scale. In all years, we utilized the 12 items developed by Davis et al. (2017), which have been used in other studies (e.g., Lehmann et al., 2023a). These items encompass four subscales: (a) other orientation (e.g., "I feel more focused on others")—we adapted the items of this subscale for the situational context by adding

¹ We employed all six measures only in Year 4. In Year 2, we replaced the BSHS with a self-report measure of expressed humility due to low reliability of the BSHS and our goal of keeping the survey brief. However, at the time, the BSHS was one of the few validated measures of state humility, so we reintroduced it in Years 3 and 4 alongside the expressed humility and experiences of humility scales. Humility and the Rogerian schema (i.e., the listening attitude) were not explicitly taught in class.

“than usual” suffixes (e.g., “I feel more focused on others than usual”); (b) transcendence (e.g., “I feel part of something much bigger than myself”); (c) selfishness (e.g., “I feel preoccupied”); and (d) egotism (e.g., “I feel ashamed for being so self-focused”). After reversing the selfishness and egotism items, we created an index for all items (Lehmann et al., 2023a).

Brief state humility scale. In Years 1, 3, and 4, we used the six items developed by Kruse et al. (2017) that were incorporated previously in other studies (e.g., Kruse et al., 2014; Ludwig et al., 2022). A sample item is “I feel that, overall, I am no better or worse than the average person.” We added two items to this measure to expand the representativeness of the humility construct: “I am open to ideas and advice of others,” which combined two items from the expressed humility scale (Owens et al., 2013), and “I can honestly assess my strengths and weaknesses” (Dwiwardani et al., 2014). Each item had a “right now” prefix to emphasize the situational context. We removed one item due to low reliability.

Expressed humility. This scale typically measures employees’ perception of leaders’ humility (e.g., Wang et al., 2024) but is also used to capture perceptions of peers’ humility (Owens et al., 2013). We used this scale in Years 2, 3, and 4, adjusting it to a self-report measure by changing “this person” to “I.” It includes nine items. A sample item is: “I admit it when I don’t know how to do something.”

Missing-Data Control

We created a variable that indexes whether respondents had answered both the pre-course and post-course survey (Full; complete data), the first survey only (First), or the last survey only (Last). This control allowed us to use incomplete data with mixed-effects modeling while ruling out that attrition (before the end of the course) or self-selection (joining a class after the course began) affected the results (Enders, 2022).

Results

We conducted all analyses using R (R Core Team, 2023; version 4.3.1). We report descriptive statistics, correlations, reliabilities, and test–retest reliabilities for all scales in Table 1. The table shows that all measures except the brief state humility scale had reliabilities of .68 or higher, with test–retest correlations ranging from $r = .29$ (others’ listening) to $r = .54$ (expressed humility and self-reported listening). The correlations among the humility measures are low, suggesting that they capture different aspects of humility. Relative to the humility measures, the correlations among the listening measures showed more convergence.

Table 1 Descriptive statistics and correlations of study measures

Measure	N	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1. Team listening environment Time 1	173	7.67	1.42	(0.91)											
2. Team listening environment Time 2	136	7.31	1.80	0.29**	(0.93)										
3. Self-reported listening Time 1	110	7.72	1.47	0.51**	0.27*	(0.83)									
4. Self-reported listening Time 2	87	6.98	1.63	0.37**	0.72**	0.54**	(0.86)								
5. Listening belief Time 1	45	6.53	1.53	-0.05	0.11	0.10	0.18	(0.90)							
6. Listening belief Time 2	37	7.28	1.96	0.32	0.65**	0.51**	0.61**	0.38	(0.97)						
7. Experiences of humility scale Time 1	205	6.01	1.23	0.20**	0.21*	0.19	0.19	0.34*	0.20	(0.68)					
8. Experiences of humility scale Time 2	176	6.09	1.36	0.07	0.35**	0.09	0.33**	0.28	0.48**	0.40**	(0.76)				
9. Brief state humility scale Time 1	143	6.06	1.28	0.02	-0.01	0.23*	0.04	0.32*	0.31	0.10	-0.05	(0.36)			
10. Brief state humility scale Time 2	127	6.32	1.12	0.17	0.07	0.31*	0.22*	0.36	0.46**	-0.01	0.11	0.50**	(0.32)		
11. Expressed humility Time 1	169	7.85	1.19	0.50**	0.09	0.55**	0.27*	-0.10	0.34	0.11	-0.04	0.18	0.22	(0.80)	
12. Expressed humility Time 2	136	7.71	1.18	0.36**	0.21*	0.45**	0.27*	-0.18	0.44**	-0.04	0.16	0.11	0.15	0.54**	(0.80)

Values on the diagonal are reliabilities. * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$

Yet, their correlations were low enough to consider them separately. Therefore, we tested the hypotheses separately for each measure.

To test Hypotheses 1 and 2, we employed mixed-effects models using the *lme4* package (Bates et al., 2015), treating repeated observations (Level 1) as nested within students (Level 2), as shown in Table 2. The table presents six mixed-effects models regressing three measures of listening and three measures of humility on two dummy codes representing participants who answered the survey only in Time 1 or only in Time 2, time (pre or post), condition, and time \times condition interactions. Only two of the 12 dummy codes were significant, suggesting that scores on the brief state humility scale were lower among those who answered it only in Time 1 relative to those who had complete data, and that scores on the listening belief were lower among those who answered the survey only in Time 2. Also, we tested whether the quasi-experimental groups were equivalent at Time 1. A series of *t*-tests indicated no significant differences between the means of these groups on all measured variables, all *ps* > .14. We conclude that there is no systematic bias due to selection and attrition. The interaction terms test our hypotheses, and they are significant for all dependent variables except the brief state humility scale. Nevertheless, we retested our hypotheses only among participants with complete data and reached similar conclusions, fully reported in the Supplemental Materials on the OSF site (see README.pdf and the R folder). The only difference was that the interaction was marginal for the expressed humility measure (*p* = .065).

To interpret the interactions, we report in Table 3 the sample size, means, and standard deviations for each dependent variable by time and condition, Cohen's *d* for change within each condition, and Δd between the conditions, reflecting the time \times condition interaction. The Δd was computed by subtracting the *d* in the control courses from the *d* in the listening-focused course (Formula 6 in Morris & DeShon, 2002). As seen in Table 3, the means of all dependent variables in the listening-focused course were higher in Time 2 than in Time 1 (positive *d* values). In contrast, the means of most dependent variables in the control courses were lower in Time 2 than in Time 1 (negative *d* values). The significance of these *d* values was assessed with *t*-values extracted from mixed-effects models. Specifically, we regressed listening and humility measures on the control dummy codes and time separately within each condition. The *t*-values of the effect of time within each condition reflect the probability of the respective *d*.

Notably, the Δd s indicate very strong effects on the listening measures (all exceeding 1) and weak to strong effects of the listening-focused course on the humility measures (ranging from non-significant 0.20 to 0.77). The probabilities of the Δd s are based on the *t*-values associated with the interaction effects reported in Table 2. Thus, we conclude that

Hypothesis 1, predicting that the listening-focused course increases listening skills, is supported consistently across all analyses and listening scales. Hypothesis 2, predicting that the listening-focused course increases humility, is consistently supported by the scales of experiences of humility and expressed humility, but not by the brief state humility scale. We show, for example, the patterns of the results for the experiences of humility scale in Fig. 1.

Next, we tested whether the results were generalized across the four years of our study. We added three dummy codes to the above models representing the four years and their two-way and three-way interactions with time and condition (Table S1 in the OSF site). The three-way interaction between the dummy code representing Year 3 (the COVID year) time and condition was significant for the experiences of humility scale (*p* < .001), marginal for the brief state humility scale (*p* = .058), and significant for the expressed humility scale (*p* = .009), indicating that the effects of the listening course in the third year were different from the other years on these measures. No other dummy code interacted significantly with the time \times condition term for either listening or humility measures (one listening measure was employed only once).

To interpret these three-way interactions with the COVID year, we present in Table 4 a table similar to Table 3, in which we separate the results by year. Table 4 suggests that the effect of the listening-focused course on humility was absent in the COVID year and supported in all other years. The effects of the listening-focused course on listening measures were consistently strong in all years, with Δd ranging between approximately one and two standard deviations, supporting Hypothesis 1.

In the non-COVID year, when students learned in person, the effects on the experiences of humility scale ranged from $\Delta d = 0.62$ to $\Delta d = 1.37$ and on the expressed humility scale from $\Delta d = 1.35$ to $\Delta d = 1.62$, suggesting very strong effects and supporting Hypothesis 2. In Table S3 on the OSF site, we replicate Table 3 without the COVID-year data. Naturally, the effects in Table S3 are stronger than in Table 3.

To test Hypothesis 3—that the effect of the listening-focused course on humility is mediated by listening—we created residual scores for humility and listening measures. Specifically, we regressed humility in Time 2 on humility in Time 1, computed residuals for change, and repeated the process for listening. Humility residuals were outcomes, listening residuals were mediators, and the quasi-experimental condition was the predictor. Because residual calculation requires complete data on Time 1 and 2, mediation analyses were conducted with reduced sample sizes. Using the *mediation* package (Tingley et al., 2014) with 5000 bootstrap samples, we assessed the indirect effect of courses on humility residuals through listening residuals. For each mediation model, we verified that the regression residuals

Table 2 Mixed-effects models regressing humility and listening measures on status (first measure only, full measures, and last measure only), time (before or after the course), and condition (listening skills or control)

Predictors	Others' listening			Self-reported listening			Listening belief			Experiences of humility			Brief state humility			Expressed humility		
	Estimates	CI	p															
Intercept [Status = Full]	8.70	7.97 to 9.44	<0.001	9.28	8.49 to 10.07	<0.001	6.56	5.04 to 8.08	<0.001	6.62	6.07 to 7.16	<0.001	6.32	5.73 to 6.91	<0.001	8.37	7.84 to 8.89	<0.001
Status: firstOnly	0.07	-0.40 to 0.54	0.757	-0.17	-0.73 to 0.38	0.542	-0.53	-1.50 to 0.44	0.276	-0.23	-0.60 to 0.14	0.229	-0.47	-0.90 to -0.04	0.030	-0.10	-0.48 to 0.28	0.594
Status: lastOnly	0.13	-0.47 to 0.72	0.679	0.05	-0.65 to 0.75	0.891	-1.19	-2.36 to -0.02	0.047	0.00	-0.44 to 0.44	0.995	-0.29	-0.78 to 0.20	0.243	-0.05	-0.52 to 0.43	0.850
Time	-1.10	-1.55 to -0.64	<0.001	-1.52	-1.98 to -1.05	<0.001	-0.03	-0.98 to 0.93	0.957	-0.43	-0.76 to -0.11	0.010	0.04	-0.30 to 0.39	0.801	-0.36	-0.67 to -0.05	0.024
Cond:listening	-1.73	-2.68 to -0.79	<0.001	-1.64	-2.63 to -0.64	0.001	-1.12	-2.98 to 0.73	0.230	-1.26	-1.97 to -0.55	0.001	-0.57	-1.33 to 0.19	0.141	-0.76	-1.44 to -0.07	0.032
Time:Cond:listening	1.81	1.20 to 2.42	<0.001	1.73	1.11 to 2.35	<0.001	1.58	0.41 to 2.75	0.009	1.06	0.62 to 1.49	<0.001	0.28	-0.18 to 0.75	0.230	0.47	0.04 to 0.89	0.030
<i>Random Effects</i>																		
σ^2	1.39			0.85			1.38			0.89			0.67			0.64		
τ_{00}	0.84 _{subject}			1.18 _{subject}			0.94 _{subject}			0.71 _{subject}			0.79 _{subject}			0.77 _{subject}		
ICC	0.38			0.58			0.40			0.44			0.54			0.55		
N	212 _{subject}			138 _{subject}			56 _{subject}			260 _{subject}			185 _{subject}			210 _{subject}		
Observations	309			197			82			381			270			305		
Marginal R ² / Conditional R ²	0.151 / 0.470			0.195 / 0.663			0.293 / 0.578			0.054 / 0.473			0.035 / 0.556			0.014 / 0.555		

p < .05 is in bold

Table 3 Descriptive statistics for aggregated data for humility measures and listening measures by course type and time, Cohen's *d* for change from time 1 to time 2, and the difference between Cohen's *ds* (Δd)

Variable	Listening course						Control courses											
	Time 1			Time 2			Time 1			Time 2								
	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>	Δd	<i>p</i>		
Others' listening	67	7.72	1.47	55	8.41	1.38	0.47	<0.001	106	7.64	1.39	81	6.56	1.66	-0.78	<0.001	1.25	<0.001
Self-reported listening	44	7.78	1.67	34	8.16	1.24	0.23	0.569	66	7.68	1.34	53	6.22	1.39	-1.09	<0.001	1.32	<0.001
Listening belief	21	6.80	1.82	20	8.34	1.31	0.85	<0.001	24	6.30	1.21	17	6.03	1.88	-0.22	0.919	1.07	0.007
Experiences of humility scale	80	5.92	1.41	72	6.60	1.26	0.48	0.002	125	6.06	1.11	104	5.74	1.32	-0.29	0.001	0.77	<0.001
Brief state humility scale	57	5.99	1.23	51	6.39	1.22	0.33	0.052	86	6.10	1.31	76	6.27	1.05	0.13	0.889	0.20	0.229
Expressed humility	64	7.68	1.25	55	7.83	1.24	0.12	0.639	105	7.96	1.14	81	7.63	1.14	-0.29	0.006	0.41	0.030

met the assumption of normality. Specifically, we applied the Shapiro–Wilk normality test to the regression model predicting the mediator from the condition and to the regression model predicting the outcome from both the condition and the mediator. All *p*-values of the Shapiro–Wilk normality test were $> .08$, indicating that all residuals met the assumption of normality.

Before any mediation analysis, we note that Hypothesis 3 is unsupported in principle during the COVID year or as measured by the brief state humility scale because a mediation analysis presupposes an effect on the outcome (humility), even a non-significant one. However, the insignificant effects were opposite to the predicted direction in the COVID year. Because the listening-focused course did not affect humility during the COVID year or when measured using the brief state humility scale, we excluded those data from our analysis of Hypothesis 3. Instead, we tested Hypothesis 3 using data only from the non-COVID years, examining each of the three listening measures as potential mediators of the course's effect on the other two humility measures. For two tests, we had data from Year 2 and Year 4; for the others, we had data only from Year 4. The listening measure based on the others' listening scale partially and marginally mediated the effect of the listening-focused course on the experiences of humility scale ($n=65$ from Year 2 and Year 4; $p=.07$). The listening measure based on listening belief mediated the effect on the same outcome ($n=26$ from Year 4; $p=.004$). No other mediation effect was significant, but these tests were underpowered.

Discussion

We advocate for a listening-focused pedagogy in MBA training, demonstrating that it cultivates listening skills, fosters a belief in the importance of listening, and promotes humility—thereby building character and virtue. Our approach incorporates high-quality listening experiences into a semester-long course, encouraging students to embrace complexity and contradictions within themselves and in their interactions with others. We tested the effects of this pedagogy in a quasi-experiment, comparing our course to control courses taught using more traditional methods that did not include listening experiences. Across four years of data, the listening-focused course improved participants' listening skills and humility. However, the mediation effect of listening skills on student humility was only partial, appearing in some but not all mediation tests.

Further support for the hypothesis that a listening course fosters humility comes from students' weekly reflection assignments and teaching evaluations. These materials indicate that students were encouraged to reappraise their self-awareness and develop more nuanced views of themselves

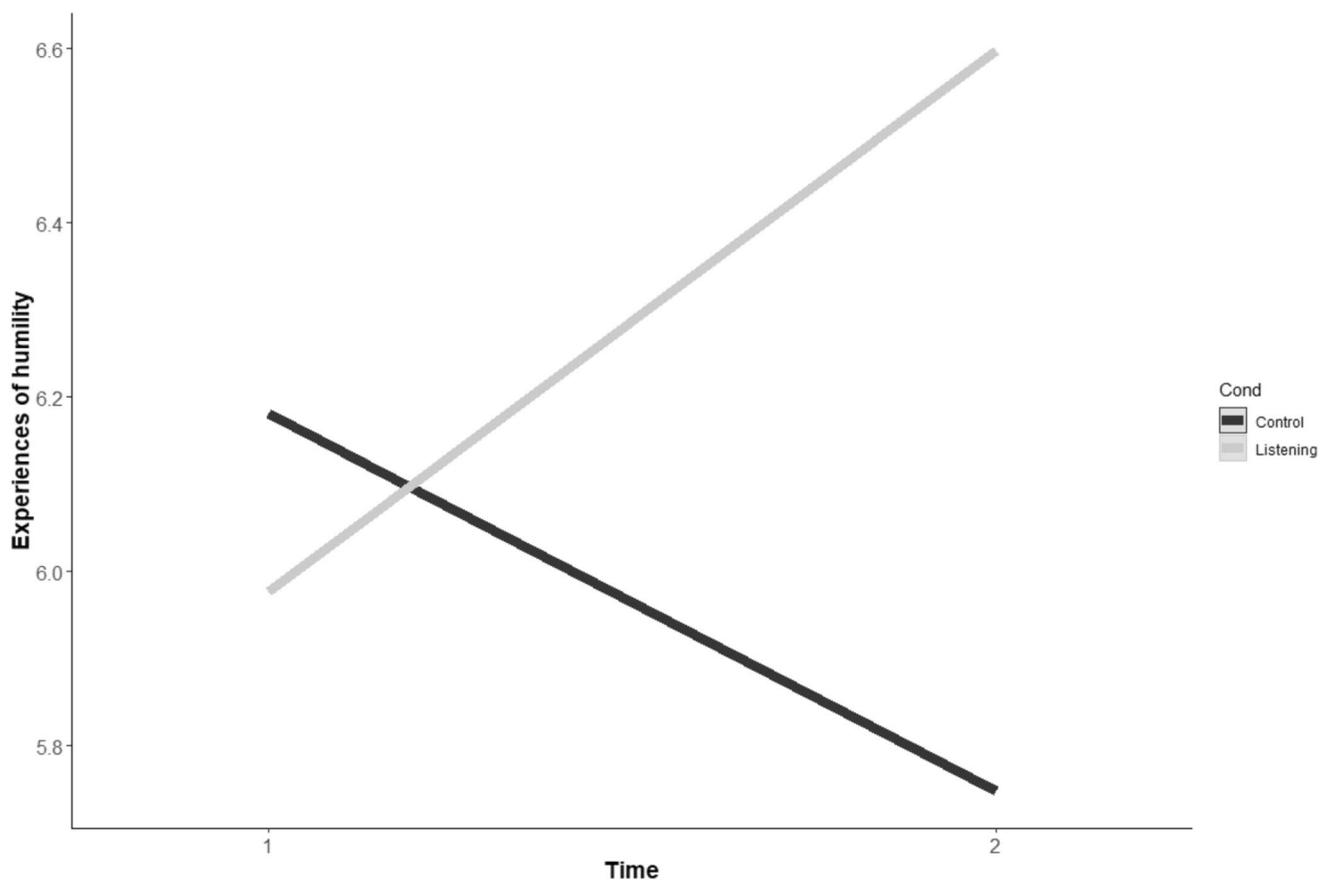


Fig. 1 Experience of humility by time and condition

and their interactions with others. For example, one student reflected: “At first, I was afraid of this exercise’s consequences on our relationship. Will I get hurt? How will I react? Surprisingly, focusing on the content my partner said, and wanting to listen and reflect on my partner’s thoughts, made me ‘forget’ that the content included tough things about me.” The challenge and introspection required by the course were echoed in comments such as “This course is thought-provoking and challenging,” “A thought-provoking course. It includes deep thinking and personal-internal work and growth,” and “I came out of the course every week with many insights, reappraising things.”

Three unexpected findings emerged from our study: a decrease in humility and listening among students in the control courses; the absence of an effect on humility during the COVID year; and the poor reliability and lack of effect of the brief state humility scale. Because none of these outcomes were anticipated, our explanations are post hoc and should be interpreted cautiously, as these findings could also result from random sampling errors or other unconsidered factors.

First, as we predicted, we observed an *increase* in humility and listening among students participating in the

listening-focused course. However, we did not anticipate the *decrease* in humility and listening among students participating in the control courses. This decrease in humility is consistent with a similar decrease we observed among undergraduate students at the same business school. Specifically, we asked 161 students, in their first and last year of study, to complete a survey with 19 items from various humility scales (α s = .78 and .93 in the first and last year, respectively). Of those students, 19 (sic.) answered on both occasions. A mixed-effects model indicated that humility levels were lower in the last year compared to the first year, $d = -0.78$, $p < .001$.

The decline in humility observed in our data is consistent with warnings about the effects of business-school education on graduates’ character (Crossan et al., 2013, 2024). However, this decline may partly reflect methodological biases, such as the “initial elevation bias,” in which mean survey responses tend to decrease over time (Shrout et al., 2018). Yet, we rule this out in our data, as the response in Time 2 from those with complete data was not lower compared to those who answered the survey for the first time in Time 2. In any case, the Δd estimates are free from biases that may be common to both comparison groups, isolating the effect

Table 4 Descriptive statistics for measures of humility and listening within each year by course type and time, Cohen's *d* for change from time 1 to time 2, and the difference between Cohen's *d*s (Δd)

Construct	Measure	Year	Listening course						Control courses											
			Time 1			Time 2			Time 1			Time 2								
			<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>p</i>	Δd	<i>p</i>		
Listening	Others' listening	2	23	7.53	1.30	21	7.70	1.64	0.13	0.032	40	7.59	1.18	28	6.24	1.59	-1.14	<0.001	1.27	<0.001
Listening	Others' listening	3	21	8.25	1.06	14	8.86	0.87	0.58	0.047	42	7.69	1.67	35	7.00	1.58	-0.41	0.051	0.99	0.007
Listening	Others' listening	4	23	7.42	1.83	20	8.85	1.08	0.78	0.003	29	7.75	1.16	18	6.21	1.81	-1.33	<0.001	2.11	<0.001
Listening	Self-reported listening	3	21	7.73	1.79	14	8.21	1.22	0.27	0.205	42	7.71	1.48	35	6.28	1.49	-0.97	<0.001	1.24	<0.001
Listening	Self-reported listening	4	23	7.83	1.59	20	8.12	1.29	0.18	0.450	29	7.67	1.05	18	6.11	1.18	-1.49	<0.001	1.67	<0.001
Listening	Listening belief	4	21	6.80	1.82	20	8.34	1.31	0.85	<0.001	24	6.30	1.21	17	6.03	1.88	-0.22	0.460	1.07	0.004
Humility	Experiences of humility scale	1	14	5.24	1.57	17	6.78	1.14	0.98	<0.001	20	5.81	0.88	23	5.47	1.04	-0.39	0.054	1.37	<0.001
Humility	Experiences of humility scale	2	23	7.69	1.15	21	7.86	1.06	0.15	0.032	39	8.06	0.94	28	7.62	1.05	-0.47	0.004	0.62	<0.001
Humility	Experiences of humility scale	3	21	6.12	1.46	14	6.19	1.25	0.05	0.112	37	6.14	1.21	35	6.43	1.29	0.24	0.352	-0.19	0.290
Humility	Experiences of humility scale	4	22	6.63	1.04	20	7.05	1.13	0.40	0.015	28	6.56	1.23	18	6.14	1.00	-0.34	0.041	0.74	0.003
Humility	Brief state humility scale	1	15	5.75	0.95	17	6.75	1.30	1.05	<0.001	20	6.22	1.48	23	6.60	1.20	0.26	0.377	0.79	0.015
Humility	Brief state humility scale	3	21	5.37	1.33	14	5.43	0.93	0.05	0.301	40	5.04	1.16	35	5.37	0.61	0.28	0.226	-0.23	0.306
Humility	Brief state humility scale	4	21	4.89	0.91	20	5.03	0.75	0.15	0.436	29	5.17	1.10	18	5.19	0.81	0.02	0.049	0.13	0.310
Humility	Expressed humility	2	23	5.47	1.30	21	6.28	1.37	0.62	0.092	40	5.76	0.91	28	4.85	1.20	-1.00	0.013	1.62	0.005
Humility	Expressed humility	3	21	8.05	1.34	14	7.59	1.87	-0.34	0.065	39	7.84	1.39	35	7.86	1.03	0.01	0.387	-0.35	0.102
Humility	Expressed humility	4	20	7.28	1.18	20	7.98	0.87	0.59	0.034	29	7.96	1.00	18	7.20	1.40	-0.76	0.011	1.35	<0.001

of the intervention. This further supports the interpretation that changes in listening skills and humility are attributable to participation in the listening-focused course, relative to the control courses. However, the possibility that business-school education may lower humility more broadly warrants further investigation in future studies.

Second, when the course was delivered online during COVID, the effects of the listening course on humility were absent, but they were present for listening. This pattern underscores the importance of examining how online instruction differs from face-to-face instruction in shaping outcomes. Future research could systematically compare online and face-to-face listening instruction to disentangle potential differences in their effectiveness. More broadly, the findings raise timely questions about how remote work affects business communication. Whereas a meta-analysis highlights some benefits of remote work (Gajendran et al., 2024), other research suggests that online communication is less effective than face-to-face (e.g., Stieger et al., 2023). Future studies could explore how listening online versus in person influences key work outcomes.

Third, we found both poor reliability and a lack of training effect on humility when using the brief state humility scale. The poor reliability we observed is consistent with a Cronbach's $\alpha = .66$ reported on a sample of students (Harmon-Jones et al., 2025). We also subjected the items of this scale to *exploratory graph analysis*—an alternative to factor analysis that performs as well or better than all extraction methods of factor analysis (Golino et al., 2020). The results both before and after the course indicated two communities of items (two factors), but there was no consistency in the assignment of items to these factors. It could be that this measure is conflated with self-deprecation (Kim & Sahlstein Parcell, 2022), which both lowers the reliability and explains why the listening training did not affect this measure. While we do not expect listening training to increase self-deprecation, we expect it to enhance humility, as captured by the other two humility scales we employed. These findings suggest that the brief state humility scale should be used cautiously until further psychometric validation clarifies its structure.

Contributions

Our work responds to recent calls to rehumanize leadership (Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015), emphasizing the importance of empathy, authenticity, and meaningful connection in leadership practices (Eubanks et al., 2012), building character (Crossan et al., 2013, 2024), and restraining hubris (Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021) in business-school education. Scholars highlight a significant disconnect between leaders and followers, as leadership is viewed as a set of functional skills rather than a connection to the group and its members

(Petriglieri & Petriglieri, 2015). To improve future managers' judgment and decision-making, business schools must prioritize not only competence but also the development of character (Crossan et al., 2013, 2024). Moreover, the rise of hubris and overconfidence among top leaders poses serious risks (Tourish, 2020). Business schools can play a critical role in tempering hubris and fostering humility in future leaders (Sadler-Smith & Cojuharenco, 2021). In responding to these calls, our proposed pedagogy offers students a set of experiential exercises that encourage them to connect with themselves, their professional endeavors, and their social environment both in and outside class. Moreover, we demonstrate how the course cultivates listening skills and humility—a virtue central to people-centered leadership and character-building (Owens & Hekman, 2012, 2016; Owens et al., 2013).

We also contribute to the literature on business ethics education. Specifically, similar to the disconnect between managers in the field and business schools regarding the importance of leaders' listening skills, research suggests a comparable pattern regarding business ethics conduct. Namely, employers are largely dissatisfied with the business ethics of business-school graduates and hold business schools, at least partially, responsible for their graduates' lack of business ethics (Sigurjonsson et al., 2014, 2015). To help business schools educate more ethical and moral leaders, scholars and practitioners have suggested several changes to business ethics education in management programs, such as developing programs that focus on curating leadership skills and attitudes through experiential learning (Schlegelmilch & Thomas, 2011). In this vein, our listening-focused pedagogy enhances students' listening skills and humility—a character virtue essential to ethical leadership (Kelemen et al., 2023)—through experiential learning and by fostering a shift in attitudes (i.e., the Rogerian schema). We focus on humility, rather than other virtues such as compassion or empathy, because it lies at the intersection of leadership and business ethics, with a growing body of research underscoring its importance for ethical conduct, good people management, and effectiveness (Chandler et al., 2023).

Our study further contributes to the understanding of interventions that promote humility. Research on such interventions is relatively scarce. Studies show that humility increases with experimental manipulations of awe (Goldy et al., 2022; Stellar et al., 2018), gratitude (Ruberton et al., 2016), self-affirmation (Kruse et al., 2015), and listening (Lehmann et al., 2023a, 2023b). We extend the latter laboratory findings (Lehmann et al., 2023a) into a real-world context of business education, offering external validity for the impact of listening on humility. This adds to the growing body of evidence that humility is not simply a fixed trait but can be actively developed through targeted interventions

(Wang et al., 2024)—an insight crucial for updating business-school curricula to cultivate humility.

Similarly, there is limited research on listening interventions in organizations (Janusik, 2023; Yip & Fisher, 2022). Extant studies demonstrate that listening can be improved among employees (Rautalinko & Lisper, 2004) and that it reduces social anxiety, enhances self-awareness, promotes objective attitude ambivalence (Itzchakov & Kluger, 2017), and increases perspective-taking, competence (Itzchakov, 2020), autonomy (Itzchakov et al., 2023a, 2023b), and relatedness with colleagues, while also decreasing burnout and turnover intentions (Itzchakov et al., 2022). These findings suggest that training future managers to listen to their employees holds considerable value. However, management-education scholars note that existing listening training falls short of the needs of the workplace (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Lewis et al., 2025). Such training often is not featured in program curricula, and when it is mentioned explicitly, it tends to be a small component of instrumental training in business communication (Hill, 2021). The listening exercises in our pedagogy incorporate a range of structured protocols, enabling students to practice diverse techniques and strategies. These exercises are complemented by reflective activities grounded in theoretical and empirical scholarship on the topic of listening. Though the full course design may not be replicable in its entirety, the principles and materials we developed offer adaptable components for courses not exclusively focused on listening, yet still capable of yielding some of its benefits. Thus, listening components from our course might be adapted to multiple classes, such that the exposure to listening is not limited to one course. For example, classes on performance appraisal may incorporate the feedforward interview, classes on leadership may employ the “What is your story?” protocol, and classes on negotiation may adopt the inner negotiation protocol (see Appendix A). While adopting a few components may be better than none, we believe that only extensive listening training and practice can truly build character.

Limitations and Future Research

The primary limitation of our study lies in its reliance on self-reported data. Consequently, it remains unclear whether the students’ increased humility and improved listening skills were experienced by their colleagues or by individuals outside the classroom setting. While obtaining third-party evaluations presents significant challenges, some researchers in the field of listening have successfully collected such data (Graybill, 1986; Joussemet et al., 2013, 2018) and have even demonstrated measurable effects on the children of trainees (Joussemet et al., 2013). These studies could guide future research on the effectiveness of listening-focused pedagogies. Also, a larger sample size could provide greater power

to our test of whether listening skills mediate the effect of our listening-focused pedagogy on student humility.

Additionally, our results partially address several criticisms that have been leveled at Rogers’s approach. First, the listening ideal that he advocated includes being “congruent,” or authentic, to a degree that even Rogers sometimes failed to attain in his own life (Martin, 2025), raising concerns about the practicality of his theory. Second, his approach to listening overlooks the diversity of multicultural norms. In some cultures, the openness created by listening, as advocated by Rogers, may counter norms of keeping one’s thoughts and emotions private (Martin, 2025; McDougall, 2002). Third, the emphasis on listening to the individual, promoting self-expression, and achieving self-actualization may come at the expense of collective needs. It risks ignoring higher-order goals that characterize organizations, overlooking societal and structural factors that shape human development and well-being (Martin, 2025), and neglecting the power dynamics inherent in roles such as therapist or leader (Margolin, 2017). Indeed, scholars advocating for listening at the organizational level emphasize the importance of constructing “listening structures” (Yip & Fisher, 2022) or “listening architectures” (Macnamara, 2015)—that is, routines and procedures designed to institutionalize listening and prevent the undue influence of the powerful on information flow.

Our results and approach partially address these criticisms as follows. First, although Rogers’s listening ideal may not be fully attained, the listening quality can be improved, as our data and that of others have shown (e.g., Itzchakov et al., 2023a, 2023b). Moreover, our results suggest that listening is associated with higher levels of humility, indicating that—at least in our context—listening did not promote behaviors that jeopardize the collective; rather, it seems to strengthen it, as humility encompasses a core component oriented toward supporting others (Chan et al., 2024; Owens & Hekman, 2012; Van Tongeren et al., 2019). Second, our study was conducted in a culture typically characterized as individualistic (Arieli & Mentser, 2022; Arieli & Sagiv, 2018). Although this differs from the American context in which Rogers developed his approach, future research should examine the effects of Rogers’s theory in collectivist cultures, such as those in East Asia. Notably, however, meta-analyses of the effects of listening on work-related outcomes, including performance, did not show that culture moderated the results (Kluger et al., 2024). Finally, our approach to advocating a listening training course in MBA programs was designed with systematic tensions (see Appendix B), aiming to provide structured support for listening rather than relying solely on individual tendencies and motivation, thereby fostering sustained engagement and participation. But the course did not explicitly train students in how to construct listening architectures within the workplace, a gap that

future training and research could address. Thus, while our work partially responds to criticisms of Rogers's approach, it also leaves important questions open for future inquiry.

In addition to concerns about Rogers's approach, it is important to recognize that the effects of listening are not universally positive. Research shows that silent or attentive listening can be unsettling for individuals with an avoidant attachment style (Castro et al., 2016) or those experiencing depression (Weis-Rappaport & Kluger, 2024). To mitigate potential distress, we designed the course with several safeguards: clear framing of each exercise, the establishment of psychological safety norms in class, and repeated invitations for students to share concerns or opt out of specific activities. Listening may evoke strong resistance—particularly common in MBA classrooms—or, less frequently, elicit profound personal sharing. Both responses require thoughtful facilitation: resistance should be met with respect, whereas emotional openness calls for a caring, humble approach and, when appropriate, referral to mental health professionals.

Finally, our quasi-experimental research effects could be attributed to factors other than listening (e.g., differences in instructor likability between the quasi-experimental and quasi-control groups). To isolate the impact of the pedagogy itself, future studies should employ randomized designs or control for instructor and novelty effects. Nevertheless, as the causal effect of listening on humility has been established in experimental studies and held above and beyond liking, we conclude that the effect is robust. The fact that we replicated this finding in the field further contributes to its external validity.

Conclusion

Cultivating humility in business-school education is essential for preparing graduates to navigate complex challenges. Our listening-focused pedagogy offers dual benefits: It enhances listening as a skill and fosters humility as a character virtue, both of which are vital for ethical and effective leadership. Business schools seeking to prepare future leaders to thrive in diverse, uncertain, and interdependent environments should desire these outcomes. Business schools may contribute to these outcomes by integrating listening-focused classes into their curricula.

Supplementary Information The online version contains supplementary material available at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-025-06099-2>.

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Declarations

Conflict of interest We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Ethical Approval This study was approved by the ethics committee of the business school where it was conducted.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the research.

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