Chapter 17
Traits of Leaders and Active Listening:
A Theory

Rajiv Kumar
Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, India

Vidyanand Jha
Indian Institute of Management Calcutta, India

ABSTRACT

Listening is an important managerial competency which contributes to managerial effectiveness and also contributes to many positive outcomes at organizational and individual level. In this paper, we investigate, the relationship between personality types and listening styles with a view to find specific listening styles appropriate to different personality types. We have argued that active listening is impacted by the traits leaders have. Employing the well-established taxonomy of the Big-Five traits, we have formulated five propositions predicting the likely impact of each of these traits on active listening. Extraversion and neuroticism are likely to take a leader away from active listening, but the other three traits—agreeableness, conscientiousness, and openness to new experiences—seem to enable active listening. We have also discussed the implications of our work for theory and practice.

INTRODUCTION

Listening for an extended period has long been considered a key managerial ability. Both the popular managerial literature (for example, Brownell, 1984) as well as more academic literature emphasize listening skills. Effective listening has been associated with a number of situations involving effectiveness of salespeople (Bergeron, 2004; Nielsen, 2000); improved worker productivity and satisfaction (Cooper, 1997); managerial creativity and problem solving (Helms & Haynes, 1992); emotional exhaustion, turnover intention, and organizational citizenship behavior (Lloyd et al., 2015).

We argue that the contemporary workplace has changed into ways which make listening even more important. Increased market competition has put more emphasis on the need to be closer to the market as well as constantly bringing more of incremental improvements as well as breakthrough innovations. Both require more of listening to frontline employees as they provide valuable market intelligence as well as customer feedback. Frontline employees and customers can often bring insights that managers or leaders removed from ground realities may not be able to anticipate or sense. The need for innovation has also enhanced the requirement for cross-functional cooperation which, again, has made the ability to listen to people with very different worldviews very essential.

Moreover, the workplace itself is changing in many parts of the world. Employees have more education and also more options in the labor market. In these circumstances, leaders must listen more to give the employees a sense of being valued which increases increase their chances to stay in the organization and contribute meaningfully over the long-term. Finally, in a scenario of increased globalization where people from different cultures are working together in an interdependent fashion more than ever before, the ability to listen well becomes quite important to understand each other and effectively negotiate differences.

There have been a number of ways to characterize the process of effective listening. One of the most popular ways is characterized as empathetic listening or active listening, popularized by Carl Rogers. Active listening in many research studies has been shown to improve many individual-, team-, and organizational-level outcomes in organizations. For example, active listening on the part of the supervisor increases the perceived safety on part of the subordinate, making them more open to experimentations and leading to their being more engaged (Fenniman, 2000). Empathetic listening has also been linked to positive organizational culture (Parks, 2015).

Given the importance of active listening, managers should practice active listening more in order to develop this important skill. However, an important issue to investigate in this context relates to whether the active listening styles differ according to personality types and the context. It is generally accepted that behavior of persons differs across the population in many situations. There are studies available that relate these differences to various personality types (Bright, 1982; Rastogi & Dave, 2004; Hagerman, 1991). Furthermore, there are studies available on some of the differences in communication styles, based on personality types. For example, Cavin (2000) examined the differences in communication preferences according to personality types. This should make it reasonable to assume that listening styles would also differ by personality types.

There are numerous ways to create typologies of personality. Some of the more used ones include FIRO-B, Type A and Type B and Myer's Briggs' Type Indicator (MBTI). MBTI, based on Jungian Personality types, is one of the most used personality typologies. In this chapter, however, we employ the Big Five traits taxonomy to develop our theory. The reasons for this choice are mentioned subsequently.

CONTEXT

We believe proper listening is essential for effective leadership, and the theory of active listening developed by Carl Rogers (1961) and his associates is vital for leaders to understand and adopt. We also sense that traits have an important role to play in the felicity with which leaders can fruitfully employ active listening. In this chapter, we explore the connection between Big-Five personality traits and active

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