Listening to employees with avoidant attachment style: A puzzle

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Active empathic listening was argued to have a “miraculous” power of changing the person being listened to (e.g., Rogers & Roethlisberger, 1991/1952) and is highly recommended practice (e.g., Gordon, 1977) because listening produces success in business (Covey, 1989), improve quality of physician performance (Boudreau, Cassell, & Fuks, 2009), minimize the damaging aspects of performance appraisals (Kluger & Nir, 2010) increase sales (Drollinger, Comer, & Warrington, 2006), to name a few. Moreover, several correlational studies have shown the supervisor listening is highly correlated with perception of leadership (.50 to .86) (Allen, 2010; Bechler & Johnson, 1995; Kramer, 1997). Similarly, supervisor listening is highly correlated with job-satisfaction. For example, in one of our studies we considered data from five companies (N=989) in which employees reported some measure of their manager's listening skills and some measure of satisfaction from various work aspects. The aggregated correlation, between listening and satisfaction, across the five companies, was r=.55 (LL=.5, UL=.59 ; p<.01). Furthermore, listening appear to produce these benefits by creating psychological safety, an argument that received empirical support (Fenniman, 2010). Thus, it seems that listening should have universal positive outcomes as argued by Carl Rogers.

However, contrary to Rogers’ ideas, active listening may not fit all people and its effects may be moderated by people’s attachment style. According to attachment theory (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2007), people differ on two dimensions of attachment: anxiety and avoidance, where the latter is relevant to our predictions. People with avoidant attachment style prefer to avoid intimacy (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). Given that intimacy could be created by listening, listening may be experienced by people with an avoidant attachment style as a threat to their inner
working model of detachment from others. Thus, people with an avoidant attachment style may feel uncomfortable when being listened to, feel less psychological safety than in "normal" conversation, and have lower satisfaction in the presence of a good listener.

In this presentation, we describe four studies testing this hypothesis that yielded inconsistent findings. The first two studies were lab experiments (N=66 and N=70) that assessed psychological safety in a 6-minutes free conversation group and in a listening group, in which each participant was a listener for 3 minutes and a speaker for 3 minutes. In both experiments, psychological safety was higher in the listening group, and in both experiments the effect was found largely among people low in attachment avoidance. The third study was a scenario experiment (N=208) where teachers and parents were presented with either a scenario of a teacher who listens carefully to a parent, or does not listens well to a parent. As expected, respondents evaluated the listener much higher than the non-listener. However, not only avoidant-attachment style did not interact with the manipulation, anxious-attachment style did, such that the experimental effect diminished among anxiously-attached respondents. Finally, a survey of employees (N=140) regarding managerial listening skills (using the Facilitating Listening Scale; Bouskila-Yam & Kluger, 2011) showed correlations of .60 with job satisfaction and .17 with subjective well-being (Diener, Emmons, Larsen & Griffin, 1985), but no interaction with attachment styles.

Thus in this presentation we will explore, and consult with the audience about, the likely mechanisms that may make attachment style interact or not interact with listening behavior in affecting psychological and organizational outcomes.
References


Fenniman, A. (2010). *Understanding Each Other at Work: An Examination of the Effects of Perceived Empathetic Listening on Psychological Safety in the Supervisor-Subordinate Relationship*. (Ph.D.), George Washington University. (UMI Number: 3389636)


