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LEADERSHIP AND LISTENING: PERCEPTIONS AND BEHAVIORS

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Extensive research has explored the construct "leadership" and the communication behavior "listening," but little has been done examining the relationship between these two variables in the small group. Scholars from diverse backgrounds and perspectives have examined leadership (e.g., Fiedler, 1967; Fisher, 1980: Lippett & White, 1968; Mortensen, 1966; Schriesheim & Kerr, 1977; Schultz, 1986), while a similarly diverse collection of scholars has approached listening (e.g., Bostrom, 1990; Goss, 1982; Nichols, 1948; Thomas & Levine, 1994; Weaver, 1972). Efforts considering small group leadership and listening together have been mainly limited to textbook prescriptions and anecdotal discussions (e.g., Brilhart & Galanes, 1995; Brownell, 1986).

Recently, however, Bechler & Johnson (1995) made an initial attempt to identify a relationship between perceptions of leadership and perceptions of listening skill. Their study found a significant positive correlation between member perceptions of who was leading the group and member perceptions of which members were the best listeners. "Those subjects ranked as most like a leader were also typically ranked as good listeners...Individuals perceived to be leading the groups were most commonly believed to be listening to the groups" (Bechler & Johnson, 1995, pp. 82-83). This essay extends that study, reexamining the relationship between perceptions of leadership and listening and adding a consideration of actual listening performance.

VARIABLES

Leadership

Lengthy reviews of the literature on leadership have been presented elsewhere (see Barge, 1994; Bass, 1990a; Hackman & Johnson, 1991; or Stogdill, 1974). While this essay will not attempt to provide an extensive survey, some brief discussion of the potential significance of listening to

effective leadership from the perspective of several leadership theories seems warranted.

Schultz's work (1978, 1986) considered several "communicative correlates" as predictors of leadership emergence. She found that certain communication functions could facilitate the selection of potential group leaders (suggesting that those selected would be likely to emerge as group leaders anyway, hence providing a means of selection that may encourage the emergence process). However, listening was not a specific focus in Schultz's work, and it has not been considered among the significant leadership variables studied by others or within proposed models. Other skills, typically those related to verbal expressiveness, have been emphasized (see Barge & Hirokawa, 1989; Morris & Hackman, 1969; Reynolds, 1984).

Considering specific leadership theories, however, one might hypothesize that listening serves as a core variable in effective leadership, regardless of approach. For example, Bormann's (1972, 1985, 1990) theory of symbolic convergence suggests that leaders are those communicators who articulate a rhetorical vision that shapes the reality of members. Leaders emerge by creating or furthering rhetorical fantasies members find convincing. It might be hypothesized that creating and articulating a rhetorical vision others will find convincing requires superior ability to understand and synthesize the visions of others (hence, the significance of listening). In a similar way, conceptualizations of "transformational leadership" (e.g., Bass, 1990b; Burns, 1978) describe leaders who create convincing or compelling rhetorical visions which inspire followers to adjust their beliefs and behaviors. Again, creating visions followers will find compelling may require superior listening skills; in identifying what followers currently believe, observing their responses, and incorporating their suggestions.

Probably the most familiar leadership theory, usually called the "traits" approach, suggests that a single set of attributes or characteristics enable individuals to gain and maintain leadership. In the early twentieth century, scholars examined such characteristics as intelligence, extroversion, integrity, and initiative. Later, the focus shifted to a study of leader motivations and skills (Yukl, 1989). While some consistency was seen over time, traits research fell into disdain as scholars failed to identify a specific list of traits consistent across leaders and leadership situations. Recently, however, some scholars have expressed renewed interest in traits research

(Lord, DeVader, & Alliger, 1986). Kenny & Zaccaro (1983) stated that those who become leaders typically possess "the ability to perceive and predict variations in group situations and pattern their own approaches accordingly" (p. 683). This assertion seems consistent with an emphasis on the role of listening as a central leadership trait, as superior perceptive ability is most likely founded on effective listening.

Finally, the leadership theory favored by the present authors is the familiar "emergent leadership" approach (Bormann, 1990; Fisher, 1980, 1986) and focuses most directly on the role of the "task leader." From this perspective, task leaders are thought to emerge from among the members of the group through phases of elimination and competition. Previous research has sought to identify variables that are influential in an individual's emergence as leader or elimination from leadership contention during the emergence process. Some of the variables identified include inflexibility, quietness, seeming unintelligent or uninformed, and inappropriate leadership style (Bormann, 1990). This study hypothesizes that those who emerge as leaders in groups are those with superior listening skills—or who are at least perceived to have superior listening skills.

Listening

Listening has been conceptualized from a variety of perspectives. Research has related listening to the retention of information (Nichols, 1948; Thomas & Levine, 1994) and to short- and long-term memory (Bostrom, 1990; Bostrom & Waldhart, 1988). Weaver (1972) (among others) identified personal selection and comprehension as key components in the listening process. Goss (1982), using an information processing model, established a relationship between listening and the internalization and application of information. The measurement of listening abilities has also grown, particularly through the development of instruments designed to measure various aspects of listening (Barker, Pearce, & Johnson, 1992; Faires, 1980). Watson & Barker (1984) noted that the research has demonstrated connections between listening and organizational abilities, academic achievement, and note-taking skills. They also assert that "...listening is a complex process rather than a singular skill" (p. 189). In an early work on listening, Nichols (1948) noted a relationship between physical environment and comprehension. Recent work considering the context wherein listening occurs has most often focused on the organizational environment (e.g., Blanchard, 1991; Brownell, 1990, 1992, 1994; Field & Knowles, 1989). The importance of listening in various organizational settings has been men-

tioned in a number of studies (see Curtis, Winsor, & Stephens, 1989; Hunt & Cusella, 1983; Johnson, 1992; Wolvin & Coakley, 1991) and further supported by the work of Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert (1989) who found that those with strong listening skills tend to hold higher positions within organizations and are promoted more often than those with weaker listening skills.

However, the relationship between listening and the small group has mostly been limited to textbook prescriptions. Small group communication texts (e.g., Brilhart & Galanes, 1995; Jensen & Chilberg, 1991) often note the importance of listening and member effectiveness. Some also link effective leadership to listening effectiveness through suggestions for behavior (see Brilhart & Galanes, 1995; Brownell, 1986).

METHOD

Research Questions

Three research questions were examined in this study. The first question followed from the exploratory nature of the Bechler & Johnson (1995) study and sought to reexamine their initial findings:

RQ1: *Is there a relationship between member perceptions of leadership and member perceptions of listening effectiveness in the task-oriented small group?*

The second question was intended to extend these findings into the realm of listening skills and behaviors. While it is asserted that perceptions are most central in the leadership emergence process, there is no evidence suggesting that actual behaviors match member perceptions with regard to listening effectiveness. The positive correlation between perceptions of listening and the role of group leader does not indicate whether or not these group-selected leaders actually possess superior listening ability. Hence, the second question sought to determine if a relationship existed among perceptions and behaviors:

RQ2: *Is there a relationship between group member perceptions of listening effectiveness and actual listening effectiveness?*

A third and related question was also addressed:

RQ3: *Is there a relationship between group member perceptions of leadership and actual listening effectiveness?*

Subjects

Eighteen groups of undergraduate students enrolled in Small Group Communication courses at two collegiate institutions were selected as subjects. The groups were assembled at the start of the semester as zero-history, leaderless groups for class purposes unrelated to the research.

These groups met together working on graded classroom assignments for the duration of fifteen weeks (meeting approximately 12 times). Groups varied in size from four to six, with a mean number of members of 5.16 and a mode of 5. A total of 93 subjects participated in this study.

Procedures

During the third week of the semester, the revised video version of the Watson-Barker Listening Test was administered to all subjects during class time. The Watson-Barker test was selected for three primary reasons. First, test data has been gathered for thousands of subjects and the test has consistently achieved acceptable results and shown reasonable construct validity (Rubin & Roberts, 1987; Watson & Barker, 1991). Second, the test is designed to be somewhat non-involving, and when administered in a classroom setting, demands that students ignore distractions and concentrate to achieve higher scores. As small group meetings are often non-involving and fraught with distractions, this type of test seemed acceptable for the study of listening in this context. Third, the test is appropriate for use in the Small Group Communication classroom. It is relatively easy to administer and provides interesting information to test-takers. At the end of the semester, time was take in class for discussion of the test results and some personal assessment of listening behavior and effectiveness. (Results were not discussed with subjects prior to the administration of the other two instruments.)

Approximately eight weeks after the administration of the Watson-Barker test, students were asked to complete an instrument which asks for a ranking of group members as listeners. This instrument (similar to that used in the Bechler & Johnson, 1995, study) provided an operationalization of listening through nine statements about what "a good listener does/is..." (e.g., "...stays focused on the discussion during meetings...tries to clarify by repeating or rephrasing what has been said..."). These nine statements (limited to nine due to space on the page) were drawn from definitions of the good, effective, or successful listener in the literature. These criteria were presented as a composite of a good listener, and subjects were asked to give a single rank score to each member (including themselves) with a 1 indicating *most-skilled listener* and the number of members in the group (usually 5) indicating *least-skilled listener*. The nine statements are listed in Figure 1.

Four weeks later, an instrument devised to assess perceptions of leadership behavior (also similar to that used in the Bechler & Johnson, 1995,

study) was administered. Similar in design to the listening instrument, this instrument provided an operationalization of leadership in nine statements drawn from definitions of leadership in the literature. These statements, phrased as things "a leader does/is..." (e.g., "...helps the group stay focused on the topic...suggests operating procedures for achieving a task...") provided a composite picture of a leader. Subjects were asked to give each group member (including themselves) a single rank score based on this composite, with 1 indicating *most like a leader* and the number of group members indicating *least like a leader*. These nine statements are listed in Figure 2.

Figure 1 - Listening Statements

An effective listener:

- stays focused on the discussion during meetings
- demonstrates interest in what others are saying
- tries to clarify by repeating or rephrasing what has been said
- does not interrupt others when they are speaking
- asks questions to get at what others mean
- does not offer judgments on what is said until the speaker has finished and the message is understood
- maintains eye contact with people who are speaking
- indicates interest in people who are speaking through "body language" (posture, not fidgeting, etc.)
- provides clear responses to speakers

Figure 2 - Leadership Statements

An effective leader:

- helps keep the group focused on the topic
- is an "idea person," suggesting new ways of handling problems
- balances participation by encouraging all members to contribute
- knows when to tolerate disagreement and when to postpone it
- compliments important contributions by group members
- leads by example
- suggests operating procedures for achieving a task
- is able to separate issues from people, especially when members advocate an opposing idea
- analyzes carefully the available information to be used in solving a problem or achieving a task

The delay of one month was thought to provide an adequate time to reduce the impact of the halo effect (i.e., ranking a person high on the second instrument due to a high ranking on the previous instrument). Also, this approach differed from that used in the Bechler & Johnson (1995) study (which applied a split-group procedure); it was wondered if a slightly different method of data collection might yield different results.

RESULTS

The first research question, examining the relationship between member rankings of perceived leadership behavior and perceived listening skills, was answered using the Spearman Rho correlation statistic. The finding here (Rho = .712, $p<.001$) was stronger than that found in the previous study and provides additional indication of a significant positive correlation between member rankings of leadership and member rankings of listening effectiveness. The data suggest that those subjects considered to be "most like a leader" were also thought to be good listeners.

The second and third research questions, considering the relationships between perceptions of listening and scores on a listening test (RQ2), and perceptions of leadership and scores on a listening test (RQ3), were also answered using the Spearman Rho statistic. Each group member's total score for the listening test was compared to those of the others in the group and converted to a rank. The member with the highest score was given a "1" and the member with the lowest score was given a number corresponding to the number of members in the group (usually "5"). While reducing the outcome of the Watson-Barker test to an ordinal form, this conversion allowed a more direct and appropriate comparison with rankings of member perceptions. In the analysis of data to answer the second question, a Rho of -.020 ($p=.87$) was computed indicating no significant relationship between perceptions of listening skill and score on the Watson-Barker test. The third question also yielded an insignificant Rho (.113, $p=.27$), indicating no significant relationship between perceptions of leadership rank and score on the Watson-Barker test.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide an interesting twist to an early understanding of listening and leadership in the small group. While the findings again indicate a strong relationship between perceptions of listening effectiveness and perceptions of leadership, no relationship was identified between these perceptions and listening skill as measured by the Watson-Barker Listening Test. In other words, what members perceive

may not be what is actually occurring. Though members seem to believe their leaders are better listeners, the actual listening skills of group leaders were not found to be superior to those of any other members.

Several possible explanations for these findings might be considered. First, it is possible that serving in the role of small-group leader may elicit more focused, higher-order listening behavior from people with otherwise average skills. Group leaders may respond to their positions by working harder at listening, putting forth extra effort to listen to group member suggestions, ideas, and even emotions. Through higher rates of participation, they may receive more direct interaction and may, therefore, be "forced" to listen more than other members (see Leavitt, 1951; Reynolds, 1984). As leaders often propose ideas and solutions, the role may elicit more critical/defensive listening, greater evaluation, and greater personal involvement. Hence, the role of leader may bring out improved listening behaviors. Part of the emergence process may involve the determination of which member is most willing to put forth that effort toward better listening as revealed in early group interactions.

This possible explanation suggests that listening effectiveness is, most accurately, a contextual variable. Someone who might be an ineffective listener in one situation may be an effective listener in another situation, implying that listening tests have limited value and questionable external validity (i.e., that they test only whether or not subjects are effective listeners when taking listening tests).

Another plausible explanation is that leaders are skilled at convincing members they are listening. Keating & Heltman (1994) found that emergent leaders were typically those rated as the most effective deceivers. They were able to fool others more consistently, particularly through their nonverbal behaviors. Extending these findings to the current study suggests the potential of communication behavior as an area of "deception." Those who emerge as leaders may not be those who are more effective listeners, but rather those who are more effective at *convincing others* they are effective listeners. They may be better able to control their nonverbal behavior, apply appropriate verbal behaviors, and give the impression that they are interested in and listening to group interaction. It might be suggested that exhibiting this behavior is being "rhetorically sensitive" (Hart, Carlson, & Eadie, 1980), adapting and adjusting to the situation, and not being "deceptive" in the pejorative sense. It might also be suggested that these individuals simply have higher self-monitoring

skills rather than that they are attempting deception. Keating and Heltman's work does not necessarily suggest that leaders actually deceive others more, but rather that they possess superior deception skills. It seems likely these skills include self-monitoring skills, and one possible outcome is that individuals with these skills are better able to convince others they are effective listeners.

Finally, it might be argued that implicit personality provides another explanation of the present findings. Implicit personality theory suggests that individuals form holistic impressions of others early in their interaction, drawing in clusters of attributes and assuming that an individual who possesses any one of those attributes possesses all of them (Rosenberg & Sedlak, 1972; Wood, 1993). The strong and consistent correlation in perceptions (and the absence of a significant relationship between perceptions of leadership and scores on the listening test) might be due to holistic impressions formed of leaders. Followers may be including listening effectiveness in a cluster of skills attributed to most any person whom they allow to emerge as group leader.

It is also possible that some combination of these and other factors is involved in the relationship between leadership and listening. The results of this study support the importance of listening as a variable in small group leadership, emphasizing the significance of perception. It seems that member perceptions of good listening are important in leadership, but it does not appear necessary (from scores on a listening test) that leaders actually possess superior listening skills over other group members. The emergence of a group leader may occur despite average or even inferior listening skills, as long as members *perceive* that their leaders are good listeners.

Further research is certainly necessary to explore the interaction between perceptions of communication behaviors and the actual behaviors themselves in those who emerge as leaders. The measurement of listening behavior within the context of the group itself during or following group meetings is one important direction for research. Also, considering the role of listening within larger constructs (e.g., rhetorical sensitivity or personality type) would enhance understanding of the combinations of communicative correlates relevant to leadership. The notion of deception provides another valuable approach to leadership research. Keating & Heltman's (1994) work has established a connection between deceptive ability and leadership emergence. Studying the relationship between deception and communication variables such as listening may help provide additional answers.

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