Communication & Performance

Beyond the Machine Metaphor of Organizations: The Effects of Personality and Emotions on Workplace Communication

CQ Dossier | Evidence-based Management

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Executive summary

Research on communication in the workplace has revealed that personality traits such as assertiveness, agreeableness, conscientiousness, and extroversion tend to increase the chance that someone will communicate at work. People with high self-esteem also are less likely to remain silent at work. Emotions also affect communication, with anger being likely to increase it and fear being likely to decrease it.

Individual differences and emotions affect communication

When we think about how people communicate, one of the major factors that often comes to mind is personality. In our work lives, many of us have anecdotally observed assertive people who speak openly or people who tend to be quieter and refrain from speaking often. In this paper, we will go from anecdotal observations to empirical research on these kinds of traits and their effects on communication.

Additionally, research has also demonstrated the role that emotions play in our decisions to communicate with peers or superiors. When we are angry, we might blurt out something that may not have been wise to say. The opposite might happen when we are afraid of a situation. In this CQ Dossier, we will review the most salient personality traits and emotional variables that affect communication. Note that "personality traits" are generally referred to as "individual differences" interchangeably in this dossier and in academic literature.

The big 5 personality traits are a widely used concept to describe personality

The personality traits in the "Big 5" are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism / negativity (Costa & McCrae, 1992). These traits have been well-studied for decades, and they are believed to be fairly stable over a person's life. When studying the effects of personality on a given behavior, the "Big 5" usually are the first set of traits that researchers tend to look at due to their ubiquity in the literature.

In fact, research has indicated significant relationships between four of the five personality traits and communication. Specifically, a significant correlation was found between communication and agreeableness, conscientiousness, extroversion, and neuroticism among individuals asked to perform a group decision-making task (LePine & Van Dyne, 2001). People who are extraverted are sociable, gregarious, assertive, talkative, and active (Barrick & Mount, 1991). People who are neurotic are likely to be anxious, depressed, angry, easily embarrassed, emotional, worried, vulnerable, or insecure (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Agreeableness is related to caring, altruism, and emotional support versus competitiveness and hostility (Howard & Howard, 1995). Conscientiousness has been linked to educational achievement and the will to achieve. Conscientious people are dutiful, orderly, responsible and thorough (Costa & McCrae, 1992). Last, people who are open to experience tend to have broad interests and like novelty (Howard & Howard, 1995).

Assertiveness

Prior research by Detert and Edmondson (2011) demonstrated a significant correlation between assertiveness and communication, including upward communication (i.e., talking to one's boss). Assertiveness is usually measured in studies with a basic scale that provides statements like "I try to lead others" and asks participants to score each question on a 5-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

Proactive personality

Bateman and Crant (1993) created a measure of proactive personality intended to identify differences among people regarding the extent to which they take action to influence their environments. People with proactive personalities "identify opportunities and act on them; they show initiative, take action, and persevere until they bring about meaningful change" (Crant, 1995, p. 532). Not surprisingly, proactive personality has been shown to correlate to communications in previous research (Bateman & Crant, 1993; Detert & Burris, 2007). Someone with a proactive would generally disagree with the idea that withholding is the right thing to do in a situation where there is an opportunity to speak up. Proactive personality can be measured with a basic survey that

includes statements like, "If I see something I don't like, I fix it" with people asked to rate their agreement with each statement on a 5-point scale from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree.

Self-esteem and contingent self-worth

LePine and Van Dyne (1998) found that global self-esteem played a role in an individual's decision to communicate in his or her work group. People with higher self-esteem communicated more frequently and openly than people with low self-esteem. As a construct, self-esteem has been criticized somewhat for its poor discriminant validity (Judge, Erez, Bono, Thoresen, 2002), and research has since progressed to include the construct of contingent self-worth (Crocker, Luhtanen, Cooper, & Bouvrette, 2003). This construct is specifically concerned with the extent to which an individual's self-esteem depends on appraisals and external factors. To that end, research has shown that that concerns about others' appraisals lead to silence (Ashford et al., 1998; Milliken, Morrison, and Hewlin, 2003). Therefore, people with lower self-esteem and people whose self-esteem depends on the appraisals of others will communicate less than those with high self-esteem or than those whose self-esteem does not depend on what other people think of them.

Self-monitoring

In the population, there is variation in the degree to which we modify our behavior from one situation to the next. Some people who are highly tuned-in to situational cues, and they possess chameleon-like abilities to change their behavior from situation to situation. These people are known as high self-monitors (Snyder, 1974). Given the pragmatism and well-manicured images projected by high self-monitors (Snyder & Gangestad, 2000), these individuals behave with deference toward authority and carefully study peers to determine what they should and should not say. Low self-monitors tend to express themselves openly, without significant self-censorship. High self-monitors generally adjust to the culture much more adeptly.

Emotions have a significant impact on communication fear

The emotion of fear has generated considerable research in social and evolutionary psychology. Fear is considered a discrete emotion that can be differentiated from other emotions by the necessity for a discrete triggering event to induce it. It is relatively short-lived compared to other emotions (Grandey, 2008; Weiss & Cropanzano, 1996). Evolution has purportedly selected for humans that are born with a capacity to understand hierarchy and to fear authority, preventing ill-advised challenges to higher-status others (Seligman, 1971). Individuals who did not have such an understanding would be more likely to get into losing battles with higher status individuals whose resources would assure their victory (Duntley, 2005). Therefore, a predisposition to recognize hierarchy and to fear authority was passed on to modern humans (Erdal & Whiten, 1994; Kellerman, 2008).

For the reasons noted above, fear is associated with the urge to withdraw or to separate oneself from the fearful stimuli (Frijda, 1986). Withdrawal from fearful stimuli and fear of authority may have been wise in the days of clans and tribes, where challenges to authority could lead to ostracism and death. In modern organizations, however, such fear of authority can have negative consequences for the organization itself. For example, a newly hired hospital orderly who notices poor organization of medical supplies may find it too risky to recommend a better organizational system, despite benefits that his recommendation would have for hospital staff and patients. This hypothetical orderly is not alone, as numerous studies have demonstrated that fear still underlies employee unwillingness to communicate (e.g., Chiang & Pepper, 2006; Cortina & Magley, 2003; Dutton et al., 2002; Edmondson, 2002). Fear of communicating has been attributed to intimidating boss behavior (Ashford et al., 1998), hostile organizational climate (Morrison et al., 2000), and insecurity about job stability (Dutton et al., 1997). Additionally, fearful situations involving authority figures may contribute to the formation of beliefs about speaking up that become internalized by people while they are at work and outside of work (Detert & Edmondson, 2011).

Anger

Anger is also a discrete emotion that has similarly deep evolutionary roots to those discussed about fear above (DeCatanzaro,1998). Anger results in different outcomes than fear. Specifically, fear creates a withdrawal response, but anger is more closely associated with an "approach" motivation (Carver & Harmon-Jones, 2009; Frijda, 1986). Anger is theorized to exist for the purpose of confronting problematic or dangerous situations – not motivating an escape from them out of fear (Plutchik, 2003). An angry person also feels more certain about the cause of a negative event than a fearful person (Lerner & Tiedens, 2006). As stated above, angry people will have more of an optimistic risk assessment of their situation, likely contributing to the "approach" tendency that could result in some kind of confrontation with whomever (or whatever) triggered the anger (Power & Dalgleish, 2008). People are more willing to communicate when angry than they are when they are afraid or not experiencing any emotion.

Being aware that personality and emotions impact communication is essential to maintain and improve organizational performance

Communication at work is influenced by numerous factors such as culture (discussed in another dossier), personality, and more. From the evidence presented above, we know that there are clear distinctions between people who communicate due to their innate personality differences and also due to emotions that they are experiencing. Understanding these personality and emotional differences provides a better understanding for why people do what they do. The takeaway from this report should not be that people should change an aspect of their personality or try to suppress an emotion because it might interfere with their ability to communicate. Rather, the intent of this dossier is to present underlying reasons that we see the patterns of communications in the workplace that we do. Communication is important for all relationships, professional and personal. Therefore, understanding its underlying components is an important part of maintaining and improving those relationships.

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