Managerial Perspectives of Listening in the Agricultural Workforce

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Abstract

Employers have historically valued employees who possess soft skills, particularly in the area of communication. Related research has identified listening as the communication area in most need of improvement; however, minimal research has been conducted exploring how to improve it. This study explored the role of employee listening in the agricultural workforce. Managers from a variety of agricultural companies and occupations were interviewed and five themes emerged. The participants identified how listening has a direct impact on business, the specific behaviors they expected to see when communicating information to employees, strategies they used to help employees become better listeners, potential barriers to listening, and finally how technology can enhance the listening process. Recommendations for practice include making students aware of behaviors positively associated with listening and helping them develop appropriate technology usage skills.

Introduction and Literature Review

Educators at all levels have focused on preparing students for the workforce (Lesley, 2014). Workforce preparation includes the development of technical knowledge and soft skills (Bruening and Scanlon, 1995; Crawford et al., 2010; Robinson et al., 2007; Williams et al., 2014). Traditionally, employers highly value proficient communication skills, including speaking and listening, among their employees (Bruening and Scanlon, 1995; Crawford et al., 2010) and have identified communication skills as important in the hiring process (Leggette et al., 2011). Despite its value and importance, a communication skill gap exists, particularly in the area of listening. This shortcoming negatively impacts businesses through lost customers and revenue (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). To overcome this deficiency, special attention must be paid by all to educators to effectively develop communication skills, particularly listening, in their students.

Of the various areas included under the communication umbrella, employers cited listening as either the most important (Bruening and Scanlon, 1995; Crawford et al., 2011; Svacina and Barkley, 2010) or a very important skill for employees to possess (Williams et al., 2014). A disconnect exists between employers and employees/potential employees regarding listening. Even though listening has been identified as one of the most important skills for employees to possess, it is also the area in need of the most improvement (Bruening and Scanlon, 1995; Robinson et al., 2007; Svacina and Barkley, 2010). Further, Crawford et al. (2011) found college students perceived themselves to be the most prepared in soft skills, including listening, while employers rated them as least prepared in that area, a misconception mirrored in the agricultural workforce (Bruening and Scanlon, 1995; Robinson et al., 2007; Svacina and Barkley, 2010). Despite its importance, little to no research has been conducted to reconcile how employers view listening as part of their interaction with those they supervise. To effectively develop future workforce contributors, we must examine what listening looks like in the agricultural workplace.

Several frameworks were used to contextualize this problem. These frameworks were not used in a confirmatory or post-positivist fashion; instead they helped illustrate how complex listening is as a phenomenon. Listening can be viewed from the following perspectives: the communication process, information processing theory, and adult learning theory. The communication process examines how information is transmitted from person to person. Three components make up the process: the sender, the receiver, and the message (Levi, 2014).

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Managerial Perspectives

Information processing theory explains how a message is processed and committed to memory. The information-processing model is divided into three unique parts: sensory information intake, short-term memory, and long term-memory (Newell et al., 1958). When a message undergoes these steps, the information is encoded into memory and can be acted upon in the future. Finally, adult learning theory explores how adults are motivated to learn (Birkenholz, 1999) and thus the role motivation plays in listening. The researchers recognize the intricacies of listening and used these frameworks to help demonstrate the complexity.

Methods

The purpose of this grounded theory was to describe the process of listening in the agricultural workforce as perceived by managers. The central question that guided the study asked how does listening play a role in the agricultural workplace?

Participants and Recruitment

The target population for this study was managers in the agricultural workforce. The College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources Career Services Office at the University of Missouri was contacted to generate a list of potential participants. Career Services provided the researchers a list of 22 potential participants. Purposive sampling was used to achieve maximum sample variation among potential participants. Factors considered during the participant selection process included: field of employment, number of employees supervised, and length of time in the managerial position. Sixteen individuals were contacted via email, with nine agreeing to participant. This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Missouri.

Data Collection and Analysis

Prior to data collection, a protocol was developed (Table 1). Each participant was asked the same set of questions, with probing and follow up questions based on their response, making the interviews semi-structured. Each face-to-face interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interviews were 45-65 minutes in length, during which field notes were taken. Due to the nature of grounded theory, data analysis began immediately upon the beginning of data collection. The researchers used a pragmatic epistemological lens to approach data analysis (Creswell, 2013). Nvivo software was used to organize the analytic process. Open, axial, and selective coding were used to identify categories and themes (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Data saturation began to appear after five interviews with complete saturation occurring after seven participants (Table 2). To ensure trustworthiness and validity of the findings memoing, constant comparative analysis, and member checking were used (Creswell, 2013).

Table 1. Interview Protocol

Tell me about your job:
How would you describe "good listening" to an employee?
How can you tell someone is listening to you?
What are some characteristics of employees you would consider to be good listeners?
How can you tell if someone is a poor listener?
Tell me about a time an employee has exhibited poor listening behaviors.
Describe the characteristics of a "bad listener."
If you had an employee who had poor listening behaviors, how do you work with them to improve? How could you tell if someone had improved?
How do listening skills influence the hiring process?
Does poor listening impact the business? How?
Is there anything else you would like to talk about related to listening skills?

Table 2. Participant Summary

Participant	Area of Employment	Employees Supervised	Length of time in managerial role
Paul	Sales	12	6 months
Megan	Production	5	3 years
Chloe	Service	7	18 months
Matt	Service	9	7 years
Phil	Sales	10	8 years
CJ	Sales	24	10 years
Ryan	Service	8	5 years

Results

Five themes emerged from the data provided by the participants. The themes focused on the participants' personal experiences related to employee listening while being reflective on their own behaviors.

Theme 1: Listening's Impact on the Business

Good listening is important to managers and the company. Employees who listen better stand out from their peers. Matt stated, *"Listening is what can separate you from an average performer to a top performer. It's that icing on the cake that makes your efforts more productive."* All participants discussed appreciating and valuing employees who possessed quality listening skills. Those employees were viewed more favorably when compared to their colleagues.

Many managers reported desiring passionate and enthusiastic employees, but their ability to listen was most valuable due to increased efficiency. Chloe, who worked in an office setting, described the situation as *"They have to [listen] and follow instructions to be independent otherwise they're just asking question constantly."* Phil stated, *"When you get someone who listens and pays attention to details, follows through on things, my day is much more efficient now because I made one visit with that person and the issue is taken care of."* Employee efficiency and independence due to listening were noted and appreciated by the participants.

Listening or lack thereof has the potential to directly impact a company's profits. CJ shared, *"You have to satisfy a customer's wants and needs. You are never going to know them if you don't listen. Good listening prevents problems down the road . . . I have seen people lose customers because they didn't listen."* He continued to explain many customers will not directly say they are unhappy with their service but subtly imply it. He believed it was important to talk less, listen more to what the customer is and is not saying, and ask follow up questions to truly determine the customer's wants

and needs. By listening carefully, people can better retain business and keep customers happy. Employee listening has a positive impact on the company.

Theme 2: Listening Behaviors

Participants identified a variety of behaviors associated with employee listening. For several participants, the listening process begins with a receptive attitude. Paul said, *"They have to be willing to listen, willing to learn something, otherwise it's just a waste of time."* While information is being communicated participants described wanting to see traditional nonverbal cues (eye contact, nodding of the head, etc.) from employees to indicate they were listening. Participants even described how listening behaviors can be influential in the interview and hiring process. Megan said that during interviews, *"Lack of eye contact is a red flag for me."* Chloe added, *"You can tell if they aren't engaged and [that makes me] a little concerned."* Using appropriate nonverbal cues was important to the participants, beginning in the interview process.

Taking notes, particularly on paper, was stressed by every participant. They described how easily information can be forgotten and how taking notes can prevent it. CJ explained, *"Even the most basic pieces of information . . . can slip out of your mind, you have got to write that stuff down."* Participants discussed when employees took notes, they felt heard and that the employees valued the information being communicated. They also noted how writing information down reduced the likelihood it would need to be repeated. Note taking was perceived to increase the efficiency of the participants and their employees.

Additionally, another positive behavioral characteristic described by the participants was the ability to ask questions. CJ simply stated, *"A good listener talks less and asks more questions."* Asking questions allows individuals to clarify statements and *"show action on your part,"* according to Matt. *"[Asking questions] just proves they have heard what I said and they have an interest to learn more or to clarify things,"* said Megan. Participants perceived employees who asked questions as mentally engaged in the conversation. They believed to ask relevant questions, individuals had to be actively processing and applying the information being communicated.

Participants were also quick to identify behaviors they easily associated with individuals who were not listening. Distinctive patterns of behavior, especially concerning body language and electronic usage, were the primary indicators of not listening. Matt described the situation:

"You can tell if someone starts losing eye contact with you, they are looking around the room, they're tapping their foot, looking at their watch, they're obviously not listening. They have other things on their mind . . . If they are checking their phone or laptop, you might as well just end the meeting."

Participants described feeling frustrated when these behaviors appeared. From the participants' prospective,

when employees displayed these behaviors it indicated they were not interested in the information being communicated despite its relevance and importance. They also noted when these behaviors were displayed it was typically a precursor to repeating information or other problems associated with poor employee performance.

Theme 3: Improving Listening

When initially asked how they would help an employee improve their listening skills, all participants stated they could not think of anything or were unaware of such strategies. However, when asked to discuss how they help an employee improve their performance, all the participants could note at least one strategy. Despite many of the strategies targeting key aspects of listening, the participants failed to link the ideas together. For participants involved in sales or worked directly with customers and clients, role play was a common mentoring strategy. Paul discussed how the scenarios served two purposes: to determine if employees had understood the new information and if they could apply it in a real-world setting. CJ discussed the benefits of debriefing an employee after a sales call:

"Maybe we leave the meeting and I [will] ask about 'do you remember that time in the meeting when you asked this, what did the client say?'. . . I want to hear their perspective on it. And they'll say 'well I asked this and then they said this.' Maybe they totally missed the cue the client had given them. I'll say 'well, didn't you hear them say this? Or when you heard this, actually this is what I think he meant.' [My goal is to] just try to make them think about it afterwards. . . Sometimes the people are spot on. They realize 'oh, I missed this, I could have done this. I wanted to do this.' Just talking it through gets their wheels turning . . . and they are better at their jobs [because] of it."

Regardless of their field, all the participants described the use of mentoring and peer-to-peer communication. When asked why they chose it, Chloe said, *"I think they just tend to listen to one another better."* Paul also experienced success with this method. *"It was very conversational because they were comfortable, it wasn't the big boss man talking . . . they were more willing to listen and adopt those messages."* All the participants discussed feeling employees engaged with and listened to their competent peers, which resulted in better information retention and outcomes.

Theme 4: Barriers to Listening Exist

When asked about barriers to listening, they reflected on personal behaviors. Lack of buy-in or perceived applicability of a message were surfaced by many participants. When reflecting on his listening, Phil stated, *"If it's something that I don't agree with . . . I'm like there is no way I'd [do it], I will block it out."* Paul discussed working with his employees and the importance of message buy-in. He said, *"If [employees] have a goal to hit . . . if they are struggling, or if their ideas aren't working, they are always a little more open*

to outside sources." When describing her personal barriers, Chloe identified the importance of staying on topic. *"When [a meeting] gets involved in tangential conversations, I am really not a good listener. . . I started about things we actually need to work on. [We] spend too much time talking about things completely uninvolved."* To fully engage in conversations, the participants noted relevance and perceived benefits were important factors.

Novelty, or lack thereof, was a common issued surfaced by participants. Matt said a common reason for him to check out of a conversation or meeting was feeling it was repetitive or unnecessary. When asked about why he stops listening, CJ replied, *"I don't need to hear [it] again because I am familiar with it."* A sentiment echoed by several other participants. When discussing her reasons for checking out of a conversation, Megan noted a difference between a regular weekly meeting and a project meeting. *"You know if it's a weekly meeting where you just get together to talk about what's been going on, then it's a little bit easier to lose focus as compared to a big project or something new."* When conservations lacked novelty, participants discussed how easy it was to become disengaged.

Theme 5: Technology and Listening

Technology has both hindered and enhanced workforce communication and listening. While technology has appeared in other themes, the researchers identified it as a separate theme due to the unique opportunities and challenges it presents for listening in the agricultural workforce. The participants noted technology will not disappear, but were excited by the possibilities when it is used in an appropriate manner. Several participants lamented the fact traditional modes of electronic communication (email, voicemail, text messaging) lack nonverbal feedback. This was frustrating for many participants. Ryan described it as, "a lot of one-way conversation." Without nonverbal cues, participants were unable to tell if the information had been processed or even if their employees had read/listened the message. Another contentious aspect of technology was appropriate electronic device usage by employees. All the participants discussed feeling unheard and irritated when employees used cell phone during conversations. Megan stated, *"I am your boss. Being on your phone when I am talking shows me you don't care about what I am saying. That is a problem."* Despite experiencing drawbacks, they understood technology was here to stay and looked forward to using it in a productive manner.

Several participants expressed optimism about the positive influence advances in communication technology could have on workplace listening. CJ discussed how FaceTime can help build positive relationships with customers. Regardless of the distance, he and customers are always able to have face-to-face meetings because of technology. Ryan focused on how nonverbal communication is conveyed in a meeting. *"I'd rather see the person talk . . . our [specialist] will talk and if you see him doing nonverbal [cues] and you see him saying 'well*

this is terrible' it really hits home with me." Participants described how seeing nonverbal cues helped make the conversation complete. They felt they were better listeners when they could see people's nonverbal cues. Participants believed as technology improves, so do communication possibilities.

Discussion

Listening plays a direct role in business. In helps increase employee efficiency and responsiveness. Further, being responsive to customers has a positive impact on business (Ramsey and Sohi, 1997). Making new employees aware of the positive outcomes listening has on a business is the first step in developing the motivation and willingness to listen. In addition to traditional non-verbal cues, the participants perceived note taking as an important in helping employees recall information. This idea is emergent from the information processing framework. Historically, note taking has been linked with increased memory retention (Annis and Davis, 1975; Fisher and Harries, 1973). Participants focused on taking notes in the traditional manner. The physical act of writing is important. Taking notes with paper and pen is a skill that should not be discounted in modern society. Asking questions is associated with problem-solving schema (Singer and Donlan, 1982) and should be encouraged, especially with new employees. When employee asks questions, it does not show ignorance, rather it indicates to managers they are listening, engaged, and have a desire to learn more. By asking questions, employees help reassure the sender that their message has been processed. Students should be made aware that asking questions and taking notes are positively viewed by employers.

Improving employee listening behaviors through coaching or mentoring was an important idea for all participants. The idea of workplace mentoring is not new and should continue. Mentoring focuses on developing employee knowledge and skills, which aligns with the adult learning framework. Kram (1988) noted workplace mentoring benefits both parties involved and helps foster positive relationships. While workplace mentoring and coaching has led to higher efficacy among employees, it also takes time for the managers to become comfortable with this task (Grant, 2010). Mangers should be made aware of the benefits of coaching and mentoring, and be encouraged to participate in the process. When beginning a mentoring or coaching program, support should be given to both parties during the initial adjustment period to maximize the benefits and ensure continuation.

Barriers to effective listening exist. Being willing to listen is the first step in the process. Mood has an influence over attention and information processing (Forgas and Koch, 2013). Perceived lack of novelty, buy-in, or applicability of the message were cited as common barriers, which aligns with the adult learning framework (Lieb, 1991). Communicating new information, even in a workplace, should be considered adult learning. When

communicating new information, managers must keep in mind adult learners are practical; goal and relevancy orientated; and maximize their learning when they feel cognitively invested (Leib, 1991). While this study did not examine the manager's role in the communication process, it is must be emphasized that the clarity of the message is important to listening and task completion.

College career service programs can integrate the findings of this study into training programs. For students, instruction on the importance of listening and asking clarifying or follow-up questions would be beneficial. Instruction focusing on workplace technology etiquette, as it relates to listening, would also be valuable. Before the start of an internship, a training focusing on workforce listening expectations and managerial perceptions of listening could potentially foster a positive experience for the intern and the company, while building career skills.

College teachers should work on developing several key listening skills within their classrooms. For example, considering the role of electronics in the classroom and developing an appropriate classroom policy would help students understand when and when not to use electronics. Further, taking notes with a pencil and paper was important to every participant. Teachers should consider how note taking could play a role in their classrooms. If a classroom routine is established that traditional note-taking in some form or fashion is required (e.g. PowerPoint notes that are modified with missing content), students become accustomed to writing and being engaged in the conversation at hand. Accountability and assessment of content beyond what is written on a PowerPoint is a related consideration. Beyond note taking, teachers should consider using more student engagement strategies focusing on helping them be present in the conversation or environment. Finally, requiring each student to generate at least one clarifying or follow up question per lecture would help the students get in the habit of engaging in reflective thinking.

Several themes focused on helping employees encode information into long term memory. Encoding is a natural part of the memory process. When someone fails to encode information, it cannot be retrieved for later use (Newell et al., 1958). Further research is recommended to help identify why this is a commonly missed step in the memory process and to identify some methods to ensure encoding. It would also be useful to identify individuals who have become better workplace listeners over time and investigate how they have improved their skills. While listening does have a direct impact on a business, research has yet to assign a price to it. A future study should be conducted to determine the amount of money lost (lost patronage, wasted employee time, etc.) due poor listening. Understanding the fiscal implication related to listening would provide important evidence for improving listening skills. Additional studies should explore how concept novelty influences employee attitudes and behaviors. While identified as a potential barrier, it is a subjective topic that warrants further investigation.

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