

The Role of Leaders as Active Listeners

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Abstract

Employee turnover invariably presents as obstacles to growth for small medium enterprises. Studies have demonstrated that leaders are one of the factors that influence employee turnover intention; however, there is a general paucity of studies elucidating the effect of leaders as active listeners to employees. This research aims to investigate the effect of leaders as active listeners on improving human resource practices and reducing employee turnover intention. A total of 215 usable questionnaires were collected from local employees working in manufacturing small medium enterprises, followed by data analysis through AMOS. It was found that active listening afforded by leaders to them, improve employees will enhance mutual understanding between human resource practices and lower employees' turnover intention. Such findings provide critical insights into the need for leaders to consider employees needs.

Keywords: Employee turnover, Human Resource Practices, Listening, Small Medium Enterprises, Leadership

1. Introduction

Employees are personnel hired by organizations to perform various tasks, in exchange for which employees obtain remunerations and other benefits [1]. Nowadays, employee turnover is a challenge for organizations [2]. Employee turnover can be defined as people leaving their jobs either voluntarily or involuntarily [1]. The multifarious reasons for employees include the organization's human resource policies, climate of the organization, relationship with leaders and others [3]. Once employee turnover occurs, it is costly especially when the organization losses skilled workers [1, 4, 5].

Factors underlying employee turnover have been studied from varies aspects [2]. A comprehensive view of the previous research on leadership has revealed the importance of the leaders' role in reducing employee turnover intention [2, 6, 7]. Cowden, Cummings [6] have concluded that a supportive leader will help in reducing employees' intention to leave. In another study, Han and Jekel [7] have revealed that the establishment of a good relationship and rapport between leaders and employees will also decrease employee turnover intention. Likewise, Elci, Sener [2] have found that leadership effectiveness lessens not only employees' stress but also their turnover intention.

Apart from that, well-trained leaders improve human resource practices, including greater safety in workplaces [8]. As stated in Abraham Maslow's hierarchy-of-needs theory, each individual harbors the need for protection from physical harm [9].

Department of Occupational Safety and Health [10] provided data from January until March 2016 reveals that, in Malaysia, workplace accidents in the manufacturing sector have cause 7 deaths, non-permanent disability to 522 employees and permanent disability to 16 employees. Injuries in workplaces will not only burden organization in term of monetary costs but also affect the life of the employees' families [11]. As mentioned by Kao, Spitzmueller [11], the greater propensity for workplace accidents to happen in the manufacturing sector constitutes a challenge for organizations to grapple with by instituting proper safety training for employees. Not only does employee training improves employees' knowledge and skills in order that they should be able to perform competently in their jobs, it also augments employees' motivation [12, 13]. Motivation of employee also can be increased through proper compensation benefits, which is in due proportion to employees' needs and social living standards [13]. Kaewpijit, Utsahajit [13] have also suggested that leaders are one of the noteworthy factors to consider in understanding employees' needs.

However, little research has been devoted to directly investigating on active listening by leaders and its effect on human resource practices and employees' intention of departing from the organization. Thus, it is of interest for this research to extend the knowledge on employee turnover intention. Herein, we propose a model that describes the effects of leaders as active listeners on human resource practices and turnover. The following section discusses the concept of active listening, human resource practices and employees' intention

of departure. In addition, the research methodology, results, discussion, limitations and need for future research are detailed.

2. Literature Review

Leaders conducting themselves with humility have received increased attention in empirical studies in recent years. Active listening to employees is an important aspect of humble leaders [14]. Active listening is essential for leaders to understand followers and this criteria is include in servant leadership [15]. Krebs [16] also agreed on the importance of listening in safety behaviors. Apart from that, through listening, leaders can learn [17] and formulate the most proper way to meet their employees' needs [18]. Leaders must able to understand the hidden messages in the conversation, as well as knowing the feelings, opinions and facts. It is important to have consensus and improve face-to-face relations [19]. Stillion Southard and Wolvin [20] have recognized the significance of listening as a component of effective leadership in shaping a vision and leaders need to continue listening to the voices of their followers to keep revising the vision. Competent leaders encourage employees to share their opinions openly, through listening to employees and understanding their feelings, it is a way to retain employees [21].

Employee turnover is a continuous problem in many organizations that may affect their productivity and development in the long run (Rubiah, 2012). The term "turnover" can be defined as an individual's movement from an organization across the membership boundary; it also can be used as quits or exits (Perez, 2008). Mobley (1982) have stated that a turnover is a scenario where an employee leaves the organization and it is a major and persistent problem (Watrous et al., 2006) in an organization. It can also be defined as the employees' termination of membership in an organization which they serve and from which they receive monetary compensation. Nevertheless, turnover intention leads to wasted money (Harris et al., 2008; Duffield et al., 2011). Notwithstanding the diminished staff turnover rate in Malaysia in recent years (from 16% in 2011 to 10.8% in 2012), high employee turnover rates are still observed for sectors such as manufacturing, conglomerates and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) industries (Watson, 2012).

An abundance of findings have hitherto shown that employees' turnover intention can be linked to turnover (Sheridan & Abelson, 1983; Khatri et al., 2001; Lambert et al., 2001; Coomber & Louise Barriball, 2007). Many reasons lead to employees'

intentions to leave an organization (Taylor, 2008); as suggested by recent evidence, such reasons include low salaries, overwhelming workloads, relocation, layoff, job dissatisfaction and poor leadership (Bull, 2010). However, there are also employees who desire to change jobs based on the very reason that they are but used to changing jobs (Khatri et al., 2001). Kool and van Dierendonck (2012) have mentioned that communication can affect the employee's commitment towards the organizational changes. Khatri et al. (2001) have found out that satisfaction to supervision is one of the reasons that affect employees' turnover intention.

Reasons underlying employees' turnover vary between organizations. However, the leaders in organizations play a vital role in dealing with this issue. To forestall losses to the organization, leaders must be aware of such reasons.

H1: There is a positive relationship between listening and employee turnover intention.

Training can be defined as the use of a systematic method [22] to improve employees' knowledge, skills and attitudes [23] in order to fit into the current job requirement [24, 25]. Training can be divided into general training and specific training: the former is more useful for an employee as they can use the knowledge in other firms; whereas the latter will be useful for only their current job (Becker, 1962). The ways to implement training are different according to the size of the organization. For smaller organizations, as the number of employees are fewer, the owner can be closer to his employees and easily determine the needs of training for each employee [24]. However, it is believed that training opportunities are much bigger in huge companies than in SMEs [26]. Jones [27] has highlighted that SMEs which are small and has low growth are less intent to provide training to their employees.

In their work on SMEs in India, Saini and Budhwar [28] have found out that SMEs in India have no systems on training. Apart from that, performance appraisal does not feature in SMEs in India and they do not usually give proper training or development opportunities to their workers. According to The Associated Chinese Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia [29], Malaysia still has 24% of SMEs that do not provide training for their workers. Among these SMEs, 33% of them do not provide training because of manpower shortage and they feel that providing training will decrease the productivity of the company. In Malaysia, the government provides the Human Resource Development Fund (HRDF) to SMEs such

as SME "On-The-Job", SME Training Needs Analysis and SME Training Partners (SMETAP) Scheme for training [30].

Jones [27] indicated that training fosters the growth of SMEs. Bryan [31] has investigated the relationship between training and performance in SMEs and found out a significant and positive relationship between training and sales growth. Furthermore, Pajo, Coetzer [32] pointed out that training and development given to employees in SMEs will cement their commitment towards the organization. Thus, SME leaders should play their roles in developing the knowledge and skills of their employees by giving them training.

Mobley (1982) stated that the increase of remuneration as a reward is one of the motivation tools if the organization is based on employees' performance. Furthermore, rewards must be relevant and important to the individual. In this regard, leaders must consider the needs of an employee and offer tailored rewards. For example, it may be inappropriate to reward a company car for an employee who does not need a car [33]. Apart from that, supplementary benefits can be a competitive advantage in the labor market, which may attract and retain employees (Mobley, 1982). Compensation administration is a way to be fair to all employees. All pay rates are based on the requirement of the job so that the remunerations can attract and retain employees with commitment [23]. Banfield and Kay [33] have proposed that the level of the pay rate should be appropriate that it does not burden the organization and at the same time it is able to retain employees. Dessler [34] suggested that leaders should be fair to all employees where the pay rate should be equal, both externally (i.e. the pay rate is competitive compared with that in other organizations) and internally (i.e. the pay rate is fair compared with that of other colleagues in the organization).

Human resource management includes the provision of a safe environment for employees [34]. Improper management of safety in the workplace may result in injuries, illnesses or even psychological problems amongst employees [33]. In general, despite increasing research on occupational safety and health management (OSH management), only limited research directly focuses on SMEs. Bartram [35] highlighted this issue in SMEs that OSH practices are difficult to be found in SMEs especially among written policies and occupational safety and health committees. Furthermore, the accident rate in SMEs are higher than in larger firms [36]. The most alarming fact is that Malaysia SMEs are not at the

standard level in OSH management (Hussin, Jusoff [37]. Despite the occurrence of workplace accidents, leaders have not taken proper actions on them. Banfield and Kay [33] suggested that leaders should take serious attention on the safety of the workplace and make sure that all employees understand the importance of safety in the workplace. In fact, OSH is remains one of the challenges for SMEs. SOCSO has reported that nearly 80% to 90% of accidents occurred in SMEs [38]. Thus, the Malaysian government proposed the Occupational Safety and Health Master Plan for Malaysia 2015. This is also to increase the awareness and performance of OSH among SMEs. This plan is believed to not only raise the awareness of OSH but also lead to higher morale among employees.

H2: There is a positive relationship between listening and human resource practices.

3. Research Methodology

In order to facilitate ascertaining how domains of the relationships of active listener leader influence the human resource practices and employee turnover intention, a questionnaire based on previous studies was adapted [39-41]. Validation of the questionnaire was conducted to confirm that it measures what it is supposed to measure [42]. There are three types of validity in this research: face validity, construct validity and convergent validity. Face validity was affirmed by gathering comments and recommendations on the questionnaire from several human resource management experts (two academicians and two human resource practitioners). Construct validity and convergent validity were affirmed by AMOS, version 20. Analysis showed data were meet construct validity as the data fits with the fitness indexes as outlined in Table 1. Level acceptance for the fitness indexes were based on Zainudin [43].

Table 1: Index Category, Level of Acceptance and Fitness Indexes of Variables.

Name of Index	Level of Acceptance	Fitness Indexes
Chisq/df	< 5.0	1.758
RMSEA	< 0.08	0.06
GFI	> 0.90	0.90
AGFI	> 0.90	0.90
CFI	> 0.90	0.96
TLI	> 0.90	0.95
NFI	> 0.90	0.91

The data also shows that the convergent validity achieved as the value of Average Variance Extracted (AVE) was 0.5 or higher. Table 2 outlines the result of convergent validity.

Table 2: Value of AVE for Variables

Variables	AVE	Variables
Listening	0.55	Listening
Training and Development	0.68	Training and Development
Benefits and Compensations	0.62	Benefits and Compensations
Occupational Safety and Health	0.65	Occupational Safety and Health
Turnover Intention	0.61	Turnover Intention
Variables	AVE	Variables
Listening	0.55	Listening

In this study, the population were the skilled employees in manufacturing SMEs in Johor. An online survey form or a hardcopy of the questionnaire were distributed to respondents either by email or by hand. A total of 215 usable questionnaires were collected. Table 3 shows the profile of respondents (115 males and 100 females). Most of the respondents worked in Johor Bahru (54%), and their age ranged mostly between 21 to 30 years old, among whom 48 respondents (22.3%) were aged between 21 to 25 years old whereas 58 respondents (27%) were aged between 26 to 30 years old. In terms of educational level, the majority of them (82 respondents, i.e. 38.1%) were SPM holders. In terms of the tenure of service in their current organization, for the majority of them (110 respondents, i.e. 51.2%), it is 1 to 3 years long.

Table 3: Profile of Respondents

Demographic	Item	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	115	53.5
	Female	100	46.5
Age	Below 21	7	3.3
	21-25	48	22.3
	26-30	58	27.0
	31-35	27	12.6
	36-40	30	14.0
	41-45	19	8.8
	46-50	17	7.9
	51-55	5	2.3
	56 above	4	1.9
	Tenure of service in current organization	1-3 years	110
4-6 years		29	13.5
7-9 years		30	14
10-12 years		19	8.8
13-15 years		5	2.3
16 years above		22	10.2
Education Level		Degree	50
	Diploma	55	25.6
	STPM	9	4.2
	SPM	82	38.1
	PMR	11	5.1
	Other	8	3.7
Place	Johor Bahru	116	54
	Kulaijaya	30	14
	Pontian	14	6.5
	Batu Pahat	14	6.5
	Kluang	16	7.4
	Muar	12	5.6
	Kota Tinggi	8	3.7
	Ledang	5	2.3

4. Results

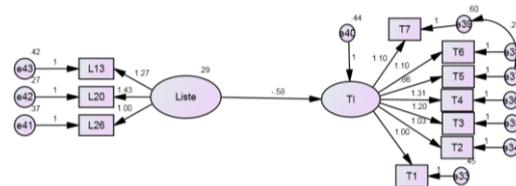


Figure 1: Model investigating the link between listening and turnover intention

Table 4: The Hypothesis Testing For the Causal Effect of Listening and Turnover Intention

Construct	Path	Construct	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
Turnover Intention	←	Listening	-0.576	0.116	-4.954	0.001	Significant

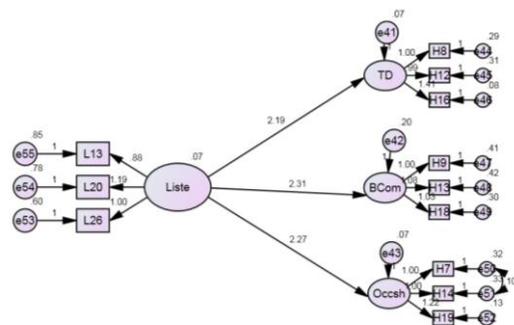


Figure 2: Model investigating the link between listening to human resource practices

Table 5: Regression Weights for Listening to Sub-Construct of HR Practices

Construct	Path	Construct	Estimate	S.E.	C.R.	P	Result
Training and Development	←	Listening	2.186	0.307	4.311	0.001	Significant
Benefits and Compensations	←	Listening	2.308	0.545	4.234	0.001	Significant
Occupational Safety and Health	←	Listening	2.267	0.527	4.299	0.001	Significant

Figure 2 and table 5 show the model to test the relationship between listening and training and development, yielding significant results, $\beta = 2.186$, $p < 0.001$. Apart from that, benefits and compensations as well as occupational safety and health show a significant relationship with listening. Relationship between listening to benefits and compensations have results with $\beta = 2.308$, $p < 0.001$, while listening to occupational safety and health have results with $\beta = 2.267$ and $p < 0.001$. Thus, Hypothesis 2 is accepted.

5. Discussion

The results herein have revealed significant associations between active listening in HRM practices (training and development, benefits and compensations, and occupational safety and health) and employee turnover intention. This highlights the importance of a leaders to show their attitude in listening to the needs and idea from employees. As outlined in Tables 4 and 5, a good listening attitude not only improves HRM practices but also attenuates employee turnover intention. Harney and Jordan [44] have suggested that leaders are an important role in implementing successful HR policies. As is consistent with previous studies, Vermeeren [45] has proposed that HRM practices can be influenced by the leadership style: this is based on the author's multilevel study of 315 employees and 41 line managers and the conclusion thereby that transformational leaders would be able to better implement HRM practices and enhance employee commitment.

Furthermore, Vermeeren [45] study also found that leaders able to reduce employee turnover intention. Evans [46] has listed one of the roles covered by a manager in HR role are include on the job training. This study results also congruent with the findings from Kuvaas and Dysvik [47] that leaders have vital roles in employees' development and in reducing employee's turnover intention. Despite the lack of direct intervention from them in the structuring of the HRM systems, the leaders' style may nonetheless influence the practices of the HRM [48]. Krebs [16] has studied leadership styles on the implementation of occupational safety and health, concluding that listening is one of the important characteristics for leaders where they understand what employees intend to express. From there, leaders know the needs of their employees from the safety perspective.

Generally, the findings in this study are consistent with those of others conducted in other countries. However, in many of those other studies, the role of active listening has not been elucidated. Hence, this study filled a significant gap of knowledge on one of the factors that affect the implementation of HRM practices and employee turnover intention. The importance of listening has been well demonstrated in this study for reducing employee turnover intention. Harney and Jordan [44] have suggested that communication can solve problems with employees effectively. Leaders are the one who responding to suggestions from employee, increase employees commitment and reduce turnover. Den Hartog, Boon [49] have likewise suggested that communication is one of the tasks for managers in

order to deliver and implement HRM practices. From their research, the significance of the communication between employees and leaders in affecting the relationship between them cannot be overlooked.

In summary, our results suggest that leaders should pay attention to listening to employees and, thereby, understanding and giving positive responses to employees. Such a gesture conveys respect and serves a token of appreciation of employees' ideas. These results also bring out the message that leaders should consider employees as members helping in improving the organization.

6. Limitations And Future Research

This research was conducted with questionnaires, whose questions were composed of the simplest words to ensure the ease of understanding on the respondents' part. Translation to the Malay and Chinese languages has been performed, considering that English is not the primary language for most of the respondents. The researchers have done the best to optimize the comprehensibility of the questions; however, it could not be guaranteed that the respondents had fully understood the original meaning of the questionnaire without any compromise. Another limitation is that this study has been conducted in only one geographical area, i.e. Johor (one of the Malaysian states). In order to have greater impact and deeper understanding for this area of study, future research need to be conducted in various geographical area. Apart from that, the research has been done in only the manufacturing sector. Thus, future study may involve other sectors to provide more insight into this aspect. Despite such limitations, the current research will be helpful for the organization's leaders and academicians with regard to the attenuation of employee turnover intention. Future research can contribute substantially to more detailed elucidation of employees' intention of withdrawal from current jobs by investigating the effect of other human resource practices such as working hours. Comparison between countries may also be conducted to study the effect of inter-cultural differences.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research has successfully expanded the knowledge of the leaders' role as an active listener on the effect of human resource practices and turnover intention. Human resource practitioners and leaders can use the results of this study for designing more competitive human resource practices and to retain workers especially for knowledgeable employees.

8. References

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