

Leadership communication behaviors and attachment styles: theory for educating leaders to meet communication challenges

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Abstract

Purpose – This conceptual article provides a basis for designing leader development programs that assess and train leaders to recognize demands for communication and how their personality affects the ways they transmit information, influence others and form positive relationships.

Design/methodology/approach – Adult attachment theory, Big Five personality dimensions (extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience and neuroticism) and pro-social and social sensitivity personality traits are proposed to shape the extent to which leaders enact relational, transmission and manipulative models of communication. These personality dimensions and communication models are the basis for assessment and training leaders to use in-person and various electronic media in ways that promote listeners' attention, understanding and psychological safety.

Findings – Secure attachment leaders who are extraverted, prosocial and socially sensitive are proposed to use high touch media to communicate in ways that establish positive relationships. Avoidant and anxious attachment leaders use low-touch media that are manipulative or mitigate accountability.

Practical implications – The behaviors associated with transmitting information, influencing others and forming relationships can be a basis for assessing leaders' attachment styles. Leaders can learn to diagnose situations to determine the best mixes of communication models to meet the demands of the situation.

Originality/value – Leaders who are promoted to higher levels of responsibility need to learn how to communicate with multiple stakeholders often during times of challenge and stress. How they communicate is likely to be a function of their comfort with interpersonal relationships, which in turn affects their use of personal and impersonal media.

Keywords Leader communication, Relationship building, Attachment style, Personality

Paper type Conceptual paper

Introduction

Leaders communicate in ways that transmit information, exert influence and develop interpersonal relationships. Likely, they engage with multiple stakeholders who are internal and external to the organization under stressful or demanding circumstances. For instance, they may have to represent their team or organization in negotiating for scarce resources or explaining complex often unexpected and swiftly changing events. These situations may be new for newly promoted leaders, especially those at mid or higher organizational levels. More responsibility, greater uncertainty, and the possibility of



unexpected and new challenges and crises require the ability to communicate in ways that convey critical information, gain compliance, and establish trust. Leadership development includes developing communications skills for this wide range of situations. This paper integrates communication theory with attachment theory and Big Five personality dimensions of extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism, and pro-social and social sensitivity personality traits. In particular, the paper proposes how leaders' attachment style and associated personality traits affect their tendency to communicate in ways that transmit information, compel compliance, and/or transform relationships to create positive change. This can be a basis for assessing leaders' and preparing them to recognize communication challenges and overcome their own personality tendencies that may limit their effectiveness.

Communication theory and behaviors

Malik (2019) building on Scarduzio (2011), Fairhurst and Connaughton (2014), Keyton (2017) considered the close association between leadership development and communication strategies. He conceptualized a three-component model of leadership communication: (1) *The transmission model of communication*: Leaders influence people by being a conduit for information from higher levels in the organization. Leaders convey information, possibly after editing it to fit the leader's style, and use the information to justify a call to action and encourage compliance. (2) *The manipulation model of communication*: Leaders compel behavior by commands and selective emphasis or distortion of information based on power of the position and their personal dominance. (3) *The relational model of communication for positive change*: Leaders establish personal, trusting relationships through open discussion and listening with attention, comprehension, and caring. Leadership education can include communication training that helps leaders develop and sustain positive relationships. The three models suggest how leaders face challenges, craft messages and media, show sensitivity to the intended recipients of the messages, and change behavior. These are described below and in Table 1.

Relational model behaviors. Leaders who learn to use relational communication behaviors need to be unbiased and ethical showing a strong sense of accountability. They learn to internalize information and translate it with passion and confidence. This requires recognizing risks and stakes. They want to build relationships by explaining, taking responsibility when appropriate. They need to be sensitive to their recipients, recognizing what their recipients expect and need to know and understand. They need to listen with attention, comprehension, empathy, and caring. They ask for honest feedback and welcome two-way interaction for discussion. They adapt when they meet resistance, directly addressing conflicts and negotiating compromise of viewpoints. They develop shared understanding, generate psychological safety, and attain mutual affirmation when possible.

The other two models of communication may limit leaders' effectiveness in establishing and maintaining positive relationships.

Manipulation model behaviors. Leaders who use the manipulation model want to accentuate the positive, avoid criticism, and rely on dominance to gain compliance. They avoid accountability. They prepare communications that deflect blame and take any negative attention off themselves. They may control communication by testing what they intend to say with others in confidence before issuing public communications. They maintain relationships by censoring or distorting messages if necessary (e.g., talking superficially, avoiding asking for direction, and stretching the truth to avoid problems) (O'Keefe & McCornack, 1987). They give the audience what they want to hear. When they ask for feedback, they do so in ways that elicit positive reactions. Mitigating the negative,

Table 1.
Leader communication
models and
attachment style

Leadership communication models	Relational model	Manipulative model	Transmission model
Facing the Challenge	Build trust and understanding and stimulate response/action	Convince by focusing on positive outcomes and distorting information if necessary	State facts frankly; not focused on risks or possible reactions
Crafting the message	Anticipate challenges and crises – difficulty of both conveying the message and effecting change	Avoid negative information and criticism; rely on power of the position to coerce the desired response	Anticipate that the information will speak for itself
Sensitivity to recipients	Recognize that people need to absorb and react to information and may need clarification and coaxing	Use dominance and power; mislead if necessary; subdue subordinates to follow the leader's interest	Assume emergency information will be appreciated and accepted as stated
Effects	Generate shared understanding and collective cognition; warnings are heeded, actions taken, psychological safety established	Some comply; some resist overtly; others cower; recipients feel low psychological safety to discuss or disagree; recipients' stress, uncertainty, and conflicts may fester	Some grasp the intended meaning; others do not; most act as instructed

they may generate confusion or misinformation that engenders stress, uncertainty, and conflict. Recipients do not feel psychologically safe to express disagreement or differing opinions.

Transmission model behaviors. Leaders who use the transmission model intend to state facts frankly. They plan for one-way communication. They do not seek others' agreement about what they will say. They anticipate that direct language will result in expected responses. They deliver the message with little concern for how the recipients may feel about it. They do not anticipate or care that their recipients may want an explanation or rationalization. They keep messages brief and stark. Recipients are likely to comply but may not fully understand the message.

Factors that affect how leaders communicate

Without focused communication training, leaders are likely to adopt means of communication based on prior experiences that were successful, observing and modeling other leaders who were successful, and/or following norms and culture of communication in the organization. Norms may cover the acceptability or desirability of certain media, such as the use of email to transmit announcements from top executives. As such, roles, position in the organization, and organization culture may influence how leaders communicate. The media they use to communicate will depend in part on organizational culture (e.g., it's okay to communicate primarily via email to support remote and hybrid team members). Leaders can learn to adapt their means and content of communication to the demands of the situation (e.g., an organizational crisis or local issue such as underperforming or resistant employees) and organizational factors (how they portray the organization on social media). The demands of the situation may call for deliberate action based on available but limited information, organizational uncertainties, and stakeholders' expectations. Such demands may limit time for communication and/or call for immediate actions that follow clear

directions from higher organizational levels (the transmission model). If the goal is to calm fears, they may try to transmit available information in a calm manner, manage expectations, explain, and inform. Or the situation may require leaders to make immediate decisions and produce results (the manipulative model). They may act authoritatively to precipitate immediate action in a crisis.

Leaders may use elements of each model. However, they are likely to adopt behaviors that fit the way they prefer to interact with others. An individual difference that is likely to have a main effect on how leaders communicate is their attachment style. Attachment style and other associated personality traits may influence the way leaders prefer to communicate especially under stressful conditions.

Attachment styles and communication behaviors

Bowlby developed the concept of attachment as an innate behavioral system based on infants' and children's early experiences with parents and other caregivers (Bowlby, 1982). Ainsworth and colleagues furthered this concept to distinguish between secure, avoidant, and anxious/ambivalent attachment classifications (Ainsworth *et al.*, 1978). Hazan and Shaver extended the concept further to adult attachment styles based on the combination of the two dimensions of insecure attachment (e.g. anxious and avoidant (Hazan & Shaver, 1990). As such, the way leaders relate to others is in part a function of their attachment style for interpersonal relationships (Mayseless & Popper, 2019). Attachment theory holds that people who seek and value positive relationships with others have a *secure* attachment style (Fein, Benea, Idzadikhah, & Tziner, 2020). People who avoid close relationships with others have an *avoidant* attachment style. Individuals who worry about the effects they have on others' feelings and want others to like them (likely because they have a low self-esteem) have an *anxious* attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017; McCarthy, Wood, & Holmes, 2017). Attachment styles are not categorical in that people are at various levels of each type of attachment. So, although people vary in the degree to which various dimensions of attachment are present. They are likely to have a dominant attachment style (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2017; Fraley & Shaver, 2000).

Guerrero (2022) highlighted the critical role that communication plays in attachment theory. She described how communication is a cause and consequence of attachment. Speakers' attachment style affects and reinforces their comfort and closeness of interpersonal relationships. Leaders who are attachment secure or attachment avoidant are likely to be frank in communicating unfavorable information (Sessa, E'Errico, Poggi, & Leone, 2020). Leaders who are secure in their relationships with others understand why subordinates need to know information that is difficult to hear (e.g., receive negative performance feedback). Attachment secure leaders who convey such information are less concerned that the information will sour their relationship with the subordinate and more concerned that the information will be understood and, if possible, valued by the subordinate.

The secure attachment leader is likely to use a relationship model of communication, a transformational style, that builds positive relationships through open and honest discussion. Rather than attributing blame for negative performance results to the subordinate's personal characteristics that the subordinate cannot change and would threaten the subordinate's self-image, the leader focuses on behaviors that the subordinate can change to improve performance in the future (Kluger & DeNisi, 1996; Kluger & Nir, 2010). Secure attachment results in larger and more satisfying social support networks (Anders & Tucker, 2000). Secure attachment leaders likely listen to the recipient's reaction with attention and caring, show empathy, provide support, and generate a climate of psychological safety for free-flowing, judgment-free discussions (Edmondson & Lei, 2014;

Edmondson & Bransby, 2023; Kluger & Itzhakov, 2022; Kluger and Zaidel, 2013). They are likely to be open to shared, collaborative leadership and communication (Kramer & Crespy, 2011). They are likely to use direct leadership tactics that maintain relationships by communicating relational expectations, questioning relational injustices, and openly discussing relationship problems with supervisors (Tepper, Moss, Lockhart, & Carr, 2007). In all, they provide a secure base for their employees. This will increase employees' motivation for reflective exploration, creativity and attention to gains rather than possible failure (Lehmann, Kluger, & Schodl, 2023).

Like attachment secure leaders, attachment avoidant leaders are frank in conveying unfavorable information (Sessa *et al.*, 2020). However, unlike the attachment secure leaders, attachment avoidant leaders do not care how the subordinate will react, just that the subordinate needs to be told what to do. Generally, avoidant individuals have lower interpersonal communications skills, which could account for having smaller and less satisfying social networks (Anders & Tucker, 2000). The avoidant attachment leader is self-absorbed and gives the impression of behaving in an impersonal and uncaring manner. Such leaders will use a more authoritative, power-drive communication strategy that is likely manipulative and threatening. For example, giving negative feedback to a subordinate, they may say, We are way behind because of you, and direct the subordinate in general terms saying, Shape up or else, without indicating specific behaviors the subordinate needs to do. These leaders attribute blame to the subordinate's character. They are likely to use regulatory communication tactics that include avoiding contact, censoring discussion, and distorting messages by talking superficially, avoiding problems, and stretching the truth (Tepper *et al.*, 2007). Avoidant attachment leaders are motivated to be dominant, and will use the manipulative model of communication by relying on an authoritative style rather than an open exchange (Maner & Case, 2016). They provide low psychological safety for their subordinates, which in turn contributes to negative outcomes such as subordinates' lower organizational identification and burnout (Lehmann *et al.*, 2023; Ronen & Mikulincer, 2012),

Leaders who are attachment anxious, however, try to minimize unfavorable information to reduce the anxiety they feel about disrupting the relationship they have with recipients. They transmit information in ways that attribute blame and rationale to external factors, for instance, so that subordinates do not feel they or the leader is the bearer of the bad news or is to blame (e.g., saying No one could have done better. or This isn't important.). They mitigate negative feelings. The anxious attachment leader is likely to use a transmission model of communication to persuade or negotiate by conveying supporting data.

Interactions of attachment style with Big Five personality dimensions and social sensitivity

Understanding how attachment style affects communication can be made more precise by considering personality dimensions that influence how attachment style is manifest.

Barel, Mizrachi, and Nachmani (2020) suggested that adult attachment styles interact with the Big Five personality traits of extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, and neuroticism (John & Srivastava, 1999; Costa and McCrae, 1992, 1995). In particular, attachment style may interact with personality dimensions that have become functional for the leader especially under situational pressures and demands (London, Volmer, Zyberaj, & Kluger, 2023).

Research has focused on the relationship among attachment styles and Big Five personality dimensions and subdimensions (Noftle & Shaver, 2006). These associations suggest how attachment style may be influenced by personality traits that shape how leaders communicate. In particular, adult attachment styles are associated with different kinds of

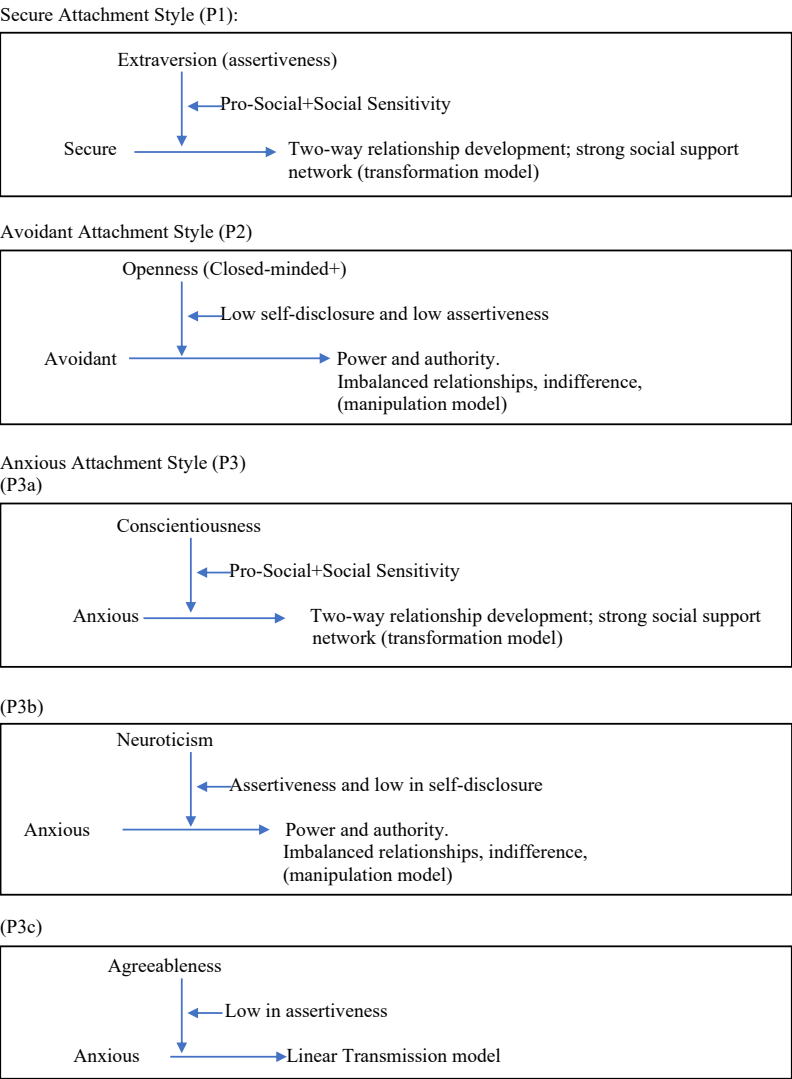
emotional dispositions linked to Big Five characteristics (Anders & Tucker, 2000; Shiota, Keltner, & John, 2006; Shaver and Brennan, 1992). Nofle and Shaver (2006) found that secure attachment was associated with positive emotions of extraversion (e.g., joy and contentment) and negatively related to neuroticism. Avoidant and anxious attachment were positively related to neuroticism and negatively related to extraversion, agreeableness, openness, and conscientiousness. Among secure attachment individuals, those with higher scores on prosocial/empathetic scales had higher agreeableness scores. Prosocial/empathetic measures were positively correlated with openness and negatively correlated with conscientiousness. Social sensitivity was associated with agreeableness. Like empathy, social sensitivity is understanding the states and feelings of others (Magrì, 2021). Unlike empathy, however, social sensitivity is more directly concerned with the evaluation of social relationships and the context in which they occur. Both social sensitivity and prosocial empathy should affect communication.

Assertiveness is a subdimension of extraversion. Assertiveness is the ability to advocate for oneself, achieve one's objectives and overcome difficulties (Peneva & Mavrodiev, 2013). Anxious attachment individuals are low on assertiveness (Shaver & Brennan, 1992; Nofle & Shaver, 2006). Anxious individuals have low interpersonal skills, likely due to lower assertiveness in social interactions, while avoidant individuals also have low interpersonal skills, likely due to their lower levels of self-disclosure. As a result, attachment avoidant individuals have less social support (Anders & Tucker, 2000).

Integration of attachment style, personality, and communication models

Research suggests how personality traits may moderate the relationships between attachment styles and communication. Extraversion, prosocial orientation and social sensitivity are likely to support leaders' secure attachment style tendencies to develop quality relationships. Neuroticism together with lack of openness and little self-disclosure are likely to support avoidant attachment style tendencies to be dominant (the manipulation communication model). Anxious individuals may be most comfortable limiting communication to transmitting information especially if they are high in agreeableness and even more so when they are low in self-esteem (McCarthy *et al.*, 2017), low in assertiveness and high in apprehensiveness about how others view them (Oltmanns & Widiger, 2020). However, anxious attachment style leaders' personality traits may lead them to communicate in other ways to alleviate their anxiety about attachment. Neuroticism, assertiveness, and low self-disclosure may drive anxious attachment style tendencies to be more manipulative. Yet, anxious attachment style leaders who are conscientious, prosocial, and socially sensitive are likely to feel sufficiently comfortable with more open discussions and will communicate in ways that develop quality relationships.

The following propositions depicted in Figure 1 outline our predictions about the flow of relationships between different attachment styles, personality traits, and communication models. Leaders with a secure attachment style who are extraverted, pro-social, and socially sensitive are likely to be most comfortable using the relationship model of communication in order to create behavior change. Leaders who are avoidant are more likely to communicate in ways that express their dominance. Anxious attachment style leaders who are conscientious, prosocial and socially sensitive are likely to rise to the occasion, using relation building communication to create change. Attachment anxious leaders who have neurotic traits and are willing to be assertive will communicate like avoidant attachment leaders, that is, express dominance. Attachment anxious leaders who are high in agreeableness and low in assertiveness are likely to be more comfortable just transmitting information from on high



Source(s): Figure by authors

Figure 1.
Leaders' Attachment
Style and Big Five
Personality
Dimensions Affecting
Communication
Behaviors (figure by
authors)

and mitigating their own accountability and that of those with whom they are communicating.

Proposition 1. Leaders' secure attachment style will be positively related to their use of the relational model of communication.

Proposition 1a. This will be stronger for leaders who are high in extraversion and prosocial orientation and social sensitivity.

- Proposition 2.* Leaders' avoidant attachment style will be positively related to their use of the manipulative model of communication.
- Proposition 2a.* This will be stronger for leaders who are low in openness to experience (high in close-mindedness) and low in self-disclosure.
- Proposition 3.* Anxious attachment style leaders will use different communication behaviors depending on their personality traits.
- Proposition 3a.* Leaders' anxious attachment style will be positively related to their use of the transmission model of communication when they are high on agreeableness and low in assertiveness.
- Proposition 3b.* Leaders' anxious attachment style will be positively related to their use of the manipulative model of communication when they are high on neuroticism, especially when they are high in assertiveness and low in self-disclosure.
- Proposition 3c.* Leaders anxious attachment style will be positively related to their use of the relational communication model when they are high in conscientiousness strengthened by high prosocial orientation and social sensitivity.

Personality and use of media

Leaders can learn to use communication media in ways that build positive relationships. Leaders have a host of communication technologies at their disposal. Leaders may need multiple media to support remote and hybrid work and communicate with stakeholders who are far afield. However, leaders are likely to use media that are consistent with their attachment style and associated communication behaviors. Communication technologies vary in degree of personal contact (one-to-one, one-to-many) and opportunities to convey personal imprint (video would be high, text would be low). High touch media could include virtual live video conferences (e.g., Zoom) and telephone conference calls, and leader-to-member texts. They allow expression through body language and/or intonation that contribute to effective communication. Low touch media would be email (corporate and personal), video (Youtube), websites, social media (X, formerly Twitter, and Facebook as examples of social networking media that allow leaders to present message but may also allow recipients to express reactions), recorded avatar-presentations, and messages generated by artificial intelligence (AI via ChatGPT). AI can gather and analyze data, diagnose situations, suggest alternative communication strategies (content and means of delivery), draft and distribute messages, obtain and analyze reactions, and continue this process with as much intervention as a leader wants to provide. A review of research on use of AI and personality found that trust in AI was positively related to agreeableness, openness, and extraversion and negatively related to neuroticism (Riedl, 2022). A study of trust in AI and attachment style found that attachment anxiety, but not attachment avoidance, predicted less trust in AI after controlling for the potential role of neuroticism and self-esteem (Gillath *et al.*, 2021). Increasing sense of attachment security by priming (encouraging subjects to think about secure relationships) increased their trust in AI.

Leaders choose media they believe will reach their intended recipients, such as members of the net generation who readily use technology to communicate with each other. Leaders who are members of the net generation themselves are likely to feel more comfortable communicating via multiple, often impersonal technologies and may develop attachment

to certain communication technologies (Hertlein & Twist, 2018). Leaders can take advantage of social media for communication given that this media is highly accessible and scalable, including using web-based and mobile technologies for interactive dialogue. However, they are likely to use it in ways that are consistent with their attachment style.

Existing, albeit limited, research suggests how attachment styles and attendant personality traits influence leaders' use of communication media. Attachment secure individuals who are high in conscientiousness are likely to use multiple methods for communicating. For instance, they tend to believe that delivering information, such as performance feedback, through digital technology increases their communication effectiveness because they recognize that people self-monitor (Hermesen, Frost, Renes, & Kerkhof, 2016). Also, attachment secure individuals prefer communication technologies that generate positive responses and in turn facilitate their own personal and professional growth (Joshi, Das, & Sekar, 2023).

Consider how leaders who are avoidant or anxious about attachment are likely to communicate if they do not learn secure attachment behavior. Avoidant attachment style individuals who seek to exert power and control and anxious attachment individuals who are low in assertiveness are likely to use impersonal, low-touch media, such as media that allow them to present messages with little opportunity for direct interaction with recipients (Carver & Smith, 2010; Zhou, Li, Han, & Yin, 2021). Individuals who are attachment avoidant are not likely to be attentive to information from social media and so are not likely to rely on social media for conveying information. Individuals who are high in neuroticism, a characteristic that goes along with avoidant attachment style, are more receptive to negative aspects of a phenomenon in general, and so they perceive technologies for communication as futile pursuits (Joshi *et al.*, 2023).

Use of nonpersonal communication alleviates stress especially for people who are high in agreeableness and neuroticism (Carver & Smith, 2010). Attachment anxious individuals, although they may distrust AI technologies because it takes control away from them (Gillath *et al.*, 2021) are likely to be highly responsive to social media, especially when they are concerned about how others view them (Park, Shin, & Ju, 2019). As such, they are likely to be attracted to social media and use it to put themselves in a positive light (Baboo, Nunkoo, & Kock, 2022). They may be especially likely to communicate through avatars because it allows them to hide behind characters of their own creation and control (Raveendhran *et al.*, 2020). Anxious attachment individuals are high in agreeableness and so tend to avoid conflict and risk and shun technologies that have potential disharmony inherent in unexpected outcomes. They would avoid online applications and location-based social networking technologies that allow recipient reactions (Joshi *et al.*, 2023). Attachment anxiety leaders would be likely to use technology such as texts to deliver negative information (Weisskirch & Delevi, 2013).

These findings suggest the following associations between attachment styles, personality traits, and adoption of communication models.

Proposition 4. Attachment style and personality characteristics that influence the leader's likely communication model will be associated with their use of media.

Proposition 4a. Attachment secure leaders who adopt the relational model of communication will be likely to use media with high touch, interactive components.

Proposition 4b. Attachment avoidant leaders who adopt the manipulative model of communication will be likely to use one-way, low touch media.

Proposition 4c. Attachment anxious leaders who adopt the transmission model of communication will be likely to will use low touch media that gives them control to present themselves and the message in a positive light.

Discussion

Bridging theories of communication and attachment styles recognizes that how people communicate is influenced by how comfortable they feel engaging with others. Adult attachment style is about the interpersonal experiences people have had from childhood on and associated personality traits. As leaders rise in their corporate hierarchies, they have to be ready to communicate with a range of internal and external stakeholders, often under uncertain, demanding, and likely stressful conditions. They will use media that matches their communication model, communicating through personal media to build and maintain relationships and impersonal, one-way media to exert dominance or be a conduit for information. Leadership education can assess leaders at the start of communication training to help them recognize their natural tendencies and communicate in ways that build trust.

Implications for research

Research is needed to test the relationships proposed here to understand antecedents of how leaders communicate in dynamic and demanding situations. This requires measuring attachment styles of personality measures and examining communication behaviors over time under different challenges, pressures, and results (e.g., recipients' feelings of psychological safety). Measures of Big Five personality traits and subdimensions have a considerable research base (cf. [Benet-Martínez and John, 1998](#); [Costa and McCrae, 1992](#); [John, Donahue, & Kentle, 1991](#)). Measures of communication behaviors can be based on observations and/or ratings of behaviors such as those in [Table 1](#).

There are several approaches for assessing adult attachment style. See, for instance, versions of the Experiences in Close Relationships Inventory ([Brennan, Clark and Shaver; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994](#); [Wei, Russell, Mallinckrodt, & Vogel, 2007](#)) and [Ravitz et al.'s \(2010\)](#) review of adult attachment measures. Adult attachment interviews asking about attachment-related autobiographical memories of childhood experiences reveal attachment schemas – internal working models ([George, Main, & Kaplan, 1985](#)). Individuals' attachment response patterns emerge from a continuous construction and reconstruction process throughout life ([Petters & Waters, 2010](#)). Individuals with less secure-based scripts are likely to be more disconnected interpersonally ([McLean, Bailey, & Lumley, 2014](#)). Research is beginning to show how AI, cognitive science, and computational modeling can reveal these patterns of internal working models by analyzing natural language recollections of attachment experiences and behavioral responses to simulations ([Waters & Roisman, 2019](#); [Rooksby et al., 2021](#)).

Although the propositions reflect leaders' dominant attachment style, a given leader can invoke relationship building, transmission, and manipulative models of communication to different degrees. For instance, a secure attachment leader can learn to use transmission and manipulative models of communication when needed. Their ability and success in doing so and how they feel about this may depend on their profile of attachment styles. Research can study leaders' profiles attachment styles and personality traits and examine the relationship of these profiles to the range of their communication behaviors. This would allow a finer tuned understanding of how attachment styles affect communication behavior and the likelihood that leaders can learn and apply more relationship building communication behaviors as they face challenges.

Research can study recipients' reactions to leaders' communication strategies, how attachment style of the recipients affects recipients' reactions, and the extent to which recipients are influenced by, and change their behavior in line with the leader's expectations. Attachment secure and attachment anxious individuals are likely to be receptive to communication aimed at building relationships. Attachment anxious individuals are likely to be high in compliance to most forms of communication but may be uncomfortable and possibly resistant to mandates from attachment avoidant leaders.

Implications for leadership education

Promotion to higher levels of leadership with greater uncertainty and the possibility of unexpected and new challenges and crises requires higher levels of communication expertise. This includes the ability to use multiple strategies as well as media. Regardless of leaders' attachment style, there are cases where leaders need to transmit information from higher levels of the organization to internal and external constituencies. There are also cases for which messages need to be loud and insistent to compel compliance. However, leaders with secure attachment will want to use communication strategies in ways that recognize that their intention is not to manipulate, mitigate, or avoid accountability. They can do so by demonstrating and rewarding positive responses and coping strategies. Perhaps this was how many, if not most, leaders delivered information about policies regarding the pandemic to their stakeholders. Leaders can learn to anticipate crises and plan effective communication strategies, not waiting for a crisis to occur or rely on instincts in the moment that may derive from anxious or avoidant attachment styles.

Leaders can learn to recognize their tendency to use particular communication models, understand the root of their preferences for these models, and how their attachment style and personality influence their use of communication. They can learn to diagnose situations to determine the best mixes of communication models to meet the demands of the situation. When they prefer or need to use transmission and manipulative models, they can learn to communicate in ways that are unbiased, ethical, accountable, and supportive. AI may be useful to sample and analyze leaders' communication patterns and outcomes. Rather than do the work for leaders by drafting communications and putting the words in the mouths of avatars, AI can provide communication models and feedback to support leaders' professional growth.

The communication behaviors in [Table 1](#) suggest bases for assessing and evaluating the communication capabilities and performance of prospective and newly promoted leaders. Observers can evaluate the extent to which these novice leaders have or can be expected to build relationships, avoid personal contact, or deflect blame and mitigate problems as they face challenges and craft messages, show (or avoid) sensitivity to their recipients, and accomplish (or miss) objectives. Lower level leaders may demonstrate their readiness and potential for relationship-building communication. Crisis simulations (e.g., tabletop exercises) and after-action analyses of actual events and communication behaviors can identify gaps in communication skills and help leaders understand, model, and practice more effective communication behaviors. This aspect of leader development is likely to be a long-term, indeed an ongoing process as the leader moves through levels of competence from novice to expert ([Dreyfus, 2004](#)). Avoidant and anxious attachment leaders for whom communications that build relationships does not come naturally can practice relationship building communication. Attachment secure individuals can learn to cope with frustrations that come from having an occasion to be more forceful or merely pass on information and have the challenge of maintaining positive relationships.

Leaders can develop more relational communication behaviors. Consider some development interventions. These call for applied research to evaluate their effectiveness

under different situational demands. Secure attachment leaders can learn and practice a more relational model of communication by participating in facilitated teambuilding that fosters multi-way communication and mutual understanding and affirmation (Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum, & Salas, 2018). They can learn how to measure culture, climate, and build two-way communication during times of stress and negotiation and to understand hidden biases that others may have. Several types of interventions may benefit anxious attachment leaders who tend to use a transmission model of communication. They can learn to become more relational. Security priming encourages participants to think about when they have felt secure in their relationships (Rowe, Gold, & Carnelley, 2020). This method can increase secure attachment at least for a short-time and in relation to the immediate situation. Feedforward interventions ask participants to focus on what it would take to shape positive future-oriented options (Kluger & Nir, 2010). Other techniques are mindfulness (London, Sessa, & Shelley, 2023) and empathy training (Lam, Kolomiro, & Alamparambil, 2011) to learn and practice language and behavior of self-confidence and commitment to others. Avoidant attachment leaders who tend to use a manipulative model of communication can become less avoidant and more relationship focused by participating in demonstrations and simulations such as scenario-based tabletop exercises and training (organization behavior modification). They can learn and practice quality listening (Kluger *et al.*, 2023) and respectful inquiry skills (Van Quaquebeke & Felps, 2018).

Conclusion

Leadership challenges include communicating with multiple stakeholders under a variety of situations. This paper proposes how leaders' adult attachment styles and personality traits may influence how they communicate – the extent to which they communicate in ways that build relationships, transmit information, and compel action. Secure attachment leaders are comfortable with relationship building communication messages and technologies. Attachment avoidant and anxious leaders are likely to communicate in ways that diminish or destroy relationships. The behaviors associated with the different models of communication can be a basis for assessing leaders' attachment styles and tendencies to communicate in ways that develop relationships, transmit information, or manipulate outcomes. Attachment anxious and avoidant leaders can learn relationship building attachment secure communications strategies.

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