

How Different Personalities Experience the Discussions Between Leader and Follower in Workplace

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Introduction

Development discussions have been much talked about and they occur very frequently in Finnish enterprises. Studies of this topic are rare, and theoretical knowledge of the subject has also remained practically the same during the whole period of the history of development discussions in Finland. In English studies development discussions have hardly been dealt with at all, and the few comparable studies are rather focusing on "performance discussions". In Sweden and Germany the topic is to some extent more prevalent. In Finland the basis of development discussions is often some kind of training for both leaders and subordinates, when new knowledge and research concerned with the topic are important. In the development discussions the subordinate's role and activity are stressed. Therefore this study is concerned with the effect of the subordinates' personality on the experience of the discussions. The research problem is: *Does the subordinate's cognitive style influence the experiences of the development discussions?* The aim of the study is thus not only to answer the research question but also to produce additional information about the development discussions. This information can be utilized in the training for development discussions as well as for the production of new views about future research.

Personality has been found to influence for instance leadership style, and now interest has once more been aroused in the effect of personality in organizations. With regard to development discussions, personality has been less studied, but it is probable that it influences discussions considerably.

Research has proved the connection of MBTI types with for instance team work (Hautala & Rissanen, 2002; Heinäsuo & Routamaa, 2004), strategic thinking (Gallén, 1997), leadership style (Berr, Church & Waclawski, 2000; Hetland & Sandall, 2003; Roush, 1992; Routamaa & Ponto, 1994; Routamaa & Pollari, 1998; Van Eron & Burke, 1992), occupational distribution (Garden, 1997; Honkonen 1998; Honkonen & Routamaa, 1996; Rissanen, 2003), change of organization

(Routamaa & Honkonen, 1996) and entrepreneurship (Hautala, 2004; Routamaa & Varamäki, 1998). In addition, MBTI has proved to be a functional training instrument for increasing self-knowledge and cooperation as well as a promoter of communication in different organizations in research (Coe, 1992; Young, 2001).

One loose definition of development discussions is:

"A discussion between superior and subordinate on a previously agreed and planned topic that has a certain aim and in the realization of which some degree of orderliness and recurrence."

(Juuti, 1998:5)

The aim of development discussions is to focus on subordinates' work, future and possibilities of development. Often these factors are linked to the whole of the organization, when the leader connects the visions and strategies of the organization with the job description and plans of the subordinates' prospects for the future. The particular emphasis of the development discussions is on the subordinate, who should be the leading figure of the discussion. Sometimes this can be awkward in practice, for both parties (Allan, 1990; Ukkonen, 1989).

Important in development discussions are preparation, implementation of matters decided on and follow-up as well as continuity. Without preparation, it is impossible to bring out in discussions all matters that may have been in contemplation for a long time already. A discussion proceeding logically step by step makes sure that all desired points are discussed. The leader provides feedback to the subordinate on his work, and the subordinate also gives the leader feedback on his activities. There are no forbidden topics in the discussions, so personal relationships in the workplace can be discussed also. In literature concerned with this matter it is advised to avoid talking about salaries in development discussions since this might determine the whole course of the discussion (Quinn,

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Faerman, Thompson & McGrath, 1990; Ronthy-Östberg & Rosendahl, 1998).

Development discussions are generally arranged about once a year, and they last about an hour. Result discussions and target discussions are also talked about, in which case these can also be held in addition to development discussions. Results discussions concern the result of the past period; in target discussions, the goals for the coming period are set. In some organizations discussions between leader and subordinate may take place three to four times a year, especially if the business of the organization is in a rapidly changing field, when strategies and visions will have to be frequently updated (Autio, Juuti & Latva-Kiskola, 1990; Ukkonen, 1989).

The influence of personality on the discussions is seen in the tendency of the leader to regard the performance of subordinates whose manner and personality please him as better than it actually is. The leader does not necessarily observe a certain type of deficiencies if they are similar to his own. Some characteristics of personality can easily be connected with good performance even if they have no connection with it. Such characteristics are loyalty, initiative, courage, reliability and self-expression (Robbins, 1998: 225-227; Ukkonen, 1989:54-55).

Method?

Sample: The data was collected in 2000–2002 from a big multinational organization. STs are on the average the most general superiors (MacDaid, McCaulley & Kainz, 1986:187), and therefore they were chosen. The questionnaires were filled in the presence and under the supervision of the researcher in the target organization. Both the leaders and the subordinates were told that the questionnaires would be seen by the researcher alone. The researcher collected the questionnaires as soon as they had been filled in. The number of leaders who belonged to the same cognitive style (ST) was 12. Their subordinates, who had taken part in the discussions and had answered the questions were 61 (see Table 1).

Questionnaires. For the study of personality the Finnish MBTI questionnaire was used. Its reliability and validity have been tested for 10 years at the University of Vaasa (see Järleström, 2002). The development discussions questionnaire is mainly based on Finnish literature on the topic and has been developed by the researcher herself (see Table 2, which contains the questions where there were statistically significant differences). The results will be studied in connection with individual questions. The subordinates responded to several statements using

a Likert-type scale, selecting in each case the alternative that best agreed with the respondent's own experience.

For instance:

"I consider myself on equal terms in the discussions"

- I disagree completely
- I disagree to some extent
- I cannot say
- I agree to some extent
- I agree completely

Table 1. Subordinates' Cognitive Styles and Distribution by Leader

Leader number	Cognitive Styles of the Subordinates to the ST's				
	ST	SF	NF	NT	YHT
1	5	1	2	1	9
2	2	1		2	5
3	8	1		1	10
4	8	4	3	2	17
5	4				4
6	2	2			4
7	1				1
8	1		1		2
9	2	2			4
10	1				1
11		1			1
12	1	1		1	3
Total	35	13	6	7	61

The data was analysed by the SPSS One-Way Anova program, and as the Post-hoc program Tukey was used. The Post-hoc program revealed in some cases statistical distinctions that the One-Way Anova had not detected. Here the distinctions Post-hoc revealed but Anova had not detected are reported; thus they can be regarded as approximate.

Results

The results are presented in Table 2. The numbers of the questions that occur in the brackets refer to the statements and questions that occur in this table.

The leader's role was most positively experienced by the intuitive-thinking (NTs). The leader appreciated accomplishments and also sets targets in their opinion more than in the sensing-feeling (SF) subordinates' (questions 4 and 5). The intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates experienced more strongly than the sensing-thinking (ST) subordinates that the leader is aware of their level of ability (question 10). The leaders' positive feedback was not in anyone's opinion exaggerated, but the intuitive-feeling subordinates (NF) agreed more definitely with

the statement than the intuitive-thinking subordinates (NT) (question 13). The intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates felt that they received least feedback ("I don't get any feedback at all", question 9); the intuitive-feeling ones (NF) that they got the most. In general, the respondents differed with respect to this allegation about feedback, when they felt that they received feedback at least to some extent.

The subordinate's role. The intuitive-thinking (NTs) and sensing-feeling (SF) experienced themselves the most as being on an equal footing; the intuitive-feeling (NF) the least (question 1). The intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates had evaluated their own performance most favourably; the sensing-thinking (ST) least favourably (question 6). The intuitive-thinking (NT) were best able to give honest feedback on the leader's activities and the environment; the intuitive-feeling subordinates (NF) were least capable of this (questions 7 and 8). Disagreeing with the leader was easiest for the intuitive-thinking (NT) compared with the sensing-thinking (ST) subordinates (question 15).

Subjects and atmosphere of the discussions. The most negative mood the discussions have produced in the intuitive-feeling (NF) and the sensing-thinking (ST) subordinates, although on the basis of the means all the respondents differed more than agreed with the statement. The negative mood was least noticeable among the intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates (question 2). The sensing-feeling (SF) and the intuitive-feeling (NF) subordinates felt more than the rest that some of the topics they would have liked had not been discussed, while the intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates disagreed the most with the offered statement (question 3). The intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates experienced also more than the sensing-thinking (ST) and the sensing-feeling (SF) subordinates that their know-how is discussed (question 11). The intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates felt, more than the others, that their possibility of development and their plans for the future are dealt with in the discussions. The responses of the intuitive-feeling (NF) subordinates were negative with regard to both (questions 12 and 14) (see Table 2).

Table 2. Means of subordinates' reactions to the development discussions in accordance with the cognitive style.

		Mean ST	Mean SF	Mean NF	Mean NT	F-value	Sig	Post-hoc
Item	Statement	n=35	n=13	n=6	n=7			
1	I feel equal in the discussions	3.89	4.31	3.17	4.43	2.64	*	NT, SF > NF
2	The discussions have left me in a negative mood	2.06	1.62	2.50	1.00	3.82	**	NF, ST > NT
3	Some matters have not been discussed though I would have liked this	2.34	2.69	2.60	1.29	2.54	*	SF, NF > NT
4	The leader estimated my accomplishment	3.51	3.08	3.83	4.00	2.12	-	NT > SF
5	The leader sets targets	3.54	3.46	4.00	4.29	2.87	**	NT > SF
6	I have estimated my accomplishment myself	3.51	3.77	3.83	4.57	3.37	**	NT > ST
7	I can frankly give my leader feedback on his activities	3.57	3.15	2.67	4.29	2.80	**	NT > NF
8	I can frankly give my leader feedback on my working environment	4.06	4.15	3.33	4.43	1.65	-	NT > NF
9	I get no feedback at all	2.32	2.38	1.71	3.00	1.48	-	NF > NT
10	My leader knows my level of know-how	3.53	3.62	4.17	4.43	2.98	**	NT > ST
11	My know-how is talked about in discussions	3.21	3.23	3.33	4.29	2.85	**	NT > ST, SF

Note: The largest mean response is in bold face.

Conclusions

In the study the influence of personality on the appreciation of development discussions was examined from the standpoint of subordinates. From the cognitive styles the sensing-thinking (ST) was selected as a representative of leaders, and the subordinates of these leaders evaluated the proceedings of the discussions. A fair number of differences due to personality were found among the opinions of the subordinates. The intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates differed most from the rest of the subordinates. It could have been assumed that the sensing-thinking (ST) subordinates would have evaluated development discussions most positively of all since, according to development discussion literature, those who share the same kind of personality as a rule provide more positive feedback to one another; this is at least the rule concerning feedback from higher to lower level (Robbins, 1998:225–227; Ukkonen, 1989:54–55).

The results suggest that the intuitive-thinking (NT) subordinates estimate their leaders the most positively in the development discussions. Having one preference in common with the leader (T) may have the effect of making communication relatively easy. The intuitive-thinking (NT) people are self-confident, critical, analytical and adept at perceiving the whole. They can hold their own and, since the role of the subordinates is emphasized in development discussions, it is clearly seen from the results that they felt most self-confident in this situation. They felt for instance more equal and felt giving feedback easier than the other subordinates. Also differing in opinion from the leader was easier for them than for the others. They also for their own part influenced the topic area of the discussions by taking a more negative attitude than the others to the question of leaving matters undiscussed and evaluating their own accomplishment. From these responses it is easy to observe the importance of the subordinates' own activity in the experience of discussions.

The intuitive-feeling (NF) subordinates experienced discussions in the most negative way of all. This is an interesting result since their leaders (ST) were, as regards their cognitive style, different in both preferences. According to the theory, it is to be expected that entirely different personalities will regard discussion as the most difficult of all. The intuitive-feeling are apt to be friendly, helpful and good at perceiving wholes and discovering possibilities. Their means were the lowest in experiencing equality and talking about their own possibilities of de-

velopment and of their future targets and also in providing feedback. They were also the least satisfied with feedback and with the choice of subjects for discussion. They were in addition more frequently than the others of the opinion that the discussions had produced a negative mood. The intuitives are often focused on the future with a long time perspective, whereas the sensing people are more likely to live here and now. The difference in experiencing "future" time perspectives appears in the responses of intuitive-feeling subordinates, when they considered speaking of their own future targets weaker than others'. The sensing-thinking subordinates most probably see the future as a briefer period of time, nor do they stress this factor in the discussion as much as the future-oriented intuitives would like. Dissatisfaction with the subjects discussed and with talking about individual possibilities of development also indicates the different personalities' different views of these matters. Feeling subordinates often talk about things on a personal level as well, while to the thinking-oriented this is seldom relevant. The intuitive-feeling subordinates often readily talk about personal development (their own or others') since this is both related to the future (intuition) and to human sympathy (feeling). The sensing-thinking ones again, as more fact-oriented, may consider personal development as one part of development discussion and restrict themselves rather to concrete matters than venture into what they consider too theoretical hypotheses. In this case, discussions will not necessarily fulfil the expectations that the intuitive-feeling subordinates had of them. It is also to be noted that the metal trade organization is not, according to research, the most likely alternative to abstractly-bent emotional people (see Rissanen, 2003:69), in which case it may be that dissatisfaction with their own work may be reflected in their responses as well. Also, when the organization's culture stresses the thinking "harder" side of human beings, the intuitive-feeling ones may find it difficult to adapt themselves to this kind of organization.

The sensing-feeling (SF) subordinates felt that they were on an equal footing in the discussions, but felt more than the others that some topics were not discussed, although they would have liked it. In addition, less attention was paid to their capability, estimation of accomplishment and the setting of targets than the others experienced. Sensing-feeling people are sympathetic, concrete and social. They are not inevitably, because of their feeling preference,

such active opinion-makers (as are not NFs either) as the sensing–thinking (ST) and intuitive–thinking subordinates. To them harmony and a pleasant atmosphere are important, which may be a reason why they have not in the discussions selected subject fields that would be likely to spoil the atmosphere.

The sensing–thinking (ST) differed from the rest in five dimensions. It is of some interest that they felt, more than the average that the discussions have led to a negative mood. Although the result is surprising, since communication with the leader is assumed to be easier when leader and subordinate are similar in cognitive style, the result may indicate the sensing–thinking style's tendency towards realism, which in others' eyes may also look like pessimism. On the basis of their responses they have the least estimated their own accomplishments, may least disagree with their leader, and their leader knows the least about their level of know-how. The sensing–thinking people (ST) are practical, stick to facts and are down-to-earth. Their thinking preference (T) makes them prone to criticism, in which case a negative feedback to others should not be difficult for them. In this study they nevertheless felt that they can not very easily disagree with their leader, but felt they could give feedback on the leader's activities almost equally freely as the intuitive–thinking (NT) ones. Then being of a different opinion may indicate that they feel they are on the same line as their leader, who represents the same cognitive style and there is thus little need for disagreement with the leader.

Intuitive–thinking (NT) and intuitive–feeling (NF) people are, with regard to their cognitive style, close to one another as are also sensing–thinking (ST) and sensing–feeling (SF) ones among themselves. The distinguishing factor is the decision-making function or thinking–feeling (T – F). An interesting fact in these results was that differences between intui-

tive–feeling (NF) and intuitive–thinking (NT) subordinates occurred with reference to nine statements whereas no differences at all were found between sensing–thinking (ST) and sensing–feeling (SF) ones. The thinking–feeling function (T – F) thus affects intuitive preference (N) differently from the sensing preference (S) at least in connection with development discussions.

On the basis of these results, leaders as well as subordinates can better than previously prepare for discussions by taking into account their own and the other party's personality. For instance subordinates with a feeling preference (F) can try to influence the proceeding of the discussions more when they are aware of their own tendency to avoid negative matters in order to preserve the atmosphere of the discussions. Likewise leaders can with regard to these subordinates give more guidance and more actively inquire about the subordinates' views and opinions about things. If the leader is very dominating, some subordinates may find it difficult to express their own views.

Studies have found out that a similar style of communication is connected with effectiveness of communication (Myers & McCaulley, 1990:70). The intention is not that either party should try to change its personality, but be flexible about its own style of communication in order to make communication easier and more fluent (see Young, 2004). In general it can be decided from these results that the subordinates' own activity positively influences satisfaction with the discussions.

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