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THE ROLE OF LEADER EMPATHY IN ENCOURAGING OPEN COMMUNICATION AMONG BEM MEMBERS IN MEDAN

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Abstract

An invitation to speak does not necessarily make organizational members comfortable expressing their concerns. Leaders' responses may influence whether members expect understanding, dismissal, or interpersonal consequences. This conceptual article examines the role of leader empathy in encouraging open communication among members of Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa (BEM) in Medan, using 2018 as its temporal frame. A narrative literature review integrates scholarship on empathy, listening, psychological safety, organizational voice, trust, and privacy. The synthesis proposes that perspective-taking and concern for others can inform how leaders invite contributions, clarify meanings, respond to criticism, and explain decisions. However, empathy should not be equated with agreement, unrestricted disclosure, or the acceptance of every request. Communication openness also depends on organizational arrangements and the consistent handling of members' contributions. Implications include structured opportunities to speak, attentive listening, transparent follow-up, and leadership development supported by contextual evaluation. These are conceptual considerations rather than tested practices. The article concludes that empathy offers a useful framework for discussing leadership communication, while actual relationships among empathy, openness, and participation within BEM in Medan require empirical investigation.

Keywords: BEM; communication openness; empathy; leadership; Medan.

INTRODUCTION

An organization may provide opportunities to speak while leaving members uncertain about whether their voices matter. A leader can invite suggestions but respond defensively when those suggestions question an established decision. Members may then distinguish between permission to speak and the expectation of being heard. This difference places leadership responses at the center of communication openness. Empathy offers a perspective for examining how those responses are formed.

Communication openness is understood here as the opportunity and willingness to express relevant ideas, questions, concerns, and disagreements. It involves both members' choices and the conditions surrounding interaction. Speaking frequently does not necessarily indicate openness, particularly when difficult issues remain unaddressed. Similarly, silence cannot automatically be interpreted as agreement. The quality of communication requires attention to what can be expressed and how it is received.

Empathy concerns understanding and responding to another person's experience while recognizing that the experience belongs to that person. Davis (1983) provides a multidimensional approach to empathy rather than treating it as a single undifferentiated quality. This perspective supports distinguishing attempts to understand another viewpoint from other emotional responses. It also helps clarify the article's use of the concept. Empathy is examined as a resource for interaction rather than a complete explanation of leadership behavior

Members of Badan Eksekutif Mahasiswa (BEM), or Student Executive Boards, in Medan provide the context for this conceptual discussion. Meetings, task coordination, program evaluation, and responses to criticism offer relevant situations for examining leadership communication. These situations are illustrations rather than accounts of observed events. The article does not assess any particular university, board, or individual. The year 2018 defines its temporal scope.

The central issue concerns how empathy may be translated into communication that members experience as open. A leader's intention to understand does not establish that a member feels understood. Nor does recognizing a concern determine which organizational decision should follow. The relationship between empathy and openness

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therefore requires attention to observable interaction and organizational conditions. This avoids presenting empathy as a guarantee of agreement or effective participation.

This article examines the conceptual role of leader empathy in encouraging open communication. It considers perspective-taking, listening, psychological safety, responses to disagreement, and follow-up. It also discusses boundaries involving privacy and leadership responsibility. The objective is to develop a framework relevant to BEM communication in Medan. Its conclusions are conceptual rather than findings about organizational conditions in 2018.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Empathy as a Multidimensional Concept

Davis (1983) develops a multidimensional approach that distinguishes different components of interpersonal reactivity. This provides a foundation for examining empathy without assuming that all emotional responses have the same meaning. Understanding another person's perspective differs from experiencing personal discomfort in response to that person's situation. The distinction matters when discussing leadership. A strong emotional reaction alone does not establish accurate understanding or an appropriate response.

Decety and Jackson (2004) examine the functional architecture of empathy and its interconnected components. Their framework emphasizes the complexity of responding to others' experiences. It supports maintaining a distinction between oneself and another person while considering that person's state. In leadership communication, this cautions against assuming that similar personal experience produces complete understanding. Clarification remains necessary even when a leader believes the situation is familiar.

Clark (2010) presents an integral model of empathy within the counseling process. This work offers an additional perspective on understanding another person's experience. Its relevance to the present article is conceptual rather than evidence about organizational leadership. Counseling relationships and student organizations involve different responsibilities and expectations. Application to BEM therefore requires careful adaptation rather than direct transfer of counseling practices.

Listening as an Interpersonal Expression of Empathy

Bodie (2011) conceptualizes active-empathic listening and presents evidence supporting its measurement in interpersonal settings. The work provides a basis for giving listening explicit attention in the discussion of empathy. A leader's understanding needs to be informed by what the member communicates. It should not depend entirely on assumptions drawn from expression or tone. Listening therefore creates opportunities to check interpretations.

Bodie et al. (2015) investigate active listening in informal helping conversations involving undergraduate students. Their findings identify benefits for some emotional outcomes without demonstrating improvement across every outcome examined. This distinction supports evaluating listening through specific consequences rather than assuming universal benefits. Within this article, listening practices provide possible ways to communicate attention and check understanding. Their effects on communication openness within BEM remain untested.

Within this article, listening includes inviting an explanation, allowing completion, and checking the meaning of the message. These actions are proposed applications rather than a claim that every listening behavior demonstrates empathy. A summary can be accurate or inaccurate, and a question can invite explanation or communicate disbelief. Interpretation depends on the exchange. Members' responses remain relevant to assessing whether understanding has developed.

Communication Openness, Voice, and Silence

Morrison (2014) reviews organizational voice and silence, including the conditions and consequences associated with expressing ideas and concerns. This literature provides a foundation for examining communication beyond the availability of formal meetings. Opportunities to contribute need to be considered alongside reasons for using or avoiding them. However, employee voice is not identical to every form of interpersonal openness. Its application to BEM requires attention to differences in organizational relationships.

Van Dyne et al. (2003) conceptualize silence and voice as separate, multidimensional constructs. Their framework challenges the assumption that silence is simply the absence of speaking. This distinction is relevant when interpreting participation in organizational discussion. A quiet member should not automatically be classified as disengaged or satisfied. The meaning of silence requires consideration of motives and context.

Detert and Edmondson (2011) examine implicit beliefs about when speaking up at work is risky or inappropriate. Their research helps explain why opportunities to speak may coexist with reluctance to contribute.

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This perspective suggests that communication openness requires attention to expectations surrounding participation. A leader's invitation may be interpreted through beliefs that extend beyond the immediate conversation. Such beliefs among BEM members in Medan require empirical examination.

Psychological Safety and Inclusive Leadership

Edmondson (1999) connects psychological safety with learning behavior in work teams. Edmondson and Lei (2014) review the development of the concept and its interpersonal significance. Together, these sources support considering perceived consequences when members ask questions or acknowledge uncertainty. Such conditions are relevant to openness but remain distinct from empathy itself. A leader's personal understanding does not automatically establish a shared communication climate.

Frazier et al. (2017) extend psychological safety research through a meta-analytic review. Their work provides a broader evidence base for examining the construct within organizational relationships. It supports considering communication conditions alongside individual leadership qualities. In the present framework, empathy and psychological safety remain related but distinct concepts. Evidence concerning psychological safety should not be interpreted as direct proof of an empathy–openness relationship within BEM.

Nembhard and Edmondson (2006) examine leader inclusiveness, professional status, psychological safety, and improvement efforts in healthcare teams. Their work provides a basis for considering how leaders invite and appreciate contributions. It also directs attention to differences in status within interaction. Applying these findings to BEM requires contextual caution. Healthcare teams and student organizations have different responsibilities and institutional arrangements.

Detert and Burris (2007) examine leadership behavior and employee voice in work organizations. Their research complements the discussion by connecting leadership conduct with the expression of concerns. The relevant application concerns how invitations and responses work together. An invitation to contribute needs to be examined alongside what happens after a contribution. Its effects within BEM cannot be assumed from workplace evidence.

Trust, Privacy, and Communication Boundaries

Mayer et al. (1995) present an integrative model of organizational trust that distinguishes trust from related concepts. This supports discussing trust without treating it as equivalent to agreement or familiarity. In the present framework, members may consider whether leaders will handle contributions consistently. Empathy may inform that handling, but trust remains a separate construct. Their relationship requires evidence rather than conceptual substitution.

Petronio (2013) discusses communication privacy management and decisions concerning private information. This perspective helps distinguish organizational openness from unrestricted personal disclosure. A member may explain a limitation without wishing to reveal its private background. Leaders can acknowledge the information relevant to coordination while respecting that boundary. Openness should therefore preserve choices about what information is shared and with whom.

METHOD

This article uses a narrative literature review to examine leader empathy and communication openness. The year 2018 provides its temporal frame, and all cited publications were available by that year. The article involves no respondents, interviews, questionnaires, or field observations. BEM members in Medan provide the setting for conceptual application. The discussion does not reconstruct actual organizational conditions during 2018.

The approach draws on Baumeister and Leary's (1997) discussion of narrative literature reviews. Sources are used to compare concepts, develop arguments, and identify boundaries of application. The article does not claim a systematic search or exhaustive coverage. Its purpose is to integrate selected scholarship relevant to the central question. Conclusions remain bounded by the literature and contexts discussed.

The literature addresses empathy, listening, psychological safety, leadership inclusiveness, organizational voice, trust, privacy, and developmental training. Sources are considered according to conceptual relevance and their contribution to the argument. Differences between individual abilities, interpersonal behavior, and shared organizational conditions are retained. Evidence from other populations is not presented as evidence about BEM. These distinctions guide the interpretation.

The synthesis organizes the discussion around understanding, invitation, response, boundaries, and follow-up. These categories are analytical arrangements developed for this article. They are not themes extracted from participant accounts or organizational documents. Illustrations explain how the concepts might apply to

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organizational interaction. Proposed practices are distinguished from established BEM procedures and evaluated interventions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From Empathic Intention to Communicated Understanding

The synthesis proposes that empathy becomes relevant to openness through how it informs interaction. A leader may intend to understand a concern while responding in a way that closes further explanation. Members encounter the response rather than having direct access to the intention. This makes clarification and acknowledgment important analytical considerations. The relationship remains a conceptual proposition requiring examination.

In an illustrative meeting, a member may object to an additional assignment. A leader could interpret the objection as unwillingness to contribute or ask what difficulty the assignment creates. The second response offers an opportunity to obtain relevant information. It does not determine whether the request should be withdrawn. Understanding the concern and deciding on an action remain separate steps.

Perspective-Taking without Presuming Knowledge

Perspective-taking involves considering how a situation may appear to another person. It should not become a claim that the leader already knows what the member feels. Similar situations can have different meanings for different people. Questions allow the member to confirm or correct the interpretation. This protects understanding from becoming projection.

A leader might say that a workload appears difficult and ask which responsibilities are most affected. The member can then identify the actual concern. It may involve unclear instructions rather than the amount of work. This illustrates why interpretation needs to remain open to revision. Empathic communication is therefore discussed as inquiry alongside acknowledgment.

Table 1. Proposed Connections between Leader Empathy and Communication Openness

Communication focus	Proposed leadership practice	Boundary of interpretation
Perspective-taking	Ask how the member understands the situation	The leader's initial interpretation may be inaccurate
Listening	Allow explanation and check meaning	Silence alone does not demonstrate understanding
Acknowledgment	Recognize the concern before discussing options	Acknowledgment does not require agreement
Inclusion	Invite contributions from members with different roles	An invitation does not guarantee willingness to speak
Privacy	Clarify what information may be shared further	Organizational membership does not remove personal boundaries
Follow-up	Explain what will happen after a concern is raised	Receiving a suggestion does not mean it can be implemented

The table is a conceptual mapping rather than an assessment instrument. It identifies actions that may be examined when discussing empathy and openness. No single action establishes that a leader is empathic. Its meaning depends on the interaction and subsequent response. The framework therefore supports questions rather than fixed judgments about individuals.

Responding to Criticism and Disagreement

Openness becomes especially relevant when members question a leader's decision. Listening to supportive comments alone provides limited information about how disagreement is handled. A leader can ask for the reasons behind criticism and clarify the concern before responding. This permits examination without requiring immediate acceptance. The purpose is a more informed exchange.

Gibb's (1961) discussion of defensive communication provides a foundation for considering the interpersonal conditions surrounding defensive responses. In this article, it supports examining delivery and reception together. Leaders' responses may clarify an issue or redirect attention toward defending personal standing.

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This possibility should be investigated through the exchange rather than assumed from disagreement. Reasoned objection remains compatible with openness.

Burris (2012) examines managerial responses to challenging and supportive forms of employee voice. This research provides a basis for considering how the nature of a contribution relates to its reception. Its conceptual application concerns whether leaders remain receptive when members question existing decisions. Responding positively to supportive comments alone does not establish openness toward disagreement. Whether these differences occur within BEM requires evidence from the relevant organizational setting.

A constructive response can distinguish the information accepted from the interpretation disputed. For example, a leader may acknowledge that instructions were unclear while explaining why the decision itself remains necessary. This gives members a more specific account of the response. It also identifies what can be improved. Empathy and accountability can therefore be considered together.

Inclusion and Differences in Organizational Position

Members with different roles may experience the same invitation differently. A senior administrator may regard disagreement as routine, while a new member may be uncertain about its consequences. This is a conceptual possibility rather than a finding about BEM. It suggests that opportunities to contribute need to be understandable and accessible. General invitations may require more specific follow-up.

Leaders can consider how participation is distributed during discussion. Allowing questions, avoiding repeated interruption, and explaining how proposals are considered can make the process clearer. These actions should remain relevant to the meeting's purpose. Inclusion does not require every member to speak on every issue. It requires attention to whether relevant contributions can be made.

Open Communication without Forced Disclosure

Organizational openness should not require members to reveal sensitive personal information. A member may communicate limited availability without explaining private circumstances in detail. Leaders can discuss the implications for responsibilities using the information necessary for coordination. Additional disclosure should remain voluntary. This preserves a distinction between operational clarity and personal exposure.

The handling of information after disclosure is also important. A concern shared privately may not be intended for discussion with the entire board. Leaders can clarify what needs to be communicated and seek permission where appropriate. They should avoid assumptions that receiving information creates unrestricted permission to circulate it. The proposed approach connects openness with responsible boundaries.

From Hearing Concerns to Following Them Up

Members need to understand what follows after speaking. A leader may listen attentively but leave uncertainty about whether any action will occur. Clarifying the next step connects interpersonal acknowledgment with organizational responsibility. The response may involve action, further examination, or an explanation that change is unavailable. Each requires communication appropriate to the concern.

Follow-up also helps distinguish unresolved disagreement from neglected input. A proposal may be declined after consideration, while another remains under review. Explaining this status allows members to understand how their contributions were handled. It does not ensure satisfaction with the outcome. It provides a clearer basis for continued interaction.

Implications for Leadership Development

Leadership development can include practice in distinguishing acknowledgment, agreement, and decision-making. Illustrative situations may help participants examine how the same concern receives different responses. Feedback can focus on accuracy of interpretation and opportunities for clarification. This links empathy with communication actions that can be discussed. It avoids relying solely on broad judgments about personal warmth.

Teding van Berkhout and Malouff (2016) report evidence supporting empathy training across randomized controlled trials included in their meta-analysis. This provides a rationale for considering developmental activities. However, evidence of improvement in empathy does not establish greater communication openness within BEM. Transfer to organizational practice requires separate evaluation. Program participation alone is insufficient evidence of effectiveness.

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Table 2. Proposed Leadership Development Activities

Developmental focus	Proposed activity	Possible evaluation question
Understanding perspectives	Discuss alternative interpretations of an organizational situation	Does the response remain open to correction?
Listening	Practice summarizing a member's concern	Is the summary accurate according to the speaker?
Responding to disagreement	Explain acknowledgment and decision separately	Is the basis of the response clear?
Encouraging participation	Review how contributions are invited and handled	Can members identify how to raise concerns?
Respecting boundaries	Discuss appropriate handling of private information	Are audience and sharing expectations clarified?
Follow-up	Develop a response and review plan	Do members understand the next step?

These activities are proposals requiring adaptation to organizational needs and resources. They do not describe an official BEM curriculum or a tested intervention. Evaluation should examine the objectives actually targeted by the activity. It should also distinguish self-reported empathy from communication behavior and members' experiences. This permits more proportionate conclusions about developmental outcomes.

Limitations and Future Directions

This article relies on selected scholarship and conceptual interpretation. Its sources include populations and settings that differ from student organizations. Their findings provide explanatory resources but do not establish local relationships. The proposed mapping has not been validated as a measurement model. It should therefore guide discussion and further inquiry.

The article makes no empirical assessment of BEM members in Medan during 2018. It cannot determine leaders' empathy, members' willingness to speak, or the causes of silence. Future research may examine specific exchanges and organizational arrangements. It should distinguish leaders' intentions from members' experiences and subsequent outcomes. Such evidence would strengthen the basis for practical recommendations.

CONCLUSION

Leader empathy offers a framework for examining how members' perspectives and concerns are understood during organizational interaction. Its conceptual relevance lies in listening, checking interpretations, acknowledging concerns, and responding to disagreement. These practices need to be connected with inclusion, privacy, and follow-up. Empathy does not require agreement or unrestricted disclosure. It also does not independently determine communication openness.

For discussions concerning BEM members in Medan, the article proposes attention to both interpersonal responses and organizational arrangements. Leadership development may include contextual practice supported by specific feedback and evaluation. The proposed practices remain considerations rather than demonstrated interventions. The year 2018 defines the article's temporal scope. Actual relationships between leader empathy and communication openness require empirical examination.

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