

## LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION TAKES SKILL, PART ONE



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### **LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION TAKES SKILL:**

**Three Lessons in Internal Leadership Communication: Listen intently; Listen to whiners; Use the right tools**

**By Dorreen Dembski**

#### **Why leadership communication matters to internal communication culture and organizational outcomes.**

Rarely can I read an organizational-related article without reading about employee shortages, disengaged employees, and organizations that are trying to attract and keep talented employees. We hear about the gig economy, rapid-fire changes, and all sorts of changing workplace configurations to draw people to organizations and draw the best from them. Through my lens, I have an intense interest in how internal communication can positively affect the overall employment picture. Literature, research and experiences make clear that a transparent culture of effective communication contributes to developing an engaging workplace. The work starts at the top with the communication modeled by leaders. It sets the tone for the whole organization.

#### **A review of research has demonstrated that communication does matter in an organization:**

*"The talent to motivate people and the ability to communicate are found to have a positive influence on organizational success rates" (Gilley, Gilley and Mcmillan).*

*"A leader's job is to create the conditions whereby a motivated person can excel" (Lisa McLeod).*

One of the expected conditions of modern organizations is transparent communication. Transparency is a postmodern expectation that is driven by the wide-spread availability of information via the Internet. (Christensen, 2002; Simon, 2006).

#### **Effective leadership communication doesn't come naturally.**

To some leaders, communication appears to be easy. I've seen some leaders adopt a philosophy of "we talk they listen". Or, "I know we should do more communication, but who has time?" These are worst case scenarios of misunderstanding the important role internal communication and its impact on organizational improvement. I've seen it, so I wasn't surprised to learn that psychological studies provide evidence that this the way that some leaders approach communication. The studies indicate that when leaders gain power with position, they literally experience a cognitive "power shift" that causes leaders "to become more self-focused, entitled, and less reflective" (Blunt, 2016). A study of business failures reveals that heavy-handed and non-attentive communication styles contribute to catastrophic outcomes.

Leadership communication is a skill

**Leadership communication then requires learning communication as a skill. One key leadership communication skill is listening.**

How do we build a communication culture that inspires transparency and authenticity? First, let's consider some definitions.

In the context of this paper, transparent communication means:

- Qualitative information is accessible.
- Information is freely exchanged.
- Processes, procedures that hamper or improve productivity can be discussed/problem solved.
- Ideas are generated from employees.
- Information is timely.

Researched based outcomes of open, honest internal communication culture include:

- More creativity,
- Higher employee engagement,
- More collaboration, and
- Organizational improvement.

One key leadership communication skill is listening. A close companion to listening is involving people in problem-solving.

- Listen objectively.
- Avoid the temptation to listen to reply, and instead, listen to learn.
- Then, invite people to participate in problem-solving.
- Key skills include:
  - Collect appropriate feedback on topics of interest.
  - Involve people in problem-solving.
  - Seek to understand feedback and problems. Ask questions such as,
    - How would you solve the problem?"
    - "What did we hear?" "Why?"
    - "What's the problem, based on what you know?"

Listening objectively is very hard. I struggle with it myself. We are often listening to respond, rather than listening to hear what people have to say. Think about that. It takes a lot of effort to focus intently on a person, and hear what they are saying rather than hearing parts of what they are saying and thinking of a response. It is especially hard to hear things we don't want to hear. Think of a time when you heard really sad news about a loved one. It's really hard to hear. Plus, while some say work isn't personal, I disagree. It is where we spend a lot of time. Sometimes we are emotionally involved with a process or product that we develop so much so that it has become part of who we are. Then, when someone doesn't like it or has difficult feedback to share, you may very well become defensive. It's hard to listen, yet feedback is truly a gift.

**The benefit of involving people in problems solving:**

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*Neuroscience proves that a person's brain is activated when a person is actively engaged in problem solving, such as working in a team solving problems, rather than being told what to do (Comaford, 2016).*

**Listen to whiners – they will tell you or they will tell someone else.**

Why do people whine? Research demonstrates that people perceive negative circumstances more readily than they perceive positive circumstances. Scientists theorize that this is part of the human condition for survival – we need to be able to anticipate negative outcomes to avoid them. Therefore, it is not all that unusual for people to be more negative than positive. (However, this also requires leaders to deliberately call attention to positive outcomes to build more positive workplace, which is another topic of leadership communication.)

This is important! If you don't listen, rest assured the negative nellys will tell someone what's bothering them! Unfortunately, the negativity can spread, and cause outsiders to have a negative impression of your organization, too.

**Be aware. Your position may inhibit transparent communication.**

Another problem for leaders is that their positional power inhibits employees from engaging in transparent communication with the leaders. Therefore, be aware. Unless a deliberate effort is made to create transparency, people will not tell their boss what is really going on. Watch out: Significant polite talk between superiors and subordinates, and especially polite talk focused upward, may indicate ambiguous and "distorted" communication (Poncier, 2015). Of course, this is exact opposite of what you want in a transparent communication culture. I'm not suggesting impolite talk – but we are seeking authenticity and transparency, which sometimes means people might say things about processes, procedures, or products that are difficult to hear. Listen anyways.

One way to open lines of communication is to take the time to share things in common, such as what occurs when we engage in small talk. There is a value in small talk – even when some think it is a time waster, because it builds relationships. Icebreakers, taking time to ask people to share at the beginning of a meeting, and private acknowledgments of important events in an employee's life are opportunities to form relationships. These should be authentic, and not taken lightly. When there is a common ground formed, bonding begins and more trust emerges.

I also believe that there is the need for some common values to be established about how to talk about things. Ideas such as establishing meeting guidelines and developing shared values are important processes that work toward creating common understanding of shared communication values you want to encourage in your organization.

**Know and use the best tools for the communication work at hand.**

Frequent interactions create familiarity and build trust. Translated, that means - be available. Yet the pressures of the technical aspects of a leader's job may seem overwhelming, time-consuming and leave little time for relationship building. Sometimes we all hunker down and choose the most efficient, rather than the most effective, form of communication.

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**Here are some things to consider when choosing communication channels:**

- Face-to-face creates the greater communication satisfaction "it appears that the ability to develop a sense of deep trust in others is impaired in virtual teams," (Purvanova, 2014).
- Sharing appropriate personal information helps build relationships (whether face-to-face or virtual).
- Communication is a key ingredient of any relationship.
- Computer-based communication (email, video, etc.) is best for *equality and efficiency*, but may not build authentic relationships. It should be used when appropriate, which is for transmitting factual information. It should not be used for emotional information.
- Teams can work effectively virtually, there still needs to be time for developing personal connections for transparency.
- There usually is the need for multiple methods of communication, no matter what the project.
- Communication should be deliberately planned into every initiative.

In conclusion, I argue leadership communication is a skill. There is much more to learn, and this white paper only scratches the surface. I truly believe it takes as much skill to be a good communicator as it does to be a good teacher, lawyer, mechanic, or any other professional. Yet, communication traverses all leadership positions. You need communication AND your other technical skills to be successful. It's not an either/or situation. All leaders need good communication skills. Some argue it is trait. I argue it should be learned if leaders want to lead.

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