

## LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

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**Abstract:** Motivation depends greatly on a leader's ability to communicate effectively, which includes the critical role of listening to followers. People look to leaders for direction and inspiration, but they also want to have their ideas and opinions heard.

Leadership cannot happen without effective communication. Recall that leadership means influencing people to bring about change toward a vision, or desirable future for the organization. Leaders communicate to share the vision with others, inspire and motivate them to strive toward the vision, and build the values and trust that enable effective working relationships and goal accomplishment. Successful leader communication also includes deceptively simple components, such as asking questions, paying attention to nonverbal communication, and actively listening to others. Today's fast-paced environment does not always provide time for the listening and reflection that good communication requires.<sup>1</sup> Surveys of managers typically reveal that they consider communication their most important skill and one of their top responsibilities. However, one study found that fewer than half bother to tailor their messages to employees, customers, or suppliers, and even fewer seek feedback from those constituencies.

Research shows that some senior executives in particular are not investing the time and energy to be effective communicators, which can leave the entire organization floundering for direction or prevent top leaders from adequately responding to problems or opportunities.<sup>1</sup> Many top managers, for example, resist employee feedback, because they don't want to hear negative information. Without feedback, though, leaders often make decisions and plans that are out of alignment with employee perceptions, making smooth implementation less likely.<sup>2</sup>

**Rezime:** Motivacija veoma zavisi od liderske sposobnosti da se komunicira efikasno, što uključuje kritičnu ulogu od slušaoca ka sledbenicima. Ljudi gledaju na lidere kao na ulogu i inspiraciju, ali oni takođe žele da imaju njihove ideje i da čuju njihove želje.

Liderstvo se ne dešava bez efikasne komunikacije. Ponovimo da liderstvo znači uticaj ljudi da dođu do promena vizije, ili poželjnu budućnost za organizaciju. Lideri komuniciraju da podele viziju sa drugima, unspirišući i motivišući ih da se bore za viziju, i stvaranje vrednosti, ali i da veruju u mogućnost efikasnog rada i dobrog izvršenja. Uspešno lidersko komuniciranje takođe uključuje varljive jednostavne komponente, kao što su tražena pitanja, obraćanje pažnje na neverbalne komunikacije i aktivno slušanje drugih. Današnja prvoklasna okolina ne dozvoljava pripremanje vremena za slušanje i odbijanje, što dobra komunikacija zahteva.<sup>1</sup> Nadzornici menadžera uobičajeno pokazuju da oni razmatraju komunikacije koje su najznačajnija veština i jedna od njihovih vrhunskih odgovornosti. Međutim, jedna studija je pronašla da manje od polovine njih se brinulo za krojače njihovih poruka za zaposlene, mušterije ili dobavljače, i čak je nekoliko tražilo vraćanje od ovih klijenata.

Istraživanje pokazuje da neki stariji izvršioc i pojedinačno ne investiraju vreme i energiju da bi bili efikasni komunikatori, koji mogu napustiti ulazak u organizaciju koprcajući se za pravac ili da spreče vrhunski lidere od adekvatnih odgovora na probleme ili prilike. Mnogi vrhunski menadžeri, na primer, odolevaju povratak zaposlenih, jer oni ne žele da čuju negativne informacije. Bez feedback-a, takođe, lideri često prave odluke i planove koji su van stroja sa opažanjima zapošljenih, praveci blagu implementaciju manje verovatnom.<sup>2</sup>

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## 1. HOW LEADERS COMMUNICATE

We have all had both positive and negative experiences with communication in our personal as well as our work lives. Have you ever had a supervisor or instructor whose communication skills were so poor that you didn't have any idea what was expected of you or how to accomplish the job you were asked to do? On the other hand, have you experienced the communication flair of a teacher, boss, or coach who "painted a picture in words" that both inspired you and clarified how to achieve an objective?

Leadership means communicating with others in such a way that they are influenced and motivated to perform actions that further common goals and lead toward desired outcomes. **Communication** is a process by which information and understanding are transferred between a sender and a receiver, such as between a leader and an employee, an instructor and a student, or a coach and a football player. Exhibit 1 shows the key elements of the communication process. The leader initiates a communication by *encoding* a thought or idea, that is, by selecting symbols (such as words) with which to compose and transmit a message. The message is the tangible formulation of the thought or idea sent to the receiver, and the *channel* is the medium by which the message is sent.

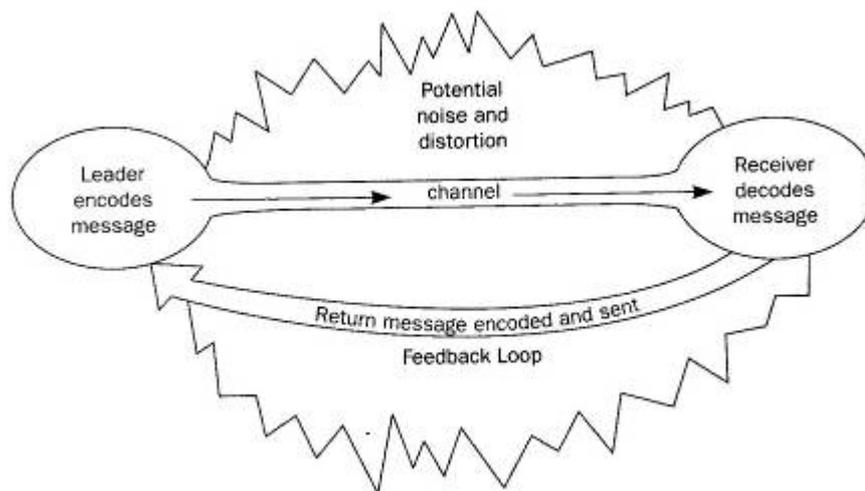


Exhibit .1. A Basic Model of the Communication Process

The channel could be a formal report, a telephone call, an e-mail or text message, or a face-to-face conversation. The receiver *decodes* the symbols to interpret the meaning of the message. Encoding and decoding can sometimes cause communication errors because individual differences, knowledge, values, attitudes, and background act as filters and may create "noise" when translating from symbols to meaning. Employees and supervisors, husbands and wives, parents and children, friends and strangers all have communication breakdowns because people can easily misinterpret messages. *Feedback* is the element of the communication process that enables someone to determine whether the receiver correctly interpreted the message. Feedback occurs when a receiver responds to a leader's communication with a return message. Without feedback, the communication cycle is incomplete. Effective communication involves both the transference and the mutual understanding of information.<sup>3</sup> The process of sending, receiving, and feedback to test understanding underlies both management and leadership communication.

## 2. MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION

The traditional role of a manager is that of "information processor." Managers spend some 80 percent of each working day in communication with others.<sup>6</sup> In other words, 48 minutes of every hour are spent in meetings, on the telephone, or talking informally with others. Managers scan their environments for important written and personal information, gathering facts, data, and ideas, which in

turn are sent to subordinates and others who can use them. A manager then receives subordinate messages and feedback to see if "noise" interfered with translation, and determines whether to modify messages for accuracy.

Managers have a huge communication responsibility directing and controlling an organization. Communication effectiveness lies in accuracy of formulation, with less "noise" as one determinant of success. Managers communicate facts, statistics, and decisions. Effective managers establish themselves at the center of information networks to facilitate the completion of tasks. Leadership communication, however, serves a different purpose.

### **3. THE COMMUNICATIONS NETWORK**

Effective communication systems, both formal and informal, are required to share the strategic vision and inform people of priorities and strategies and to ensure strategic and tasks are carried out expeditiously. Where the organizations is decentralized an effective communication network is vital for feeding information *upwards and laterally* inside the organization: without this control will be lost. In quite different ways, both managing by wandering around and biudgetary control systems can help achieve this co-ordination. Good lateral communications also help managers to learn from other parts of the business; this in turn can lead to "best practices" being shared.

### **4. COMMUNICATION IS A BUSINESS TOOL**

Communication is a fundamental aspect of business life. But business communication is not something that is undertaken for its own benefit. Communication is effective only if it leads to the right decisions being made and, as a result, the correct courses of action being followed. People cannot make the right decisions unless they have the right information to hand. Communication is the means by which people obtain and transmit information and indicate what information they need in order to make decisions.

Actions are a result of the decisions that people make. Communications can encourage them to take one particular course of action over others. It is a process governed by feedback. Once initiated, communication leads to further communication. We judge other people's perceptions of our actions by the feedback (response communication) we get. In general, positive feedback encourages or reinforces particular actions. Negative feedback discourages them. Communication, information, decision-making and action-taking are then linked in a loop. Managing communication effectively, using it as a business tool, is about managing this loop in its entirety.

Communication is not simply a passive, background aspect of organizational life; it is the very thing that makes organizations happen. It is therefore important that communication is looked upon as an active part of business activity. And, as with any business activity, the objectives of communication need to be considered. Of course, the extent to which formal and explicit objectives are set will depend on the nature of the communication. A major presentation to the client will demand a formal consideration of objectives. A telephone call to check on some facts will have objectives that are implicit and will not need much explicit consideration.

Nonethelless, all communication should be undertaken with some objective in mind. The following is a quite general framework for setting communication objectives. They apply to any communication: not just those between the consultant and client but those between members of the consulting team.

The critical objectives is:

- What do I want to happen as a result of this communication?  
In other words, the question to be answered is not, "What do I want to say?" but "What do I want to happen as a result of saying it."  
Once this objective has been resolved the following questions need to be asked:
- Who will be the recipient of the communication?
- What information needs to be conveyed?
- What action should the recipient(s) take as a result of the communication?

One of the key action that the recipient might take is to provide you with some information, so it is also important to consider:

- What information should they give as part of their response? (In other words, “What do I want them to tell me.”?)

People act on emotional as well as rational grounds. They emerge from communication encounters feeling motivated or demotivated. So consider:

- How should the recipient *feel* as a result of communication?

A further question that should be asked is:

- What information do the recipients need in order to act in the way desired?

Don't flood the listener(s) with information. Consider what is the minimum information the audience will need to complete the action required. Consider whether it will be a hindrance if the recipients have to come back for more information. Or will this in fact help? This question is related to a further one that must be asked:

- What level should the information be at?

How deep is the audience's understanding (and desire to understand) specific details? Do they want a broad picture or a highly detailed account? How technically complex are the audience? How much technical detail do they need? Don't forget the communication is a continuous process, not a one-off exercise. Consider what follow-up action will be needed as a result of the communication to ensure the desired actions occur. The consultant is engaged in a continual process of communication with the client. This process does more than just transfer information-it is the basis on which an effective and rewarding working relationship is built.

## 5. LEADER COMMUNICATION

Although leadership communication also includes the components of sending, receiving, and feedback, it is different from management communication. Leaders often communicate the big picture-the vision, as defined in Chapter 1-rather than facts and pieces of information. A leader can be seen as a communication champion.<sup>7</sup> A **communication champion** is philosophically grounded in the belief that communication is essential to building trust and gaining commitment to the vision. Leaders use communication to inspire and unite people around a common sense of purpose and identity. A communication champion enables followers to "live" the vision in their day-to-day activities.<sup>8</sup> This chapter's *Consider This* box highlights the importance of this aspect of leader communication. People need a vision to motivate them toward the future. Learning, problem solving, decision making, and strategizing are all oriented around and stem from the vision. Furthermore, communication champions visibly and symbolically engage in communication-based activities. Whether they walk around asking questions or thoughtfully listen to a subordinate's problem, the actions of champions convey a commitment to communication. Communication isn't just about occasional meetings, formal speeches, or presentations. Leaders actively communicate through both words and actions every day. Regular communication is essential for building personal relationships with followers.

Exhibit 2 shows the leader-as-communication-champion model. By establishing an open communication climate, asking questions, actively listening to others, learning to discern underlying messages, and applying the practice of dialogue, leaders facilitate and support *strategic conversations* that help move the organization forward. Leader communication is *purpose-directed* in that it directs everyone's attention toward the vision, values, and desired outcomes of the group or organization and persuades people to act in a way to help achieve the vision.

Leaders use many communication methods, including selecting rich channels of communication, stories, metaphors, and informal communication. For example, in communicating his message about the federal budget, President Ronald Reagan spoke of a trillion dollars in terms of stacking it next to the Empire State Building. Framed this way, the message redefined the meaning of a trillion dollars, and took on a new reality for the audience. Historical and contemporary leaders as diverse as Reagan, Martin Luther King, Jr., Oprah Winfrey, Steve Jobs, Aung San Suu Kyi, Bono, and Meg Whitman all share the ability to powerfully communicate their messages to followers and others.

## 6. LEADING STRATEGIC CONVERSATIONS

**Strategic conversation** refers to people talking across boundaries and hierarchical levels about the group or organization's vision, critical strategic themes, and the values that can help achieve desired outcomes. Leaders facilitate strategic conversations by (1) asking questions and actively listening to others to understand their attitudes and values, needs, personal goals and desires (2) setting



*Exhibit 2. The Leader as Communication Champion*

the agenda for conversation by underscoring the key strategic themes that are linked to organizational success; and(3) selecting the right communication channels and facilitating dialogue.<sup>9</sup> An example of strategic conversation comes from Royal Philips Electronics, Europe's largest electronics outfit. President Gerard Kleisterlee outlined four key technology themes that he believes should define Philips' future in the industry: display, storage, connectivity, and digital video processing. These themes intentionally cross technology boundaries and require people to communicate and collaborate across departments and divisions. A strategic conversation for each theme begins with a one-day summit that brings together everyone who has relevant information to contribute—regardless of rank or job position—so that people can together gain a clear sense of goals and establish cooperative working relationships.<sup>10</sup> Five key components necessary for strategic conversations are an open communication climate, asking questions, active listening, discernment, and dialogue.

## 7. CREATING AN OPEN COMMUNICATION CLIMATE

**Open communication** means sharing all types of information throughout the organization, especially across functional and hierarchical boundaries. Open communication runs counter to the traditional flow of selective information downward from supervisors to subordinates. But leaders want communication to flow in all directions. People throughout the organization need a clear direction and an understanding of how they can contribute.<sup>11</sup> A recent survey of U.S. employees reveals that people genuinely want open and honest communication from their leaders, including the bad news as well as the good. Yet when these employees were asked to evaluate how well their leaders were doing on a scale of zero to 100, the average score was 69.<sup>12</sup>

To build an open communication climate, leaders break down conventional hierarchical and departmental boundaries that may be barriers to communication, enabling them to convey a stronger awareness of and commitment to organizational vision, goals, and values. In an open climate, a leader's communication of the vision "cascades" through an organization, as explained in Exhibit 9.3. Consistent and frequent communication brings follower acceptance and understanding. Smart executives also recognize the critical role of open communication in building trust.<sup>13</sup> Trust is an essential element in effective leader-follower relationships because it inspires collaboration and commitment to common goals.<sup>14</sup>

Another important outcome of an open communication climate is that employees understand how their actions interact with and affect others in the organization. Open communication encompasses the trend toward *open-book management*, which means sharing financial information with all employees to engender an attitude of employee ownership. Recall from the previous chapter that when employees feel a sense of ownership in the company, they are more highly motivated to achieve goals.

In addition, when people have access to complete information, they make decisions that are good for the company. At Tampa-based Ameri Steel, opening the books and training all employees to understand the numbers helped cut the cost of converting a ton of scrap steel into a ton of finished steel from \$145 to \$127.<sup>15</sup>

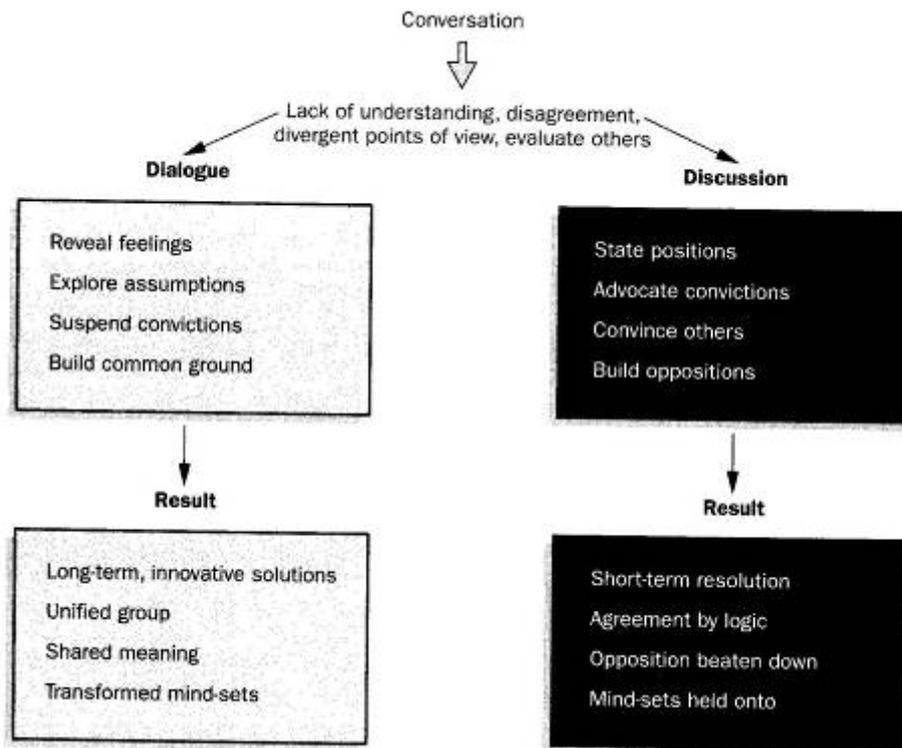
The open-book management program help to say, which means the organization gains the benefit of all employees' minds. The same perspectives batted back and forth between top executives don't lead to effective change, the creation of a powerful shared vision, or the network of personal relationships that keep organizations thriving.

New voices and continuous conversation involving a broad spectrum of people revitalize and enhance communication.<sup>16</sup> Leaders at Boeing, which was hit hard in recent years by a series of ethical and political scandals, are using blogs as part of their strategy to create an open communication climate and rebuild trust among customers, employees, and the public. Leaders at Boeing, as at other organizations, want an open communication climate, because it can help to alleviate tension and conflict between departments, build trust, reaffirm employee commitment to a shared vision, and make the company more competitive.

## 8. DIALOGUE

When a group of people are actively listening to one another and paying attention to unspoken undercurrents, an amazing type of communication, referred to as dialogue, occurs. The "roots of dialogue" are *dia* and *logos*, which can be thought of as *stream of meaning*. In **dialogue**, people together create a stream of shared meaning that enables them to understand each other and share a view of the world.<sup>17</sup> People may start out as polar opposites, but by actively listening and talking authentically to one another, they discover their common ground, common issues, and common dreams on which they can build a better future. Most of us have a tendency to infuse everything we hear with our own opinions rather than being genuinely open to what others are saying. In addition, traditional business values in the United States and most other Western countries reward people for forcefully asserting their own ideas and opinions and trying to discredit or contradict others.<sup>18</sup> But people can engage in dialogue only when they come to a conversation free of prejudgments, personal agendas, and "right" answers. Participants in a dialogue do not presume to know the outcome, nor do they sell their convictions. One way to understand the distinctive quality of dialogue is to contrast it with discussion.<sup>19</sup> Exhibit 3 illustrates the differences between a dialogue and a discussion. Typically, the unjust melted down," he says. "Everyone would scream at each other and then leave." Bertolon hired Wil Calmas, a psychologist with an MBA, to lead a series of programs to get people talking and listening—to one another on a deeper, authentic level. People were encouraged to express fear, hostility, frustration, secret wishes, whatever feelings were affecting their lives and work. The dialogue sessions created a safe environment for people to reveal their feelings, explore ideas, and build common ground. Bertolon also believed it helped employees be loose, flexible, and open to new ideas—ready to respond to the rapid changes taking place all around them.<sup>20</sup>

Both forms of communication, dialogue and discussion, can result in organizational change. However, the result of a discussion is limited to a specific topic being deliberated, whereas the result of dialogue is characterized by group unity, shared meaning, and transformed mindsets. This kind of result is far-reaching. A new, common mindset is not the same thing as agreement, because it creates a reference point from which subsequent communication can start. As new and deeper solutions are developed, a trusting relationship is built among communicators, which is important to all communication episodes that follow. Dialogue thus transforms communication and, by extension, the organization.



Source: Adapted from Edgar Schein, "On Dialogue, Culture, and Organizational Learning," *Organizational Dynamics* (Autumn 1993), p. 46.

Exhibit 3: Dialogue and Discussion: The Differences

## 9. THE LEADER AS COMMUNICATION CHAMPION

To act as a communication champion, as described earlier in this chapter, leaders don't communicate just to convey information, but to persuade and influence others. They use communication skills to sell others on the vision and influence them to behave in ways that achieve goals and help accomplish the vision.

The ability to persuade others is more critical today than ever before. The command-and-control mindset of managers telling workers what to do and how to do it is gone. Employees don't just want to know *what* they should do but *why* they should do it. Leaders can follow four steps to practice the art of persuasion:<sup>21</sup>

1. *Establish credibility.* A leader's credibility is based on the leader's knowledge and expertise as well as his or her relationships with others. When leaders have demonstrated that they make well-informed, sound decisions, followers have confidence in their expertise. Leaders also build credibility by establishing good relationships and showing that they have others' best interests at heart.
2. *Build goals on common ground.* To be persuasive, leaders describe how what they're requesting will benefit others as well as the leader. For example, to get fast food franchisees to support new pricing discounts desired by headquarters, one leader cited research showing that the new pricing policies improved franchisees' profits.<sup>22</sup> When people see how they will personally benefit from doing something, they're usually eager to do it. When leaders can't find common advantages, it's a good signal that they need to adjust their goals and plans.
3. *Make your position compelling to others.* Leaders appeal to others on an emotional level by using symbols, metaphors, and stories to express their messages, rather than relying on facts and figures alone. By tapping into the imaginations of their followers, leaders can inspire people to accomplish amazing results.

4. *Connect emotionally.* Recall the discussion of emotional intelligence from. Good leaders sense others' emotions and adjust their approach to match the audience's ability to receive their message. Leaders use their emotional understanding to influence others in positive ways. In addition, by looking at how people have interpreted and responded to past events in the organization, leaders can get a better grasp on how followers may react to their ideas and proposals.

Persuasion is a valuable communication process that individuals can use to lead others to a shared solution or commitment. Karen Tse, founder and director of International Bridges to Justice, provides an excellent example of a persuasive leader. She was just 37 years old when she founded an organization that would change the lives of thousands of prisoners in places like China, Cambodia, and Vietnam by training public defenders and raising awareness of human rights abuses. Tse persuades by connecting emotionally to people, whether it is a businessman she's asking for a donation or a prison guard she's encouraging to allow prisoners daily exercise. Rather than fighting against the "bad," Tse says she tries to find the good in each person and work with that part of them to make changes. One Cambodian prison director who initially told Tse he would beat prisoners down "like rats" eventually worked with her to improve the prison's dark, dank cells, build a garden, and implement exercise classes for prisoners and guards.<sup>23</sup>

To be persuasive and act a communication champion, leaders must communicate frequently and easily with others in the organization. Yet for some individuals, communication experiences are unrewarding, so they may consciously or unconsciously avoid situations where communication is required.<sup>24</sup> The term *communication apprehension* describes this avoidance behavior, and is defined as "an individual's level of fear or anxiety associated with either real or anticipated communication with another person or persons."<sup>25</sup>

To be effective communication champions, leaders pay attention to the channels of communication they use, employ aspects of storytelling and metaphor to enrich their communications, and use informal as well as formal communication techniques.

## 10. SUMMARY AND INTERPRETATION

Effective communication is an essential element of leadership. Leaders are communication champions who inspire and unite people around a common sense of purpose and identity. They lead strategic conversations that get people talking across boundaries about the vision, key strategic themes, and the values that can help the group or organization achieve desired outcomes. Five elements necessary for strategic conversations are an open communication climate, asking questions, active listening, discernment, and dialogue. Open communication is essential for building trust, and it paves the way for more opportunities to communicate with followers, thus enabling the organization to gain the benefits of all employees' minds. However, leaders must be active listeners and must learn to discern the hidden undercurrents that have yet to emerge. It is through listening and discernment, both with followers and customers, that leaders identify strategic issues and build productive relationships that help the organization succeed. When active listening spreads throughout a group, a type of communication referred to as dialogue occurs. Through dialogue, people discover common ground and together create a shared meaning that enables them to understand each other and share a view of the world.

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