

Ten steps to purposeful communication

By Gordon Adler

There are five main pitfalls of leadership communication. Putting them aside, while following these steps, will make you a better leader.

Communications professionals and leadership experts tell us that effective communication is more important than ever. Yet, when I interviewed 30 senior managers in large, international companies about their communications practices, I made some surprising discoveries. They said management communication is deteriorating. And the deterioration is, in part, self-inflicted.

What should managers and leaders be doing? Stop making faulty assumptions about how communications works. Take a long-term, strategic approach to daily communication. Treat all communication as a strategic campaign.

What are those faulty assumptions? I describe below what I call the five myths of leadership communication:

Myth 1: words contain meaning

The notion that words “contain” one fixed meaning is wrong. People attach meanings to words.

Meanings aren’t inherent in the words themselves. A word triggers meaning and, if it is concrete, sensory associations. There is no one fixed meaning.

A word and its connotations may differ. We hear the word “dog” and we may visualise a dog, hear its bark, or feel its fur. Abstract nouns like “strategy” or phrases exist only as ideas. They fail to spark sensory impressions, and they probably have different meanings to different people. Imagine the misunderstandings caused by this chain of corporate abstractions: “We are committed to establishing greater transparency and access to information, as well as providing information to all our stakeholders in a clear and open way.”

Eighty percent of the managers in my study said they worked hard at making their messages technically precise, accurate and true. But often, precise technical language increases the chance of misinterpretation. Why? Because experts know the widely accepted meanings of the words they use.

But others don’t share those meanings. The more we know about a subject, the harder it becomes to understand what it’s like not to know what we know.

Myth 2: Information equals communication

Seventy-six per cent of the executives I interviewed seemed to confuse “information” with “communication”. For our purposes, information is data, facts, and business intelligence. Communication is when an executive transmits information, an idea or feelings to another person or group of people.

Communication is a process with three parts: the sender, the symbols used to convey the message (usually words), and the receiver. There are auditory means of communicating (speaking and tone of voice), non-verbal, physical means (body language, sign language, para-language, touch, eye contact) and written means.

You can measure the effectiveness of your communication

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by the degree of similarity between the message sent and the message received. The challenge in communication is this: what you say usually isn't what your audience hears. Physiological, environmental and psychological interference impedes and distorts the message. Yet many of us talk and write as if our messages arrive pristine in the minds of our audience – much like handing bricks from one person to another.

Myth 3: Communication is a product you can control

A business development director from a leading cement firm said: "We spent two years on our new Asia strategy, but the CEO worked on the slide deck one afternoon with the communications people, then he delivered the presentation once and emailed the slides to everyone... never mind that some employees in Africa have unreliable dial-up connections. He never checked if they got it; he just assumed everybody had heard his message the way he's sent it and had bought in."

Communication is not a physical commodity or product, like email, website or brochures. It's not a matter of "getting the word out". You can improve your control over communication, as we'll see below, but even well planned and executed management communication is disorderly, complex and messy. Everything you say or do sends a message – your facial expression, your gait, your office décor, your tie, your social chit-chat. Even silence is perceived as a message. You

cannot not communicate. It is the receiver who "communicates". Your messages have a life of their own!

Myth 4: Good speakers are good communicators

The managers in my study could name "great presenters", "engaging speakers" or "gifted storytellers". Sixty-three per cent of the interviewees expressed varying degrees of distrust of "great" or "slick, professional speakers" or presenters. Skilled speakers, in their view, were not necessarily good communicators. Why? Good speakers "perform". They don't listen: "words go in one ear and out the other". They are "more concerned with their own show" and "consumed by their own egos" (what one interviewee called the "me, me, me bias"). They try to impress the audience with "dazzling messages", instead of "listening" and "engaging". The CEO of a Middle Eastern telecoms company said: "I don't trust 'good' speakers. They strike me as dishonest and manipulative."

Effective communicators listen to the audience. They choose the right medium (channel), position their message in the context of the audience (adapt it to their knowledge and needs) and express their thoughts clearly and concisely in language the audience understands.

The interviewees said they don't expect perfection. Effective communicators are "authentic" and "credible", even if they are relatively unskilled or unpolished. Good

communication is not a conquest; it is an act of surrender.

Myth 5: Emotions have no place in business communication

The executives described large international companies as cultures of facts, figures and information. The predominant rhetoric was said to be rational argument. Communication focuses on the visible and measurable and appeals to the cognitive skills involved in thinking, analysing and drawing conclusions. Participants suggested that since the multi-media (PowerPoint) presentation has been added to the managerial communication palette, large company communication can be characterised as "successive unemotional PowerPoint presentations, overused to the point of overdose...or comatose!"

Ninety-three per cent of the managers in my study prefer communication that appeals to the emotions, with storytelling, blogging or podcasting, for example. Emotion, it was believed, raises the conversation or communication to what one interviewee called "a higher level of engagement". A global HR manager with a clinical psychology background stated: "Stories, or min-cases that engage people's emotions and powers of visualisation, move them. People are hard-wired to feel more for people or other living beings, than for abstractions."

Participants saw a connection between powerful messaging,

Ten Steps

1. Take stock
2. Attend to your Audience
3. Express your purpose
4. Manage your messages
5. Build credibility
6. Seek surprise
7. Ready, aim, send
8. Keep it simple
9. Tell the truth
10. Make a plan.

learning and emotions. They suggested that messages “stick” better if emotions are combined with reason. Sadly, the managers in my study hesitate to break the conventions of rationality by using emotions to gain persuasive effects. God forbid they be branded as “uncontrolled”, overly emotional, “loose cannons”, or “storytellers”.

Beat the Five Myths

1. Take Stock. How well do you communicate? Find out. A senior marketing manager at DOW Chemical suggested that his C-Suite colleagues run their latest PowerPoint presentation by a focus group! Try it. Ask a group of trusted professional colleagues to rate your communications skills. Find out if your messages are getting across. Practice important presentations in front of your toughest audience.

Taking stock of your communication skills

- What key communication strengths do you believe have fuelled your effectiveness so far?
- What do you know about your weaknesses and limitations? List the areas where you know you are least effective and/or most vulnerable.
- What are your under-developed communication talents?
- What potential capabilities and interests do you believe you possess, but have not yet expressed and made real? Speech-making, blogging? Podcasting?

2. Attend to your audience

You don't communicate; your

audience does. Once they receive your messages, they “re-create” them. So, you better attend to them well. For managers, the most common audiences are employees (including potential and temporary employees, contractors, unions, board members), marketing communications (suppliers, customers, retailers, consumers and competitors) and so-called “corporate affairs” stakeholders (local authorities, global authorities, opinion makers, local and global media, trade media, professional organisations, local neighbours and financiers).

According to the managers in the study, their employees are most likely to want clarity about your recommended path of action. They expect the action steps to “make sense” in their context. They want to be able to take in what you're saying, in whatever form, quickly and easily. From managers they expect a clear progression of ideas or logic, symbols or narrative that puts your message in context. They want their managers to motivate them. They want to have faith in the validity of the material; in other words, they want to have faith in you. They demand absolutely convincing or compelling support, whether that takes the form of a powerful argument or a memorable story.

Analyse your communication stakeholders

- Who is my audience (hierarchy, group dynamics, relationship, diversity)?

● Am I communicating with one person, a small group or a large group, a huge audience? How does the size of the group affect my communication choices?

- What do they know about the subject?
- What do they need from me and why?
- What are they concerned about (professional and personal agenda)?
- What's in it for them personally? What do they gain from following my advice?
- How will they receive my message? Will they believe it? Will they want to believe it?
- What can I expect from them?

3. Express Your Purpose

Here's the first commandment of all management communication: “it's all about persuasion”. Whether you are writing an email, chatting with a member of your team or giving a major presentation, you are probably trying to persuade the audience to act. When you first practice this step, write your purpose. Or say it out loud. The purpose of this communication is ... Conscious expression will help you discover what you are really trying to say. Be aware of the many ways you can persuade people and practice them consciously. Your audience as your jury: you want them to find in your favour.

Articulate your purpose

- What is my overriding purpose?
- What would I like to change? How do I want to move people to act?
- What should my audience do after

Management communication: common purposes

Inform	Alarm	Inspire	Welcome
Persuade	Amuse	Motivate	Win back
Convince	Apologise	Promise	Fraternise
Move	Calm	Reassure	Argue
Change	Charm	Get commitment	Explain
Discipline	Get attention	Defend	Align
Excite	Impress	Shake up	Engage
Flatter	Discuss	Warm	Entertain

How do you want the audience to feel and think?

What actions do you want them to take?

my communication?

- What results do I want to spark?
- What's my last sentence? Go for an appeal, or propose next steps?

4. Manage your messages

The managers I interviewed talked much about "messaging". One said she tried to have a "teachable point of view". This isn't surprising. There has been much talk among experts about the importance of communication in leadership. But 87 per cent admitted that they did not treat messaging as an ongoing campaign to hone and repeat their messages. My experience suggests that you need to be able to deliver your messages immediately, at any time, in any professional setting. You should always be ready with your messages. What messages should you be managing? The managers in my study spend most

of their communication time and energy on messages that fall into five groups:

1. Corporate culture: how we do things around here
2. Financial results: here's how we're doing and here's what it means to you
3. Organisation structure and hierarchy: who's responsible for what
4. Time management: how we should be spending our time
5. Your sense of your job: what I'm doing, why I'm doing it, and what it means for you

Messages you must manage

- Do you understand your company's strategy and can you communicate the company's business proposition(s) to any employee?
- What needs to happen today so that we can get where we

want to go?

- Where is there confusion in my company, division, team, and so on?
- What vague belief or notion can I clarify or debunk today?
- What have I not communicated completely or clearly?
- What kinds of things are people taking for granted?
- What is the single most important message I need to communicate (and to whom) right now? Why?

Once you figure out which messages you need to send, you have to craft each one for maximum effect. Virtually all the executives I interviewed purported to work hard to structure their communications.

Three worked hard for consistency in their non-verbal "hidden messages" (tone of voice, attire, grooming, "look and feel" of their office space, energy level, degree of outward enthusiasm or equanimity). Many used principles of logical structure, argument (deductive and inductive), mind mapping, "storylining" and storyboarding and storytelling they had learned as consultants or in their MBA and other management development programs. Regardless of the tools or frameworks they used to shape their written and oral communication, their remarks fell into ten characteristics of well-structured messages.

5. Build credibility

Building your credibility entails using a style that fits the occasion and naturally fits you, finding your passion and being authentic. There

Executive views of effective communication

1. Logical flow
2. Easy to understand and follow
3. Simple and concrete
4. Short, concise, clear
5. Something personal the audience can relate to (in speaking)
6. Clear structure and agenda (past, present, future; who, what, where, when, why)
7. Top down approach: main message first
8. Exciting, surprising, unexpected
9. Clear recommendations or action agenda
10. Reliable, believable supporting data or arguments

are at least five recognised styles of communication. Each is appropriate in varying circumstances. If you're facing a crisis, such as a fire on the shop floor, telling people is critical.

However, when you want to involve people and engage support, then a consulting or co-creating approach will be far more effective. The executives stated that, although co-creation is the most effective way to persuade people, sometimes you just have to tell, sell, test or play a consulting role (listen and then offer a solution).

To communicate effectively, you need to use every one of these styles, depending on the circumstances. The key here is to be aware of your options and consciously choose the most appropriate style for your desired effect. Research has shown that to persuade people you need to invest your heart, head and feelings. Credibility ("believability") is a matter of inner conviction, or an extremely rare talent at faking sincerity! Why? The effect you have on people is at least as important as what you actually say. Good content does not always win the day. Rhetorical perfection is not in demand. Communicate as though you are communicating with your best friends. Insert "I" statements, express your feelings about the message.

Messages that people remember are unexpected, concrete, well argued or, for stories, well told, memorable and appeal to their emotions. Not every

message is worth obsessing over and not every message needs emotion – like the regular updates from the HR department – but when your message needs a long half-life, use emotions.

Questions to yourself

- What does this theme or message mean to me? Can I speak about it personally?
- How or why does the theme really matter to me?
- What really fascinates me about this theme?
- Is there something about this theme that really concerns, bothers or angers me?
- What is the most important aspect for me? What is "closest to my heart"?
- Have I had any personal experience that could support or illustrate this communication?
- How can I add emotional "I" messages to express my feelings, without overstepping the bounds of our corporate culture etiquette? ("This really matters to me..." "I'm proud of this..." "I'm optimistic..." "This causes me concern...")

6. Seek surprise

Your material may be easily at hand – the weekly update, quarterly results, a marketing report, or a strategy document. But don't fall into the trap of sending the documents as an attachment or, if you're speaking, reading off a spreadsheet or a block of text on a slide. You need to create messages about the material that "stick" in people's minds. To get that

stickiness, you may need an astounding fact, a moving statistic, a motivational story or a powerful symbol or metaphor.

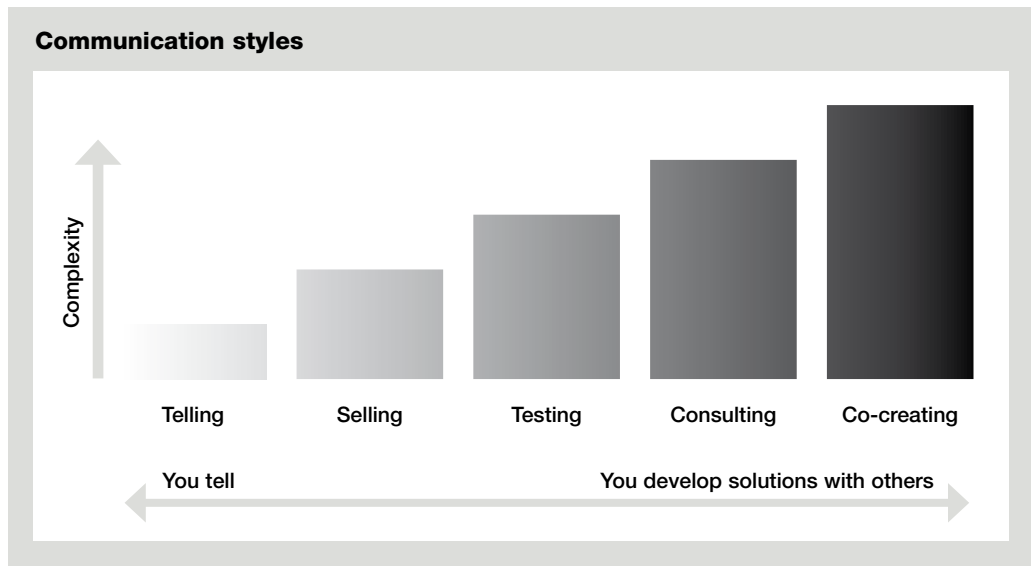
One executive in my study recounted using a story about Tiger Woods to demonstrate why, despite continuing profits, the company now had to respond to changing markets with innovative products. He talked often about Woods re-learning his stroke when he was already, some thought, at the top of his game. But Woods, ever the perfectionist, wanted to improve his swing even further, despite the drop in his performance during his "re-tooling". Effective communicators make their points to wide, non-expert audiences with symbols and metaphors they know will resonate.

Memorable, convincing

- Where will I get the material for all my communication? Especially presentations?
- What material do I need to support my most important messages, themes or arguments?
- How will I illustrate my points? (Examples: personal experience, metaphors and symbols drawn from a world outside business your audience is likely to appreciate).
- How can you visualise your message? What simple and powerful images, charts or graphs can you use?

7. Ready, aim, send

As managers learned in Business Communication 101, or its MBA equivalent, "communication channels" refers to all the



You need to choose the channels that boost your message's impact, and you need to ensure you exploit the potential of that channel

opportunities you have for establishing communication. A channel can be internal or external (media, for example), but it also be personal meetings, emails, memos, notice boards, conferences, trade shows, talks in the company parking lot, presentations, and so on.

You need to choose the channels that will boost the impact of your messages and you need to make sure you utilise the full potential of the chosen channel. All channels have pluses and minuses. Face-to-face, according to the managers I interviewed, has the most impact. Make sure that your channel choices complement each other. Combining channels may have a greater effect than relying on one alone (such as email). Whatever channel you choose, be sure that your message will reach your target group. Remember, too, that some channels are perceived as less trustworthy than others. As one

chief communication officer noted, "If your channel is perceived as untrustworthy, your message will also be perceived as untrustworthy." Although you cannot control communication, you can try to align your messages with your channels. Prepare to send your messages by aiming them at the right audience, choose the best possible channel and supporting channels, and then repeat, repeat, repeat.

Channels

- Which channels will work best for the audience and the purpose?
- Could I use different channels to complement each other?
- Which is my leading channel for this communication, and which are my supporting channels?

8. Keep it simple

Ninety per cent of the managers stated that simplicity is hard, time-consuming work. As the

philosopher Blaise Pascal once famously wrote: "I have made this letter longer than usual, because I do not have the time to make it short." Effective communicators are masters of simplicity. They have a knack for identifying the central "core" elements of their messages. Recall Bill Clinton's "It's the economy, stupid". Or Martin Luther King's "I have a dream".

Many effective communicators use stories to convey their ideas in simple, memorable form. Stories inspire and motivate, engage, connect, help hearers visualise, have strong figurative power and have the quality of "stickiness" (concrete and easy to remember). Stories make ideas more concrete, often engage the visual sense, frequently tap into the emotions and often encapsulate complex ideas in a simple, memorable fashion. The emotional power of storytelling is seen to be its highest value.

9. Tell the truth

Telling the truth often means the end of a relationship, and telling the truth about what you think, what happened or what matters often, seems so brutal that we avoid it. Few people want to say the truth, and few want to hear it. There are doubtless many reasons for this, but the consequence is that many managers send "coded" messages. The CEO says: "We're a team!" Or the project manager says: "We're on time and under budget". These messages are confusing because they are imprecise and seem to have a halo of deceit.

Your personal strategic communication plan

Audience/target	Attitude	Purpose	Key messages	Vehicles	Timing
Individuals	<i>Negative:</i> resisters, bystanders <i>Positive:</i> agents of support	Persuade Get with the program	Change; strategy New roles New methods Personal impacts	Face-to-face Telephone Telephone Video conference	Launch: now Immediate Ongoing
Senior & middle managers	Varies with situation	Buy-in Understanding Dialogue New skills	New roles New methods Personal impacts	Meetings: CEO and senior management Training	Launch: week 1
Employees	Varies with situation	Buy-in Understanding Dialogue New skills	New roles New methods Personal impacts	Meetings with managers Training Events (town meetings)	Launch: week 1
Customers	Varies with situation	Information Awareness	New methods Service impact	Meetings with sales reps	Launch: week 1
Shareholders	Varies with situation	Information Awareness Persuasion & support	Service impact Financial impact	Written information	Launch: week 1
Community	Varies with situation	Information Awareness	Service impact Financial impact Environmental impact	Press releases	Launch: week 1

Managers who avoid the truth may be communicating short-term. But the truth will out. On YouTube. Or in a blog. Once you earn the reputation of being disingenuous, every future message is questioned. Without truth, no trust can develop. This does not have to hurt. Telling the truth is a matter of knowing your audience well enough to know the best to hold the truth out to them. And remember to distinguish among the truths of any communication: your truth, the audience truth, the truth of situation and the moral truth.

10. Make a plan

Think of your communication plan as your roadmap; you know where you want to go, but you need a route. The plan is your route. It forces you to think long-term.

Conclusion

Why bother with all this work? You'll clarify your management goals and objectives. Become more aware of your communication strengths, weaknesses and challenges. You'll gather feedback. Implement effective communication approaches. Choose something you will engage in so you aren't

pulled in umpteen directions. You'll identify whom you need to reach, what you want them to know, and how you will reach them. Gain the influence you need by listening better. In short: you'll communicate better. Can you afford to do anything less?

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