



LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION

THE POWER TO CONNECT

Written by:
Michael DeVenney
Bluteau DeVenney & Company





Leadership Communication: The Power to Connect

The Bottom Line

The ability to communicate effectively is a critical skill for successful leaders. Communication affects all aspects of leadership. Yet, **leaders are assessed by their teams and organizations as a C- in communication effectiveness.**

There is no wonder that employee engagement is down, workforce productivity is in decline, and client loyalty is lagging. Leaders at all levels are only 62.5% effective in communicating to connect with their audience.

The audience had a shared opinion - the same rankings of leader communication effectiveness is seen across generations and genders of employees. **Leaders are more focused on their message than what is important to the audience.**

What is needed most from leaders by the organization?

- The ability to provide constructive feedback and to receive that feedback as well
- The ability to be participative and transparent in decision making
- The ability to be open to resistance and questions

Although leaders were seen as listening, talking to their teams, and communicating the vision - across the board, organizations are disappointed with leader communication and want a greater connection.

Several significant gaps were revealed in the responses to our survey:

- On every aspect of communication effectiveness, female leaders were assessed higher than their male counterparts, with a substantial 16% gap. Women leaders connected better by taking a more participative approach.
- Older leaders (more than 55 years of age) were seen as not being effective communicators on all

aspects as compared to younger leaders. With a greater tendency to tell rather than include, older leaders were viewed as less open to ideas and input, keeping information to themselves, and not being receptive to feedback. Younger leaders were viewed as being much more participative. There was a 15% gap in effectiveness in general between leaders over 55 years of age and younger generations of leaders.

- The higher the level of leadership position, the lower the participation in communication. Surprisingly, leaders in CEO, President, and Executive Director positions were assessed as much more likely to adopt a directive style as opposed to managers. Leaders in senior positions were also seen as being less self-aware, more closed to input and resistance, and less responsive to the feelings of others

The challenge of communication is that leaders do not make the connection with the audience.

Why is this important? Communication is the foundation of success. Communication affects the ability to lead change, engage employees, develop relationships, build business, achieve client satisfaction and loyalty, gain support for ideas and innovations, and just about every aspect of success individually and as an organization. At any level of leadership or in any type or size of organization, a leader must be able to communicate effectively. If not, you limit your ability to succeed - translating to less money, less time, and more stress.

There are three fundamental shifts successful leaders make to increase communication effectiveness - focus on their audience not themselves, understand the audience's decision-making process, and be aware of their style to adapt to their audience.

Most importantly, leaders need consultative sales training to understand how to connect with their audience.

The positive - **communication effectiveness can be learned.**



Landscape

Communicating effectively is truly a competitive advantage and the foundation for leadership success.

In our research, we asked employees to assess leaders on style and impact. Overall, leaders were scored at 62.5% for general effectiveness.

Style

The results for leadership style in the survey were surprising. Leaders are still telling and directing rather than including and participating.

The style of communication can have a tremendous impact on the ability of a leader to connect with the audience. The message may be perfect but if the delivery is not adapted to the audience, the connection may fail completely. The key point of communication style is that no one way is right and there is a need to adapt the style to the audience. However, leaders need to first be self-aware of their style to be able to match their audience.

The four fundamental leadership communication styles are telling, selling, participating, and delegating. Telling is about giving direction of what to do and when - it is highly tactical and low on relationship. In terms of selling, the style is about promoting the end result and persuading people to take that course of action. A selling style is high both in tactical and relationship terms. Participating is high on relationship and low on tactics being based on collaborating, involving and including others to gain commitment. The delegating approach is low on both the tactical and relationship fields where the style is to let others get what they need.

No one style of communication is right and each may be a better fit depending on the audience. Each person generally has a dominant style and a tendency to apply that in every situation. This default method of style probably does not fit 75% of the leader's audiences.

The following table outlines the distribution of leader communication styles as assessed by their employees. The key point of communication style is that no one way is right and there is a need to adapt the style to the audience. However, leaders need to first be self-aware of their style to be able to match their audience.

Analysis of Leader Communication Styles

	Telling	Selling	Participation	Delegating
Overall	30%	12%	34%	12%
Gender				
Female	31%	3%	43%	11%
Male	29%	18%	28%	12%
Age				
25-39	7%	33%	33%	20%
40-50	33%	11%	33%	10%
55+	30%	11%	36%	12%
Level				
CEO	41%	15%	30%	2%
VP	28%	13%	34%	18%
Manager	26%	9%	36%	15%

Points of interest from the analysis of leader communication styles:

- Overall, leaders are still telling more than is thought. Telling is a method that works well with employees new to their role when they are just learning the ropes. Most leaders would not be involved in training new employees and the telling approach is not terribly effective with others. It can seem faster to simply tell people what needs to be done but it does not result in engagement and commitment.
- Women leaders do not adopt a selling approach to any real extent. Selling can be very effective with employees to buy into different ideas and concepts. The high focus on participative communication may sound very positive but it also has a downside. Too much participation can slow organizations down, create too much debate and discussion, and not be seen as decisive. Participation sounds great but female leaders may be depending too much on this one approach.
- Younger leaders tend to be much more likely to sell or seek participation in their communication and very unlikely to tell or direct. Again, the trend sounds somewhat positive but the key again is adaptability. Telling may be more necessary for younger leaders as many of these leaders would be in manager or supervisor roles where training and developing new employees is more prevalent.



A higher degree of telling may be needed here as new and developing employees need to know what to do before they can participate effectively.

- The CEO position results are intriguing and revealing. There is a reasonable level of selling and participating but an overwhelming dominance in telling with almost no delegation at all. At this senior level of leadership position, the breakdown is very surprising. Leaders in CEO, President, and Executive Director roles are much more likely to deal with other senior people - executives who are masters on their own and employees who know their work well. Taking a telling tone in communications does not work at all - delegating would be much more effective. It is intriguing that the higher the level of leadership the more likely the communication approach is telling which would be almost counterintuitive - and counterproductive.

The concentration of leadership style (particularly at the senior level of CEO) can explain much of why change initiatives are failing. The prevalence of the telling and directing mode of communication is not conducive to engagement and commitment.

Impact

The impact of communication is realized in eight basic areas of leadership. Male and female employees and employees of different generations all shared similar opinions on leader communication indicating a clear viewpoint with a high degree of agreement.

For leaders, the eight key dimensions of communication and general rankings are:

		Score
1.	Communication of Vision and Purpose	59.7%
2.	Communication of Decision Making	59.6%
3.	Communication of Team building and Performance	61.5%
4.	Communication for Clarity of Expectations	61.1%
5.	Communication for Empowerment	57.5%
6.	Communication for Feedback and Growth	53.7%
7.	Communication for Interpersonal Relationships	61.0%
8.	Communication for Resistance and Conflict	58.0%

Gender matters! Overall, female leaders are seen as more effective in terms of all aspects of the impact of their communication than male leaders. Women in leadership roles were assessed at 67.9% in terms of gaining a desired impact whereas male leaders were ranked at 59.4%. What worked for women? A clear openness and inclusion in their communications. Women leaders were perceived as being more involving and receptive to others. Employees of all genders and generations felt the same way about women leaders.

What didn't work for male leaders? Men in leadership roles were perceived as being more secretive and closed in their decision-making and resistant to others.

Both men and women leaders were ranked very low for providing feedback to others and seeking feedback as well.

Getting older affects a leader's communication impact - and not positively. Leaders aged 55 years and older were assessed significantly lower in communication effectiveness than younger leaders.

The following table outlines the distribution of scores for leaders across age groupings for each of the eight dimensions of communication impact.

Analysis of Leader Communication Impact by Age

Impact Factor	Age of Leader		
	55+	40-54	25-39
Vision	53.9%	62.5%	61.0%
Decision-Making	53.3%	62.4%	62.0%
Team Building	56.5%	63.9%	63.4%
Clarity	54.6%	64.6%	61.3%
Empowerment	53.4%	59.7%	59.3%
Feedback	51.5%	58.6%	57.5%
Interpersonal	54.5%	62.8%	64.4%
Resistance	52.2%	60.4%	63.0%
Combined	53.7%	61.9%	61.5%

Points of interest in terms of generational differences in communication impact for leaders:



- Overall, leaders over 55 years of age were ranked down for each of the eight impact dimensions - 15% lower than the other age groupings.
- Leaders aged 55 years or older were perceived as significantly more likely to be resistant to input from others and to have judgments made before hearing from those around them.
- Older leaders - and all leaders - were ranked down on communicating to empower as well as communicating feedback. For both impact areas, leaders of all ages were scored a D - no wonder engagement and productivity are suffering.

In terms of communication impact, the perception of effectiveness of leaders by level of position was fairly consistent with only marginal differences.

Analysis of Leader Communication Impact by Position

Impact Factor	Position of Leader		
	CEO	VP	Manager
Vision	58.7%	61.2%	58.9%
Decision-Making	58.4%	59.2%	60.1%
Team Building	61.3%	59.8%	62.9%
Clarity	61.1%	60.1%	62.4%
Empowerment	58.7%	57.0%	55.7%
Feedback	54.9%	54.3%	57.5%
Interpersonal	61.1%	60.4%	60.0%
Resistance	55.6%	58.0%	59.4%
Combined	58.7%	58.8%	59.6%

The key areas of interest for impact of communications were in those to engage others, to provide feedback for development and growth, and not being resistant to the input of others. All of these areas affect the engagement and productivity of the workforce.

Responses from survey participants indicated that communicating in person and in writing were both equally important in terms of effectiveness. A leader needs to be

able to put his or her ideas and thoughts on paper as well as being able to present verbally.

How well do leaders communicate in meetings? In general, leaders were scored at 63.6% for presenting and running meetings. Again, female leaders were seen as most effective.

Key Opportunities

Employees and stakeholders want leaders who can adapt their communication style to the audience. Leaders need to not only become aware of their personal approach but also know how to adapt that style to fit the audience.

- As leaders progress to more senior roles, the adapting of style is not happening and pressed for time, CEOs, Presidents, and Executive Directors are falling prey to telling and directing. Such an approach can disengage a workforce and discourage an audience.
- Women in leadership roles win in terms of taking a participative style but this approach may also be hampering their ability to get action and urgency.
- Younger leaders and those in manager roles may be too quick to participate and shy of providing direct instructions for new and developing employees resulting in a lack of clarity of what to do and slower action. At times, telling is the best route - sometimes you want a steak, sometimes a hot dog will do.

Change is a core responsibility for leaders - communicating effectively supports success. The key factor here for leaders is to know thyself and gauge the audience for approach.

People want feedback - at all levels. They are not getting it - at any level. Leaders need to focus on providing feedback communication and being direct and open with employees and stakeholders to build effective relationships, support growth and development, and improve overall engagement.

Although getting older can result in some things slowing down, it cannot affect communication as a leader. Patience may be shorter and knowledge may be deeper, but employees want a greater openness to discussion and ideas



as well as transparency in decision-making. Leaders need to encourage discussion and input and show how decisions have been made and the results from those actions.

Declining engagement will result in declining results. Communication from leaders is the key element in picking up employee and other stakeholder engagement. What supports high engagement?

- Open and participative discussion and decision-making
- Regular, honest, and direct feedback
- Clear vision and reporting of progress

Communication effectiveness can be learned. The next step for leaders is to be more aware of not only their own style and also of what is important to the audience.

Roadmap

There is an information overload with an increasing variety of distractions. The world is more complex every day. Leaders need to navigate the clutter and connect with the audience.

There are three aspects of increasing communication effectiveness for leaders - communication style, understanding the audience, and working with the audience's decision process.

As a leader, the first step is to gain awareness of your style and approach for communication. Knowing your natural communication approach provides you with the framework to adapt to your audience. In communicating with others, the focus is on the audience and not on the communicator. Leaders need to know their style to be able to understand where adapting their approach is necessary. Your way is not always the right way.

The best approach is to take advantage of several assessments to clarify approach and style.

- The MBTI instrument provides a connection between personality type and preferences to mode of communication.
- The Kolbe assessment will outline the instinctive approach for communication and the steps for effectiveness.
- The LEAD Style assessment determines the

communication style and level of adaptability to different approaches.

Each of the assessments provide a component for leaders to understand their own approach and also the impact (positive and negative) on their audience. The foundation of self-awareness is the framework for increased communication effectiveness.

Understanding the audience is critical to get the message right. Connecting with the audience is based on consultative questions. Most communications are full of information, process and details about the sender. All the reader really cares about is himself. He or she just wants to know what's your point, what's in it for them and what do you want them to do? It has to be about them – not you.

Remember the Four Fatal Flaws of Conventional Communication:

1. Communications are typically about what you will do and ideas you have and fail to talk about the specific benefits and value gained by the audience.
2. Communications are full of information and fail to tell people what to do – we think they will figure it out on their own.
3. Communications are about process and details and fail to show people how they will experience and feel your message.
4. Communications are about the sender and fail to see it from the audience's perspective.

You have to speak from the audience's chair and then you can connect and be heard. Meet your audience's need – give it one good reason to connect with you.

Find out what your audience wants, needs and who they are. There is only one person involved in communication that matters – the audience.

Most of the thinking happens when you are gone – your message should focus on your audience and the three points you want them to remember when you are gone. They don't want to have to remember more than three things as they will remember nothing. What you want them to remember also have to pass the tests of "what's in it for me" and "why do I care". Your message has to be clear, they do not have to hear everything you know and it is totally up to you to make clear what you want to



communicate. It is not your audience's job to figure out what you want them to remember and take away from your communication.

Establishing your credibility is not about telling them how much you know but it is about communicating the right things for them to remember.

People make decisions on emotions. They may understand your points academically but they need to connect to feelings and emotions. Your audience uses facts simply to justify what they want to do. You need to connect to the emotions and be clear on how you want them to feel from your communication.

Use a story and personal experience to connect with your audience – one good story is worth dozens of adjectives. A story is an immediate emotional connection.

You need to be conscious about your message. Your best results come from thinking first about your audience and writing out your key points. You have a much greater chance of getting the emotional response and purchase you want. Emotional responses produce results and that is the reason you are communicating in the first place.

Go for the right emotional response – not just what they need to think but what you want them to feel.

Your audience feels your message and understands your points. They still hesitate. Remember, it is human nature to procrastinate. They can always get to it later. Most communications do not close with “what now”. You need to let your audience know what they need to do – “who does what by when”. They may not agree with your timeline but they recognize it and think about it so if they are thinking about “by when” they are definitely thinking about “who will do what” as well.

You need to provide a call to action and let your audience know what happens next – who does what by when. Every communication has to end with a call to action so we know what to do.

Remember your audience is the only person that matters – listen to their challenges and opportunities. Be strategic in your communication and you will connect with your audience.

Leaders can greatly improve the quality and connection of their communication by stepping back before they talk or write. Talk to those who represent your audience first. Or

simply go through a thinking exercise to put yourself in the audience's shoes. Answer these questions first and then craft your communication message from there.

- What are the key challenges (blocks, obstacles, problems) that your audience faces (in terms of the specific situation or in general)?
- What are the key opportunities (goals) that your audience wants to achieve (in this specific situation or in general)?
- What are the key capabilities (resources) that your audience needs to be successful (in this specific situation or in general)?
- What are the key results your audience wants to realize (in this specific situation or in general)?
- How will your audience feel if they are able to achieve those results?

By answering these questions, the leader understands the audience and can frame the message to fit. It is not important to be right or to have the answer - it is critical to ask the question to get the right message.

Using consultative selling techniques is very different from traditional sales - leaders are not missionaries convincing everyone to “buy” their vision or strategy. Leaders who treat their audience as clients are focused on providing value for their client and finding a mutually acceptable way to work together and commit to a result that is meaningful for both.

In most communications, leaders have the “answer” and want those in front of them to fall in line and commit to taking the appropriate action. Leaders typically have thought through the situation and are ready with the right decision. The disconnect with many communications from leaders is that the leader and audience are in two different places - the leaders have made the decision but the audience has not even thought about the situation. Leaders excitedly communicate their vision, direction, or decision and then wonder why people are not equally as excited. Why does the audience not see the brilliance and buy in?

The measure of an effective communication is how well it succeeds in influencing the audience to make the decision to commit. Rather than communicating the features and advantages of the idea of strategy (traditional sales), the better approach is one that focuses on the steps the



audience (client) takes in making a decision.

There are four decision steps for the audience – three happen before the decision is made and one after the decision is made.

- Recognition of needs – the initial step to commitment to take action starts with the recognition that there is a problem and moving from minor irritation to real dissatisfaction and then to the point you want to do something about it – without dissatisfaction with the status quo, commitment is unlikely to happen
- Evaluation of options – what are the choices the audience has to do something about it and provide clarity as to the right option
- Resolution of concerns – before making decisions to commit to a direction or action, the audience wants to test and challenge the decision to make sure it is right
- Implementation – after commitment has been made to a decision, the audience needs continued reinforcement to support the decision and reduce potential remorse

Understanding the “client” decision process is crucial to connect. Value is created when we put ourselves in the client’s shoes and understand how to resolve their problems in getting things done.

Overall, communication is more effective when leaders treat the audience as clients. We treat clients differently than we treat others around us (even though they are equally as important for our success). We all strive for excellence of delivery and experience in our work with clients. Our approach with clients is focused on them and giving them what they need to have successful relationships with us.

Think what would happen if we treated those important to our success (colleagues, supervisors, reports, suppliers, etc) the same as we treat clients! The world would be a better place. The research shows that about 15% of leaders actually come from a sales background - and it shows. Basic consultative sales training should be a part of all leadership development - it centers on putting the client first which is what is needed for leaders and their

stakeholders (particularly internal).

Whether providing feedback, presenting vision, determining strategy, or making difficult decisions, to a great extent, leaders should do less talking – end of story. Communication should be more about asking questions than telling.

Action Steps for Communication Effectiveness

- Define your communication style through assessments that define your natural approach, impact the delivery and receipt of your message, and support your connection with the audience.
- Use a question-based template to understand the audience prior to any communication (regardless of the format). Reflect on the five core questions to frame the messaging of your communication to connect.
- Add consultative selling techniques to your communication approach to work with the audience’s decision-making process and gain a higher degree of commitment

The best point - communication effectiveness can be learned. Invest in determining your best approach to communication.

Action

The point:

- Leaders are not communicating effectively with their audience resulting in declining engagement and productivity - the outcome being less money, less time, and more stress. Although women and younger leaders are more effective, the overall grade for leadership communication is a sad C-. Leaders need to focus on the audience to improve the connection.
- Leaders are too often taking a directive or telling approach which may save time in the short term but does not resonate with the audience. The organization is craving feedback, reflection on progress, and



participative discussion with open minds.

The benefit:

- Things happen with better communication. Effective communication increases the level of commitment and investment from the audience supporting the leader's objectives. The win is a greater sense of urgency with greatly improved performance.

The action:

- Leaders should first understand their communication style through assessments to frame the best delivery.
- Leaders should use a question-based template to understand their audience before communicating so the message connects
- Leaders should match their communications with the audience's decision-making process to increase commitment

Bottom line - leaders should treat their audience as clients and focus their communications on creating value for the audience. Leaders should take time before they communicate so they connect rather than wasting time later trying to get people onside.

Acknowledgements and Disclaimer

The authors and publishers of this work and the accompanying materials have used their best efforts in preparing this work. The authors and publishers make no representation or warranties with respect to the accuracy, applicability, fitness, or completeness of the contents of this work. The information contained in this work is strictly for educational purposes. Therefore, if you wish to apply ideas contained in this work, you are taking full responsibility for your actions.

Materials in our work and our website may contain information that includes or is based upon forward-looking statements. Forward-looking statements give our expectations or forecast of future events. You can identify these statements by the fact that they do not relate strictly to historical or current facts. They use words such as "anticipate", "estimate", "project", "intend", "plan", "believe" and other words and terms of similar meaning in connection with a description of potential earnings or financial performance.

Any and all forward-looking statements here or on any of our sales materials are intended to express our opinion of earnings potential. Many factors will be important in determining your actual results and no guarantees are made that you will achieve results similar to ours or anybody else's, in fact no guarantees are made that you will achieve any results from our ideas and techniques in our material.

The authors and publishers disclaim any warranties (express or implied), merchantability, or fitness for any particular purpose. The authors and publishers shall in no event be held liable to any party for any direct, indirect, punitive, special, incidental or other consequential damages arising directly or indirectly from any use of this material, which is provided "as is", and without warranties.

As always, the advice of a competent legal, tax, accounting or other professional should be sought.

The authors and publishers do not warrant the performance, effectiveness or applicability of any sites listed or linked in this work.

All links are for information purposes only and are not warranted for content, accuracy or any other implied or explicit purpose.

This work is © (copyrighted) 2010 by Bluteau DeVenney and Company Incorporated. No part of this work may be copied, or changed in any format, sold, or used in any way other than what is outlined within this work under any circumstances

Bluteau DeVenney & Company

5670 Spring Garden Road

Suite 901A

Halifax, Nova Scotia, B3J 1H6

902-425-0467 or 1877-210-9880

www.BluteauDeVenney.com