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Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

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Introduction

In this excerpt from his new book, *Accelerating Leadership Development*, Jocelyn Bérard, Vice President, Leadership and Business Solutions, Global Knowledge, examines the importance of communication in an organization and present practical concepts for leaders to apply easily.

Identifying, developing and retaining great leaders represent perhaps the greatest challenges in any organization. The stakes have been raised in the pending demographic tsunami in the form of aging boomers and the different drivers and demands of the generations coming after them. What leaders, aspiring leaders and HR professionals require is a straightforward, practical and useable guidance about how to ensure that the leadership talent pipeline is filled today and into the future.

Accelerating Leadership Development provides a proven model to develop high-potential employees to 1) assume critical roles, and 2) develop competencies, intellectual and knowledge capital. The book offers practical and rigorous tools and practices that enable organizations to identify and develop high-potential individuals, follow-up procedures to ensure activities are executed and results are captured; and leadership best practices to assure that leaders are functioning at a high level. The benchmarks of success are a pipeline of ready leaders, high-potential engagement and retention, and the development of intellectual capital.

In addition, readers gain access to a unique set of strategies and initiatives designed to enable leaders to built capacity and confidence in their ability to perform. Within a results-oriented framework, the book addresses: communication and delegation strategies; feedback models; shifting responsibility and accountability to direct reports; contemporary coaching and development approaches; the role of performance management; and On-Boarding as an essential business practice.

> *Every time you have to speak, you are auditioning for leadership.*
> —James Humes

Ask any retail expert what the three most critical characteristics of a successful retail business are, and invariably they will respond, "Location! Location! Location!" Location is so fundamental to bricks-and-mortar retailer that even if an organization has excellent products, services and people, it cannot be successful if it is in the wrong location. Location is to retail what communication is to interaction between people. Communication is the de facto fundamental success factor of any type of working relationship.

What makes a great leader? When we look back through history, many great leaders come to mind: Winston Churchill, who held together a battered and outnumbered British population in the dark early days of World War II, when the country stood alone against Nazi Germany. "We shall never surrender" stands out among his many radio addresses during those days. Or Ronald Reagan, who took over as U.S. president after the country seemingly had lost its way following Vietnam, the Watergate scandal and the 1979 energy crisis. Or Margaret Thatcher, who turned around a foundering country and was indeed said to have been an inspiration to Reagan.

What did these leaders have in common? They were all effective communicators. So much so, in fact, that was the label that an admiring U.S. press corps affixed to Reagan during his eight years in office. Reagan was a former Hollywood actor who preferred simple messages and solutions to complex ones. He may not have been the most cerebral leader that the United States ever had, but he got his message across. Everyone knew what he wanted to do and how he wanted to do it. That was even more the case for Thatcher, who wanted to break the unions' hold on the British economy, and Churchill, whose goals were the survival of the British people and the defeat of the Nazis.

As a leader you should not undervalue your role as communicator. Your team members and the rest of your organization take their cues from you. Whether you give positive reinforcement or helpful criticism, what you communicate has impact.

Communication creates, shapes and sustains the environment in which you and your employees work. Just as Churchill and the rest of his ilk proved, the way that you communicate can demonstrate your positive traits (such as steadfastness, optimism and determination), create buy-in and build employee engagement. It can demonstrate your trustworthiness as you "walk the talk," doing what you say you are going to do, and it can also reflect your honesty and authenticity.

For Alan Booth, an associate partner and human resources specialist at consulting giant Deloitte, leaders who are effective communicators need to have a bit of Churchill in them: "The message has to be given with candor, brevity and color."

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In a national survey conducted by Global Knowledge's research group, communication was rated as the most important competency to a leader's success. This discovery wasn't surprising. Studies and reports with similar results have been published every decade since the 1960s. Communication has long been touted as the most important factor in leadership effectiveness. But what, if anything, has changed? Is the way that people communicate today different than the way they communicated in the 1960s? The answer is what the French would call *une réponse de Normand:* yes and no.

What has changed, quite simply, is the amount of communication taking place, the pace at which it arrives and the variety of media used. Just think about your typical day. You read through—and respond to—a vast (and seemingly never-shrinking) pile of e-mail, discover interesting articles from the many RSS feeds you subscribe to, and catch up on your Twitter account and Facebook page for both personal and business communication. While you are doing that, you receive a few SMS messages on your mobile phone, and an e-mail updating you on your LinkedIn contacts.

Amid all the tapping, sending and downloading, it is likely that you haven't been engaged in the oldest and most powerful communication system that there is, the one that predates our ancestors painting on cave walls: speaking. Yes, the computer revolution has been a boon to business, but we are still verbal animals at the end of the day. There are great orators, but few leaders today have been singled out as great electronic communicators.

E-mail is in some ways the bane of efficient communication in the workplace. It is so easy to bang out a few sentences, hit "reply" or "forward" or "reply all" and send your nonverbal communication to one person, or tens or thousands of people in your organization. On the surface that's one of the great things about e-mail—it is so efficient.

What e-mail—and tweets, and Facebook posts, and even blog posts, for that matter—is terrible at is conveying the subtleties and underlying emotions that are part and parcel of verbal communication. The British people had no difficulty understanding and being inspired by the resolute determination of Churchill's radio broadcasts. His message may not have been so rousing as a series of short e-mails.

Let's get back to today's world. So once you've done your duty to the gods of electronic communication by reading, responding, blogging and tweeting, you now have to prepare for a virtual meeting where you will introduce to your colleagues a new system that your company is implementing. You expect some resistance because most people are comfortable with the current system. You suspect that they may be somewhat confrontational. Dealing with emotion or negative feedback is much more challenging in a virtual session (a session where participants are not in a common location but are communicating via phone and/or web-based system allowing a sound and visual exchange) where you lose most nonverbal and paraverbal communication cues.

This is the new element of communication, and it brings with it a multitude of inherent challenges. The fundamental model of communication is still the same: there is a sender and a receiver of information, and multiple filters in between that can alter the way the message is sent, communicated, received and interpreted. This process takes on a whole new reality when these new methods of communication, such as webinars and instant messaging, are the preferred mediums of modern businesses. As my good friend Stéphane Moriou, an industrial psychologist in France, would say: "the amount of e-mail communications is becoming textual harassment."

We have developed numerous habits and behaviors in relation to these new communication devices and methods, such as constant connectivity, new vocabulary and micro-coordination (i.e., last-minute decision making). It was fascinating to see the incredible intensity of people's reactions to Research In Motion's (RIM's) four-day system outage in 2011, back when the company was the unchallenged standard for business communication. BlackBerry users realized that they were so dependent on their mobile devices to communicate that losing them for four days caused them to react emotionally—as if a friend had abandoned them.

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Deloitte's Alan Booth studies and thinks a great deal about communication in organizations. He believes that effective communicators use candor (giving the truth of what is happening, not the sugarcoated version), brevity (speak too long and you lose your audience) and color (your words have to be said or written in an interesting way). He considers great communications an essential element of building relationships and influencing others.

Booth stresses that leaders should be careful not to "spin" or oversell their message too hard to achieve buy-in from those in their organization. An interesting activity for the Deloitte executive is to look at online news articles. Typically, those articles with the most opinion or spin to them provoke a flurry of (often negative) commentary and reaction from readers.

Ultimately communication needs to be effective, no matter what medium is used. In fact, only a small amount of meaning is conveyed through oral communication alone. Speaking and listening are not just about hearing and processing words. There are also paraverbal (tone of voice, for example) and nonverbal (gestures, shrugs, smiles and frowns) elements.

Various studies show slightly differing numbers, but the general consensus is that only 10 percent of communication is actually verbal (the words), while 40 percent is paraverbal and 50 percent is entirely nonverbal. The takeaway here is that it is not only what you say that counts, it is, more importantly, how you say it. So if approximately 50 percent of the meaning of the message is affected by nonverbal cues, what does that mean when we can't talk face to face—when we have to use e-mail, blogs, Twitter and even conference calls or webinars? Attention needs to be paid to apply good communication practices to the new shortened and speedy interactions of today's world.

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The Interesting Findings of Professor Albert Mehrabanian

The oft-quoted percentage breakdown of how we communicate comes, for the most part, from the research of Professor Albert Mehrabian, who pioneered our current understanding of communication. Mehrabian's work in the mid to late twentieth century featured strongly in establishing early understanding of body language and nonverbal communication.

Some of Mehrabian's findings are as follows:

- 7% of message pertaining to feelings and attitudes is in the words that are spoken.
- 38% of message pertaining to feelings and attitudes is paralinguistic (the way the words are said).
- 55% of message pertaining to feelings and attitudes is in facial expression.

It is important to note that this formula applies to communication of feelings and attitudes.

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Fortunately there is an effective way to craft your message, face to face or in writing, which we at Global Knowledge call KUBA.

KUBA is an acronym for a four-step process that everyone can use to make their communication more effective and influential. It is also the process that people go through to learn new things and to change their own or others' behavior. When you are considering engaging in communication, you should take a moment and think through the KUBA process and the intention of your communication. Do so from the receiver's perspective as well as your own.

So, how do you KUBA your communication?

The first step, *know*, requires that you convey the core of your message to your audience as clearly and specifically as possible. People must know what it is that you are asking them to understand. The key question underlying this first step is: What are the facts?

From there, your audience must *understand* the details about the topic you are discussing. It is one thing to provide the facts, but that does not mean the receivers of your communication understood what you are sharing. It is important for you to do two things, provide them a rational and solid context and ask questions to confirm their understanding. "Why" is the key question here.

The third step is to have your audience *believe* in the value of what you are asking them to do, and to believe that they can accomplish it. Even if what you are communicating is not a request for action, you want the other people to believe in what you are communicating. This is the buy-in phase of communication. The key question here is "what are the benefits" for either the person receiving your communication or other stakeholders.

Step four is to encourage your audience to *act*. It may not always be the case, but in many circumstances the communication will lead to a certain action. Only when people know, understand and believe will they be committed to act. Key questions for this step are "what are the next steps or actions?" The common mistakes for leaders is to communicate the facts and then expect everybody to get to the "act" phase immediately. It may work occasionally, but it is way too frequent that we see active or passive resistance or plain confusion instead of action. The *understand* and *believe* stages are crucial and often missed.

It may sound counterintuitive, but to be a good communicator you have to ask plenty of questions. I like to say in my training sessions that there is a reason that humans developed with two ears and just one mouth! We have evolved to listen more than talk. Noted psychologist Carl Rogers, the father of active listening, said, "Attentive listening means giving one's total and undivided attention to the other person and tells the other that we are interested and concerned. Listening is a difficult work that we will not undertake unless we have deep respect and care for the other." Alan Booth likes to say that as a leader, a good rule of thumb is to ask two questions for every statement you make. The types of questions that a leader as communicator-in-chief should be asking fall into the following four rough categories:

1. **Open-ended questions.** These questions are ones that you would use to gather information. For example, "Why do you think that would work?" or "What do you think the client will think of that?"
2. **Closed-ended questions.** I like to call these the "pin down" questions because of the specific point they are going after. Some examples are: "Will the project be completed by next Monday's deadline?" and "Are you clear on what I expect of you?" With a closed-ended question, you are requesting a short, specific answer. Yes or no, or A or B.
3. **Confirming questions.** These questions allow a leader to state his or her assumption and request confirmation. For example, "So we will go over the project on Tuesday and present it to the client on Thursday, correct?"

4. **Clarifying questions.** Just like the name suggests, clarifying questions seek additional information. An example is, "When you mentioned earlier that you don't have all the data you need to complete the report, what did you mean by that? How can I assist?"

In our training programs we coach leaders to be clear on the intent and the content of the information that they are communicating. Very often, leaders, especially those new to a leadership position, focus on the words and substance of what they want to say. However, what they should be focusing on is what they want others to understand. After you have communicated with others, it is critical to ask them what they understood from your message. Simply asking "Is this clear?" is too general a question. It is necessary to confirm comprehension.

Your silence also sends a message. Take, for example, a manager who resists communicating a quarterly report because the numbers presented in it are bad. People will note the lack of communication and receive the message regardless. Your silence leads others to misinterpret your message.

The Connection Between Personal Needs and Communication

A successful communicator has a firm grasp of what motivates and inspires others. At Global Knowledge we encourage leaders to ask themselves, "What are the personal needs of my team members?" Everyone has a number of personal needs that must be satisfied if they are going to reach their true potential in their organization. As a leader, understanding your personal needs and the needs of others is a key part of effective communication and leadership.

By understanding your own personal needs, you will have a better grasp of

- why you communicate (talk and listen) the way that you do;
- how others may perceive you;
- how you perceive the actions and reactions of those around you; and
- how to alter your communication (whether verbal or written) to be more effective and to fit with the personal needs of your audience.

Colleen Johnston, chief financial officer of Toronto-Dominion Bank (TD), warns that when leaders fail to understand their own needs, they risk making themselves unapproachable. They may present themselves as individuals who are not open to receiving feedback or news—good or bad—and are in danger of putting themselves in an ivory tower. Johnston says, "As leaders, the situation you cannot have is to be stuck in the ivory tower and people are only feeding you limited information about what is going on in the organization." She continues, "You have got to be seen as someone who is approachable, who is real, down to earth, etc. If you create an environment where people always feel like, 'Hey I'm being judged harshly if something goes wrong, I better solve it or suppress it,' that is when organizations get in trouble."

One of TD's seven leadership values is asking leaders to live transparently. This value is about "being transparent around what is going well and what is not going well. Being real, being authentic about what the challenges are," Johnston says. "If someone comes to me with a problem and I say, 'Oh my god, how am I going to tell my boss?' then what you are going to do is discourage people from surfacing problems."

At Global Knowledge, we divide people's core personal needs into six categories. They are:

1. **Structure** (the need for logic, order, processes and systems)
2. **Success** (the need for results, profit and quality)
3. **Control** (the need for authority over environment, decisions and people)
4. **Caution** (the need to minimize risk)
5. **Attention** (the need for recognition by others)
6. **Acceptance** (the need to be part of a team and liked by others)

We urge our clients to consider how they, as leaders, adapt the way that they communicate based on what they know about the personal needs of their audience. In order to motivate people and understand how they will behave in a given situation, it is essential to understand their needs.

Keep in mind that people's needs are fluid, and may change given the problem or situation. Therefore, resist the urge to typecast people based on only one particular core need.

Leadership, Communication and the Myers–Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI)

Dr. Michael Hackman is a professor of communications at the University of Colorado and author of two textbooks, Leadership: A Communication Perspective and Creative Communication: Principles and Applications, which are used at over 400 domestic and international universities. Hackman emphasizes that the primary job of any leader is communication, and that the greater the leadership responsibility, the more the job is a communication job. He maintains that leadership communication is, for the most part, a set of learned behaviors that are developed through knowledge and practice (Hackman 2006).

Essentially, this leader/communicator has the task of securing buy-in for a future that others may not see, a future that the leader sees and wants others to follow. This is achieved in part by

(a) sending many messages to your audience using many styles, rather than one message in one style;

(b) appreciating diverse points of view and promoting two-way communication; and

(c) encouraging talk between organization members to promote learning.

Hackman refers to the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) assessment tool, which is based on Carl Jung's theory of psychological type, to describe different communication styles and how they help with understanding and improving teams, leadership and communication. He insists that, to a large extent, the good connection one makes instantly with someone is based on shared or complementary communication styles. He suggests that we can expect to struggle when communicating with individuals whose styles differ from our own.

Hackman refers to the four basic communication styles or types, which were originally outlined by Jung. They are Sensor versus Intuitor, and Feeler versus Thinker. Hackman notes that by using a pattern of dichotomies, Jung forces a choice between psychological opposites.

The first two (Sensor and Intuitor) describe how we prefer to take in information, either by experiencing the present (Sensing) or by imagining future possibilities (Intuition). For example, the Sensor will adopt a communication style that focuses on present-day reality, action and getting things done in a timely manner. The Intuitor will be more future driven, focused on ideas, innovation and big-picture thinking. He or she will be more of a problem solver than an implementer. The second two (Feeler and Thinker) describe how we tend to make our decisions, either by using logic-driven analysis (Thinking) or by means of a more personal process (Feeling). For example, the Feeler can be expected to adopt a communication style that focuses on human interaction, understanding and analyzing emotions of self and others and displays of support and loyalty. The Thinker's communication focuses on identifying and solving problems.

Hackman argues that the more a leader/communicator is in tune with the communication style of team players, the better chance he or she has of establishing a cohesive team with predictable positive outcomes. He notes that while a consistent style provides predictability, to be effective the leader/communicator must develop flexible strategies for dealing with communication styles that differ depending on the person and the situation. To develop flexible strategies, you should take the following steps:

1   Work to identify the primary style of your team members and consider the impact of your communication style on their behavior.

2. Focus more on the message substance than on style.

3. Adapt to the style preferences of others based on the situation.

4. Look carefully at communication style preferences when assembling teams.

Organizations, like people, each have their own unique set of experiences that make up their history. Some of these experiences are good, some mundane and some so shameful that they are never spoken of except in hushed tones.

As a leader, knowing and understanding the history of your organization—how certain facts and events or episodes are perceived, and the feelings that they generate among your team members—can help you tailor messages to suit particular situations. If you are speaking at a celebratory event, say a historic milestone or major achievement, and you want to generate or reinforce positive feelings, then you would select recent, positive facts and events to share.

Conversely, if there are negative emotions or events from the organization's past that people need to deal with, then acknowledge them rather than dance around them. Getting these issues out in the open allows you and others to deal with them. It also demonstrates that you as a leader are not afraid to address uncomfortable subjects and emotions.

You can use past facts, events and the emotions they generate to help pose meaningful questions when following up on your team members' project assignments and personal-development programs. This allows you to explore the emotions that an assignment or other task generates from the employee and gives you deeper insights into his or her perspective.

Confronting an organization's past can also help a leader to plan the best way to communicate with employees. It allows the leader to gain a greater understanding of a team's personal history with the organization, predict team members' responses and prepare to deal with their concerns. Bringing up past facts and events can also prompt more authentic emotions and feedback from employees, which gives a leader a better understanding of their standpoint.

Storytelling: Put Some Spice into Your Communication!

From the earliest cave dwellers to modern corporate executives, people have always told stories to illustrate and convey their ideas and make their point. Stories use the magic of the narrative form to take complex information and summarize and transform it into a message that is both entertaining and memorable.

Stories are powerful because they speak to reason and emotion. A good story is easy to remember, and the listener will want to tell it to others. It is a very powerful way to organize and think about information. A good story lets you share your expertise and experience with others.

Structuring the Story

The power of a story depends, in part, on its simplicity. A powerful story gets to the point quickly and effectively. If a story is too long, the audience is lost. If it is too complex, the audience is confused. Powerful stories are also visual. Listeners should be able to see the players, put themselves in the scene and feel the tension that makes up the plot of your story.

The Four Ps of a Powerful Story

To ensure that your story has impact and purpose, consider the following four elements.

Purpose: Know why you are telling your story. This will help you

- focus on the essentials without bringing in unnecessary details; and
- ensure that you follow a logical flow so that the message does not have to be explained—everyone will get it the first time.

People: Talk about real characters. Describe the people so your audience can imagine them. Paint a picture in words. Use actual conversations.

Plot: Give your story a beginning, a middle and an end. There needs to be tension for a story to work. Keep it simple—it's not a novel.

Place: Place your story in a location that your audience can visualize. Give them enough visual cues so that they can put themselves in your story.

What the Experts Say

The ability to speak is not the same as the ability to communicate. Most people in supervisory roles have the ability to speak, but they are not necessarily competent communicators. Communication is a two-way process that involves speaking and listening, as well as checking for understanding. Effective leadership communication is rooted in the values and culture of an organization as well as in the character of its leader.

John Baldoni (2004), a leadership communication consultant who has worked with Fortune 500 companies, argues that the underlying purpose of leadership communication is to bring people together for a common cause. He says that leadership messages are designed to engage the listener, gain his or her commitment and ultimately create a bond of trust so that the speaker and listener can work together more efficiently. According to Baldoni, leadership messages do one or more of the following:

1. **Affirm** the organization's vision and mission.
2. **Drive** transformational change.
3. **Issue** a call to action.
4. **Reinforce** the organization's capability.
5. **Create** an environment where motivation can flourish.

Baldoni suggests that a leader skilled at communication regularly, in good times and in bad, reinforces what the organization stands for, where it is going and how it will accomplish its goals. A leader works to stay on message; repeats that message; and speaks and listens often to employees, customers and other stakeholders. Just as communication reinforces an organization's vision, it also affirms the individual's role, be it through

teaching or quiet one-on-one conversations. Baldoni presents four key goals of effective leadership communication (the four Is):

1. **Informing:** Informing team members what the issues are, and explaining how they relate to the team, provides members with the information they need to do their jobs.

2. **Involving:** When leaders involve employees by listening to them and valuing their input, employees will be more likely to buy in to the leader's message.

3. **Igniting:** A message delivered with conviction and genuine enthusiasm helps a leader to ignite his or her team's imagination. Members think about things they can do to make life better for themselves and for their organization.

4. **Inviting:** Inviting people to actively and more fully participate in an organization helps the organization achieve inspired results.

Baldoni acknowledges there is no single way to communicate. What matters most, he says, is making the commitment to communicate—with consistency, constancy and frequency. Words alone say very little, but words backed by the leader's character, conviction and example have the power to communicate and to inspire.

Without effective communication, a manager is not a successful leader. In her article "Leadership Communication: A Communication Approach for Senior-Level Managers," Deborah Barrett (2006) reports on an early Harvard Business School study that looks at what it takes to achieve success and be promoted in an organization. The study found that the individual who gets ahead in business is "able to communicate . . . and to get things done with and through people" (Bowman, Jones, Peterson, Gronouski and Mahoney 1964).

The author describes an interesting model of leadership communication that is made up of three rings: (1) core, (2) managerial and (3) corporate. Rather than a hierarchy, the model is depicted as a spiral, with the core communication ability represented in the center.

Barrett argues that all effective communication depends on the core skills at the center of the spiral, which consist of individuals' abilities to strategize, write and speak. Core communication includes the development of communication strategies that are congruent with the audience in every situation, writing and speaking in language expected of business leaders and the confident and persuasive creation and delivery of oral presentations.

Once the core skills are mastered, individuals expand their skills to include those needed to lead and manage groups. These include emotional intelligence; cultural literacy; listening; managing teams; and meeting, coaching and mentoring.

Spiraling outward, people develop corporate communication skills, which include those related to employee relations, change communication, media relations, crisis communication and image and reputation management. At the corporate level of communication, audiences become larger and more diverse. They are the leaders of change programs, they are in charge of vision development and they are the public faces and voices of the organization. When speaking to these audiences, leaders need to be able to develop more complex communication strategies.

Barrett focuses much of her attention in this article on the connection between leadership communication and the leader's ability to project a positive image. This positive image, or "ethos," is an appeal based on the perceived character of the sender of the message.

For example, it is based on the audience's perception of how trustworthy, believable and/or knowledgeable the sender is. The author acknowledges that positive ethos might be equated with charisma, since both characteristics are associated with the ability to "persuade others and move an audience." She distinguishes between the two by emphasizing that charisma suggests a power over others, based more on emotions than on reason. She identifies credibility as essential to creating a positive ethos. In order to build a positive ethos, leaders need to know how others perceive them.

The author cites research (Conger 1998) that looked into managers' ability to judge how they are perceived, which found that most managers considerably overestimate their own credibility. Barrett says that leaders can use emotional intelligence to effectively gauge how others perceive them. Through self-exploration and honest feedback from others, leaders are able to develop the self-awareness necessary to accurately judge themselves, as well as interpret signals that others send through body language, actions and words.

The author notes that, ideally, ethos and ethics should align with each other. However, it is possible for someone to project a positive ethos with little ethical foundation behind that projection. In the end, Barrett points us to leadership research indicating that if people are going to follow someone willingly, they will look for assurances that the person behaves ethically and is trustworthy.

Effective leaders must not only be successful in interacting with individuals whose communication styles differ from their own, they must also develop trusting relationships through transactional and transformational behavior. Trust is communication based, and built on accurate and open information. Frank J. Flauto (1999) conducted a study in which 151 employees across nine organizations rated their leaders' leadership behavior and communication competence. He found these positive correlations:

1. High-quality leader-member exchanges and perceived leaders' communicative competence.
2. Transactional leadership behaviors and perceived leaders' communicative competence.
3. Transformation leadership behaviors and perceived leaders' communicative competence.

The study noted that, at the lower levels of leader communication competence, high-quality leader-member relationships do not exist.

Flauto determined that transactional leadership requires a level of communication competence that allows the leader to negotiate the leader-member contract and to monitor the transactions.

A review of the literature on leader communication points to communication style, strategy and transformational leadership behaviors as the key components of effectively bringing people together to drive individual and organizational success. In one article on innovation as a strategic communication type, Zerfass and Huck (2007) emphasize the increasing role that communication should play in promoting innovation management. Consider-

ing the competitive and global nature of today's business world, it is obvious to all involved that the only way to sustain a competitive edge is through innovation. Zerfass and Huck point to studies showing that companies' attempts to implement innovations are largely ineffective (Friedmann and Mauer 2003) unless they are accompanied by a robust and strategic communication plan.

In contrast to communication efforts that support daily business, strategic communication prepares organizations for the uncertain future that most businesses face today. Innovation management can best be understood as an integrated and cooperative process that must be strategically planned and controlled, and well supported by communication.

Zerfass and Huck remind us that companies no longer "create ideas in guarded research labs under the veil of secrecy" until they are ready for market. Instead, in the age of open innovation, internal and external stakeholders systematically get involved in the innovation process. This is an example of the importance of communication leadership.

The authors point to the results of a survey conducted in Germany in 2004, which included feedback from 460 public relations experts and journalists on innovation communication. The study concluded that innovations are hard to communicate, and that companies do not provide enough information about innovations. Interestingly—but not surprisingly—the same survey showed that 90 percent of the public relations professionals interviewed think that employees are very important target groups for innovation communication (Mast, Huck and Zerfass 2006, 29–31). The authors emphasize that while employees are important sources of new ideas when innovations are initiated, they are the first ones affected when ongoing innovations change the working environment or even lead to a loss of employment. This makes it vital that organizations prepare for the challenges, benefits and pitfalls of leadership communication and innovation from within the organization first.

Zerfass and Huck recognize social theory's strong link between innovation and communication — that innovation only arises when social practices change. Communication is an integral support feature of the innovation process. It is important that communication supports each phase of this process, from the generation of ideas to marketing the product and building relationships with employees, research and development partners, customers, competitors, politicians, journalists and other relevant stakeholders. The authors refer to past studies (Mast, Huck and Zerfass 2005, 2006), which list the main barriers for communicating and translating an innovation. These barriers include:

1. Innovations are novel and, as such, profit yields are less obvious. This leads people to consider the undertaking as rather abstract.
2. Innovations could mean potential change for everyone.
3. There are seldom any frames of reference that new ideas can be integrated into, because they are new ideas, there is no frame of reference.

Zerfass and Huck suggest that to overcome these obstacles, leaders should discuss innovations with their audience by telling stories and giving examples of concrete applications for customers, research partners and others. Leaders should also use simple examples, graphs and pictures to set a frame of reference for an innovation within an already existing cognitive structure. Of course, foremost on the list of ways to overcome an audience's reluctance to buy in to a new idea is the credibility and authenticity of the communicator.

Conclusion

It is easy to conceive why communication is so often rated as one of the most important leadership competencies; there is probably not a single day where a leader does not communicate. And as the quote from James Humes, every time you speak you are auditioning for leadership. How more critical can that be? Applying methods and behaviors that will lead to better communication is of the utmost importance for leaders at all levels. The methods described in this chapter like KUBA and Story Telling are fairly easy to apply and will make a large difference in the day life of a leader and his team.

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About the Author

Jocelyn Bérard is Vice-President Leadership and Business Solutions, International, for Global Knowledge. He has worked in the leadership and talent management field for 25 years, with clients in the US, Canada, Europe and Asia. His business unit at Global Knowledge focuses on research and intervention initiatives with organizations to develop their leaders and improve their talent management. A sought-after speaker, Bérard has presented at numerous HR associations in Canada, Europe and the US, including CSTD, HRPA, CRHA, and SHRM, and is a frequent speaker at Global Knowledge Executive Speaker Series events.

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