



Importance of Communication Skills for Leadership and Management

By Decker and Mitchell - January 5, 2017

This article about the Importance of Communication Skills for Leadership and Management is number eight in a series of twelve about *Self-Handicapping Leadership* by Professor Phillip Decker and Professor Jordan Mitchell. All articles can be read without knowledge of the previous ones. Please find an overview of the articles in this series at the end of the article.

Importance of Communication Skills for success

Breakdowns in communication cause major problems for managers. We can all recall experiences of communication failure. Perhaps you remember sitting in a conference room, suffering through a traditional PowerPoint presentation? Nothing but text on each slide, the presenter watching the projector screen and painstakingly reading each point. As a spectator, you were less than enthralled by the presentation or the individual giving it.

Let's look at a more complex example:

A team meeting with a dozen managers seated around a conference table. The leader is worried about poor customer satisfaction scores. He says to the group:

“I’M TIRED OF ALL OF THE CUSTOMER COMPLAINTS. TALK TO YOUR EMPLOYEES AND LET’S PUT AN END TO THIS”

At this point, everyone in that meeting is thinking the same thing: “Well, what do you think we’re doing?” Of course, no one says that aloud. The leader hasn’t really offered any meaningful solutions or created any discussion that will solve the problem; he has just dumped it on the group. The discussion may go around in circles with everyone nodding and agreeing while no real action planning happens. There are a couple of major undiscussables here – lack of accountability and impression management.

Why doesn’t the leader take charge? Where is that brave soul who will speak up and lead the team out of this mess? We know the answers: the employees don’t want to get on the leader’s bad side and they fear negative repercussions from speaking up.

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Moreover, they don’t think anything they do will really change the situation, and, ultimately, no one wants to look stupid or be embarrassed in front of their peers. Everyone is managing impressions rather than solving real problems. Eventually, this poor leadership trickles down, resulting in even lower customer satisfaction. These examples are both instances of someone handicapping their leadership through poor communication.

Risking Poor Communication

Most leaders understand the consequences of poor financial management, but not all leaders appreciate the importance of communication skills for leadership and management. In other words, the risks that come from a poor approach to communication are underestimated. The blowout of the Deepwater Horizon offshore oil rig, in April 2010, resulted in a massive crisis for BP and its partners. Among the key factors contributing to the disaster were “poor communications” and a failure “to share important information” (Groysberb & Slind, 2012).

More than half of all change programs fail to meet their objectives and this is often attributed to managers being unable to deal with employee resistance to needed changes (Decker et. al. 2012). Inadequate communication is also a factor in many accidents and safety incidents. We have all seen managers manipulating communication for their individual gain, or other situations where lack of communication caused problems. Poor communication is one of the largest areas of self-handicapping in business organizations (Decker & Mitchell 2016).

The Surprise of Learning Communication as a Two-Way-Street

Communication is a process of exchanging verbal and non-verbal messages and is a continuous two-way process. A prerequisite of communication is a message conveyed through some medium to the recipient – voice, email, presentations, or posters. But some media can be handicapping – for example, PowerPoint presentations by executives can lead to one-way only communication in an organization.

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It is essential that the message gets to the recipient and is accepted and understood in the same terms as intended by the sender. It is also important that the communication media and techniques create a culture of openness and trust in the organization. This is what increases innovation, early identification of problems, and creates the mastery goal orientation needed for exceptional productivity.

Too much information, poorly framed messages, inappropriate channels, and incomplete feedback from the recipient to the sender on how well the message is understood and accepted can all be self-handicapping. It is the leader's responsibility to ensure that all take place effectively.

Non-verbal Communication

Nonverbal communication is also important: gestures, eye contact, touching, running a few minutes late to a meeting, and physical appearance. Non-verbal cues convey information that can be self-handicapping.

For example, let's look at two forms of posture: 'open' and 'closed'. Open is facing the other person with good eye contact and open arms. Closed means arms folded, legs crossed or positioned at an angle to the other person. A closed posture will inhibit conversation with an employee.

Every culture has different levels of physical closeness which are expected or tolerated. When someone violates an 'appropriate' distance, people may feel uncomfortable or defensive. Non-verbal cues can become a barrier to effective communication – they must match the verbal message.

Remember, "What we say" is often less important than "How we say it." Words are only a small part of our communication.

Business Communication

The most successful way of communicating in a workplace is to *treat each other as both friends AND as task partners*. Self-handicapping in communication occurs by not developing an open and trusting communication culture.

FOR EXAMPLE: Picture a meeting where the boss comes in a few minutes late, starts talking about a critical issue, and doesn't allow for questions (during or after). At the end of the meeting, several people try to pose questions but the boss says, "I have another meeting" and immediately leaves the room. More than likely, any concerns or apprehensions employees had when coming into the meeting will now be magnified. Without a chance to clarify concerns or ask questions, the employees' thinking can easily wander to imagine the worst-case scenario. This is one of many ways to create a negative communication culture.

Most organizational groups or teams hold common ideas about how to deal with recurrent problems and uncertainties – *they create and perpetuate social order through these common ideas and they become cultures*. Cultures are sets of beliefs, values, and norms that are emotional and resistant to change but guide future activity.

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The Communication Culture

Many organizations with remote employees rely on email, for instance; but face-to-face communication – even by phone – is more conducive to the give and take needed to build trust just as small group meetings help open two-way communication more than PowerPoint presentations.

How communication works *in and across* multiple organizational cultures is a key to how organizations function – with a culture of openness, transparency, and trust or without. Communication culture is the glue that holds teams and organizations together. This glue can be a driver or an obstacle to performance; exceptional managers understand this.

Upward Communication

When leadership is chaotic or untrustworthy, a culture will likely develop where keeping one's head down, not speaking up, avoiding trouble, "being a team player," and "just doing one's job" is the norm. Upward communication of concerns or fears is unlikely to be voiced. Innovation thus comes to a halt. This culture *protects the workers from the potential chaos that originates from this type of leadership*. Great leaders know that a [mastery goal orientation](#) requires open, two-way communication and a lot of trust.

IF COMMUNICATION DOES NOT WORK, EXCEPTIONAL LEADERS DO SOMETHING ABOUT IT

Organizational cultures cannot be manufactured or changed at will – it usually takes enormous effort to do so. If communication does not work, exceptional leaders do something about it. And they start with themselves and how they communicate. Once their personal communication is open and transparent, leaders can adopt methods that enable them to [get closer to employees](#), build trust, [promote dialogue](#), [engage employees](#), and align their communication with organizational strategy. It is usually the being “open and transparent” that is the problem – and no form of impression management will mask this problem.

Openness in Communication and a Free Flow of Information

So, why don't managers promote openness and a free flow of information? Like most self-handicapping, self-handicapping in communication starts with excuses. These may sound like: “I don't have time for small group meetings, I will just do a presentation. My managers will work out the employee problems.” This approach saves the leader some time. The employees generally don't say much, they just accept this as the communication culture and hunker down. Over time, employees disengage and problems are not brought to the surface.

It is common for students in business schools to be required to give presentations; and when they get out into the “real world,” their preferred mode of communication is a presentation of concepts rather than one-on-one or small group problem-solving. Presentations have their place in organizations, but leaders must not use them as a crutch for expediency, avoiding employee concerns, or fear of getting too close to workers' problems – that is self-handicapping.

Communicating who you are

As with any other category of self-handicapping, you have to ask yourself how much of what you are doing is motivated by uneasiness, an effort to take the expedient route, or to avoid problems, etc. Much of what we do in creating or contributing to the communication culture in our workplace is due to anxiety about revealing our true self: How close are we willing to allow others to come to our “inner being,” shyness, shame, or other deeper issues? None of this is bad; it is just part of who we are. However, if you want to be an exceptional leader – you may have to face these fears and get beyond them.

Great leaders help create or change communication cultures so that they are open and trusting and promote a maximum exchange of information and learning. Understanding that you are a big contributor to the culture in your workplace may help you to face your fears, work to overcome them, and practice new ways of operating.

Communicate Inclusion

Most employees want to be a part of a workplace culture that puts a premium on delivering the truth (Llopis 2014). They want their leaders to share where the company is headed so they can plan and protect themselves; yet, this does not always happen. The reasons leaders are not transparent may include their belief that they will be viewed as less authoritative, or have less power or control. They may have developed a habit of withholding information – this may have been learned in the past, over time, in a more dysfunctional work environment.

Here is what Leaders *should do to Improve Communication* (JRS Consulting 2007):

Take these as baby steps to a new culture:

- Treat others as you would want to be treated – with respect and truthfulness.
- Make time to listen to employees' questions and suggestions. It's important to communicate that you, in fact, want to hear from employees (even if you have heard it a 100 times).
- Show that you have heard employees' opinions and ideas *by using some of them*.
- Greet employees. Remember their names. Walk to meetings on different routes so you can see more of them.
- Give compliments; recognize employees for their contributions. Everyone likes being told they are doing good work.
- Make an effort to get to know employees beyond their roles. Find emerging talent.
- Let people know who you really are – talk about vulnerabilities, problems, and failures. Use yourself as an example.
- Ask for help. As much as people like giving help, it's still kind of scary to ask for it.
- Provide small meetings for information and opinion exchange. Do not use PowerPoint presentations exclusively.
- Distribute a weekly memo about projects, announcements, and deadlines to keep everyone on the same page and to recognize workers.
- Send all messages across multiple channels. **Make important messages repetitive – it takes three times to get the message through.**

REMEMBER, IN THE ABSENCE OF DATA ABOUT A LEADER, EMPLOYEES WILL MAKE UP THEIR OWN

If you find it difficult to open up and be vulnerable in personal disclosure, read *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty* by Manuel J. Smith (1985) or *Shyness and Social Anxiety Workbook: Proven, Step-by-Step Techniques for Overcoming your Fear* by Martin Antony Ph.D. and Richard Swinson (2008). Remember, in the absence of data about a leader, employees will make up their own.

Many leaders feel some unease when connecting with other people – they need to start with baby steps. They sometimes feel others will judge them or dislike them. This fear holds many back from being open and is the greatest source for communication self-handicapping. Yet, if leaders don't

share some of themselves, the employees won't share back. In fact, secretiveness can sometimes bring more attention than it helps avoid. Remember, in the absence of data about a leader, employees will make up their own (Decker & Mitchell. 2016).

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Finally, if a leader is in the habit of judging others, he/she will be judged. Self-handicapping can lead to a downward spiral, from excuses to a level of self-deception where it is all someone else's fault. Then blame becomes habitual and begins to take away opportunities for meaningful interaction ([see article #1](#)).

Leaders in this "box" need to find ways to communicate with others and truly connect without judgment or blame. Leaders must be willing to assume responsibility for all communication even when they feel that the responsibility should be shared or that someone else should make the initial effort. In other words, they must get out of the "box" to communicate in a way that does not cause self-handicapping obstacles.

As leaders achieve a heightened awareness of their own self-deception and move toward becoming skilled communicators, they should view themselves as accountable for their work environment.

The importance of communication skills for great leadership and management has been explained. Here are some steps to improve communication tomorrow:

- Choose a coworker to have a conversation with and practice paying attention and listening.
- Say "I'm sorry" once, sincerely, in front of 2 or more people when you have fouled up in some way and it is all your fault.

The key behaviors for maintaining attention are:

- Stop talking – listen to what the person is really saying.
- Look at the speaker directly and maintain eye contact throughout the conversation.
- Do not rush to add to the conversation – process the information before you take your turn to speak.
- Use your body language and gestures to convey your attention.

The key behaviors for apologizing are:

- Apologize as soon as you realize that you've wronged someone.
- Say "I'm sorry," or "I apologize" sincerely to express remorse. With full eye contact and open posture.
- Admit responsibility for your actions and make amends if possible.
- Say you will not do it again.

For further reading, we suggest Cotton (2013) *Say Anything to Anyone, Anywhere: 5 Keys To Successful Cross-Cultural Communication*, or Reynolds, et. al. (2011) *Guide to Cross-Cultural Communications*.

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