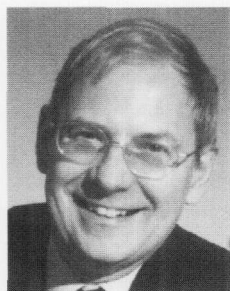


## Practice papers

# Leadership communication: A status report

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**Abstract** Although management is often viewed as distinct from, and sometimes inferior to, leadership, the two share a number of core competencies. Communication is central to the main four management competencies outlined by Warren Bennis: the management of attention, meaning, trust and self. To be truly effective, both leaders and managers must develop their self-awareness, become role models for communication in the organisation, and learn to encourage and manage constructive dissent. An important part of the communication professional's role is to support the organisation's leaders and managers in developing their communication competence.

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There are more books, articles and dissertations on leadership than any other topic of management. The sheer volume of research and writing about the concept of leadership tells us that this is not a topic that is easily defined, nor one where there will be a great deal of consensus. From Machiavelli<sup>1</sup> to Townsend,<sup>2</sup> Tannenbaum<sup>3</sup> to Harvey-Jones,<sup>4</sup> there is very little agreement on just what makes an effective leader.

Just about the one thing almost all these authorities agree upon, however, is that effective leaders are also effective communicators. (The reverse is not

necessarily agreed upon — good communicators do not necessarily make good leaders.)

Perhaps the best-known writer on leadership issues in modern times is Warren Bennis,<sup>5</sup> whose attempts to distinguish between leadership and management have been so badly understood. Among a number of distinguishing factors between management and leadership, which he defines, are:

- the manager focuses on systems and structure; the leader focuses on people

- the manager imitates; the leader innovates
- the manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it
- the manager's eye is on the bottom line; the leader's eye is on the horizon
- the manager does things right; the leader does the right thing

The problem with these broad statements is not that they are inaccurate — they strike very strong chords of realism — but that several generations of managers have been brought up to believe that being a manager is somehow inferior to being a leader. The reality is that management and leadership are inextricably linked. A truly excellent leader requires good management skills, and the best managers are also leaders to some extent. Leadership is a role; management a function. Each depends on the other — whether they are combined in one individual or shared between a closely knit leader and manager team. Indeed, when Bennis and his colleagues looked at the *skills* of being a leader, they described these as four management competencies. Central to each of those competencies is effective communication.

*Management of attention* describes how leaders encapsulate a vision, which other people are able to endorse and buy into as their own. They bridge the present and the future, by helping people imagine what the future could and should be like, and encouraging them to help in taking the steps that will make the vision a reality. Leaders, who think the job is done when they have created and distributed a vision and values statement, miss the point entirely. The art of managing attention involves:

- developing the vision over time with the followers
- articulating it in ways that they cannot
- enabling them to anchor the vision emotionally — to buy into it with their hearts as well as their minds.

Bennis found that this process does not happen rapidly and the authors' own more recent researches confirm this.<sup>6</sup> Good leaders work at the vision continuously. They make it the core of every conversation. They listen to how other people interpret the vision and attempt less to convert them than to include them. They do not do the vision thing then get back on to the priorities of managing; for them, the priority of managing *is* the vision.

*Management of meaning* is Bennis' second leadership skill — the ability to communicate clearly and successfully. Good leaders articulate business purpose and priorities succinctly and in language that encourages intelligent questioning. In the terms of the authors' company's research for the International Association of Business Communicators (IABC)<sup>7</sup> on the links between business excellence and communication, this equates to creating clarity of purpose. Analogy, metaphor and vivid illustration are key techniques; emotion, trust, hope and optimism are the underlying tones.

*Management of trust* ('the emotional glue that binds followers and leaders together') depends in large part upon consistency of both communication and action. Again, the authors' study identified the link between the quality of interfaces between people in the organisation, the trust and rapport, and business performance.

*Management of self* (or 'deployment of self') is what gives leaders credibility. They do not, in many cases, have much charisma. When they do, it tends to be a reflection of the intensity of their emotions. What they do have is a high level of self-discipline that is always more demanding of themselves than of others. They are persistent, self-aware and always open to more learning. What they learn, especially from talking with their followers, is incorporated into the vision, creating a virtuous cycle of ambition for

the organisation. They also have remarkable resilience: when things go wrong, they admit their mistakes, draw appropriate lessons and incorporate that into the vision, too.

Bennis' research and the authors' 'Winning streak' studies focused almost entirely on the most senior leaders — the Chief executives and presidents of major companies. But the same basic skills appear to apply at all levels, down to the most junior team leader. From the point of view of the follower, whether they are senior managers or shop floor workers, the defining characteristics of effective leaders can be boiled down to two consistent defining questions:

- does this leader know where he or she wants to take us and why
- does he or she care (about me, about the team, about the goal itself)?

The first question is primarily intellectual and to do with perception of the manager's competence. It has, however, emotional undertones through association with the follower's need either to feel a sense of security, or a sense of excitement and challenge, or both together.

The second question relates to building empathy and trust. Will I be supported, if I struggle to keep up? Will s/he stay the course? Is their enthusiasm catching? Internal studies by Microsoft and other companies indicate the critical importance of leadership behaviours that relate to these two questions. Really effective leader/managers:

- set mutual expectations clearly
- make sure everyone has very clear objectives and performance measures and check that they understand them
- are good at planning and at communicating the steps between where the team is now and where it needs to be
- give continuous feedback
- give people very stretching goals to

achieve, but ensure they have all the support they need from the manager and from their colleagues

- make sure that achievements are recognised, both within and outside the team
- encourage and establish team members' sense of self-belief.

These are all communication issues, to the extent that it could be said that good leadership is mostly good communication. The problem is: how can people be helped to develop the skills that will elevate them from supervisors to effective leader/managers?

## COACHING LEADERS TO COMMUNICATE

Leaders, who do not communicate well, are not really leading at all. It is one thing to have the position, another to fulfil the role. The standard remedy, it appears, is to provide executives in this position with some form of presentation training. This might help them give a speech, but it will do little to help them become genuine leaders. To achieve that, the executive must:

- achieve a higher degree of self-mastery and self-awareness
- learn how to be a superb listener, before they can begin to become a better talker
- actively manage themselves as role models
  - for learning and for the corporate values
- uncork their imagination (so often suppressed through years in risk-averse or over-controlled corporate cultures)
- learn how to link their imagination and emotions to the ambitions they have for their team, department or organisation, so they can express ideas in ways that will capture the imagination and emotion of others.

This is, however, just a starting point. Managing oneself is a long-term, continuous project, but the more self-

aware the manager is, the easier it will be to communicate with genuine passion, time after time. Having built the basic capacity to communicate, the executive can make further strides towards becoming an effective leader by:

- learning how to demonstrate trust in others, as the first step in enabling them to trust in return
- acquiring the skills and courage to confront constructively
- learning how to encourage and make use of constructive dissent, so that alternative perspectives can be examined, discussed and, where appropriate, adapted and incorporated into the larger vision
- building the capacity for myth management, for seizing opportunities to underline core values through simple but powerful gestures of anger, reward or gratitude
- becoming a role model for good communication and working with other, potential leaders, in helping them develop their ability to communicate.

The inescapable conclusion from the checklist above is that developing the communication skills essential to leadership is not primarily a classroom exercise. While some techniques and theory can be imparted by practice with others away from the workplace, most of the learning needs to come from reflection about specific instances and behaviours, over a period of time. The learning process, therefore, is much more suited to high level coaching. This is a role, which many communication professionals already play with their executives in some areas.

One of the authors' company's interests for 2002 is to help establish more clearly the competencies required to be an effective communication coach. Previous research has given some valuable insights into the situational nature of

communication and processes for helping leaders match communication behaviours more appropriately to the situation.

A major challenge for communication professionals is also how to persuade top management to take the communication elements of their leadership roles seriously. Explaining that they are not effective leaders because they do not communicate well enough is not likely to be a popular message, even if it is true. One practical tool is to measure *perceived leadership quality* on a regular (at least four times a year) basis and use these data to encourage discussion about communication behaviour.

In a 2001 study conducted by the authors' company,<sup>8</sup> raising and maintaining the internal credibility of the top team appeared in the five most important roles of internal communicators, scoring 1.6 out of two for importance. When communicators were asked to rate their success at supporting the top team, the average score was only one out of two. Narrowing this gap is likely to be an important area of focus for communicators for some time to come.

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