Leadership communication: the three levels

Article

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Winston Churchill, one of the acknowledged great British Prime Ministers once said, 'the difference between mere management and leadership is communication'. While management and leadership have been shown to be much more than communication, there is little doubt that communication skills are at the heart of effective leadership. Good communication skills alone, however, will not make an effective leader.

Research on leaders over many years has demonstrated that leaders spend from around 75% to 90% of their time on communication activities. The aim of this article is therefore to map out the critical communication skills leaders need at the various levels in the organisational hierarchy. Space limits how comprehensively I can describe each skill. However, for each skill that will be identified, you can find additional resources on the Internet and in books to assist you to learn and develop it.

There are three levels of communication skills for leaders:

- core communication skills,
- team communication skills, and
- strategic and external communication skills.

As a leader gains more responsibility in an organisation and undertakes more complex and demanding roles, the leader will need to improve core skills and become more effective in the higher level team and strategic skills. To be effective, the skills should be acquired and developed in a sequence, that is from core to strategic skills.

Core communication skills

Sometimes communication skills are categorised under a broader term known as *interpersonal skills* or *people skills.*. Interpersonal skills are the skills needed to develop relationships with other people. Whatever term is used, research over decades has shown that these skills are most important for leaders at all levels. Within the interpersonal skills framework, the following key skills are known to be essential:

Oral and written communication

There are many good books available in these areas. However, what needs to be said is that leaders are expected to have reached at least an acceptable standard in these areas and the standard will be dependent upon the organisational context in which the leader works and within its usual communication practices. Every communication, oral or written, builds a picture and creates an impression about you and your

leadership. A leader's skills will be most visible when speaking informally, one-on-one, with groups, and when giving formal presentations. Effective leaders use these occasions to connect with people, so techniques like posture and eye contact are important to learn. Practice is often the best way to be good at formal presentations and public speaking. Leaders should take every opportunity to develop and practice these skills.

Non-verbal communication

Facial expressions, body language, the way a person dresses, the way a person moves their hands when talking, the distance between them and the other person when talking, and their general demeanor—all send messages to others. Understanding your own body language and ensuring that oral and non-verbal communication is coherent is important to leaders who wish to improve their communications with others. Some research indicates that up to 90 per cent of the meaning of a communication is captured in the non-verbal clues.

What is important is that leaders understand the significance of non-verbal communication as a communication technique and as part of their interpersonal skills that are in need of constant attention and development.

Active listening

Genuinely listening to others requires intellectual and physical effort. It is a skill that many leaders find demanding. Some leaders *hear* when others talk, but far too often they do not *listen* to what is being transmitted, either verbally or non-verbally. Active listening is listening for the full meaning of what is being transmitted and observing. It includes 'listening' to the non-verbal clues contained with the message without making premature judgments or interpretations.

There are eight specific behaviours that leaders should endeavour to practice to build active listening skills (Robbins, Bergman, Stagg & Coulter 2003). These are:

- Make eye contact with the speaker so that they know you have focused your attention on them, that you are not distracted and that you can see their facial expressions and other non-verbal clues.

- Make affirmative nods and other appropriate facial expressions to show interest in what is being said. Appropriate movements and non-verbal listening responses on your part let the speaker know you are listening.

- Avoid distracting gestures that might make the speaker think you are bored or tired of what is being said. It is important that the speaker thinks they have your full and undivided attention.

- Ask questions to seek clarification and to ensure your own understanding—but leave it until the end so as not to be interruptive.

- Use the paraphrasing technique by restating and rephrasing the communication in your own words by commencing with, 'Do you mean …' or 'As I understand it, what you are saying is …'. This technique checks for accuracy and verifies you have listened correctly.

- Avoid interrupting the speaker until the end of the communication.
- Avoid talking over the top of the speaker. You cannot listen and speak at the same time!
- Make smooth transitions between the roles of speaker and listener—try not to think what you might say as you listen to the other person.

These behaviours can be learned, even though they may seem awkward and insincere at first try. The behaviours will become more natural if practiced and will bring about attitudes of tolerance and empathy if persevered with.

Giving and receiving feedback

Giving feedback on performance (both praise and criticism) is an integral part of effective leadership. It is also an activity which makes many leaders uncomfortable. It should, however, be daily activity in a team that is working effectively.

Feedback from leaders can be very diverse in nature. It can range from feedback on team member work performance to feedback on a team member's interpersonal behaviour. It can be both positive and negative. Research demonstrates that leaders like to give positive feedback and usually do so promptly and enthusiastically. Negative feedback, however, is often avoided by leaders, is inappropriately delayed, and often distorted by the leader to make it more acceptable to the receiver.

Feedback skills are related both to other communication skills listed in this article and to active listening, but often leaders who are good communicators are not good with feedback skills. The most significant point when giving feedback is to *separate the behaviour from your interpretation of the behaviour*. Focusing on behaviour when giving feedback is the key to giving good feedback, but many leaders find this much easier in theory than in practice. Take, for example, a leader responsible for assisting team members to improve their customer service who observes a team member speaking inappropriately to a customer. Interpretative feedback from this leader might be:

- You were rude and unhelpful, or
- You do not seem to care.

The problem with interpretative feedback is that it often triggers a defensive reaction from the team member. The team member takes the feedback as a personal issue rather than a work issue. When people are defensive they put all their energy into counter-attacks and excuses, rather than listening with an open mind to ways in which they could improve. Therefore, when giving feedback, leaders need to focus on behaviour. Focusing on behaviour makes the feedback easier to accept by the team member. Focusing on behaviour, the leader might have said:

Do you remember when you were talking to that customer? I noticed that:

1. You didn't look at the customer when you spoke to them.
2. You interrupted the customer in mid-sentence.

3. You walked away to talk to a colleague before the customer was finished.

1, 2 and 3 are examples of specific behaviours. A specific description of behaviour is more neutral. Team members are generally more receptive to feedback which is presented in this way. Check whether the team member was aware of the required standards before he or she did the work and choose an opportunity to talk to the person in private, without interruption. Aim to give the feedback as soon after the event as possible so that the details of the task are still fresh in the team member's mind.

Finally, ensure that your feedback is clearly and fully understood. Ask the team member to rephrase the content of your feedback to ensure they fully capture the meaning that was intended. Feedback is also more effective when it is designed specifically for the personality type of person receiving it.

Emotional intelligence

Goleman (2004) introduced the concept of emotional intelligence (EI). EI refers to the capacity of a leader to deal effectively with their own and others' emotions. EI is a core communication skill for leaders. When applied to the workplace, emotional intelligence is about thinking intelligently with emotions—perceiving, expressing, understanding and managing emotions in a professional and effective manner at work. A number of recent research studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between the ability to manage emotions and the quality of social interactions—and therefore leadership potential. EI is a combination of self-management and social skills that can transform and optimise individual or team performance. EI for any leader can be measured and the good news is that it can be increased over time.

Conflict resolution and negotiating skills

Leaders devote around 20% of their time to negotiating outcomes or resolving conflict. This is may be a low estimate, however, and in many organisational cultures the percentage is much higher. The 80/20 rule often also applies—i.e. that 80% of one's time as a leader will be spent on conflict involving around 20% of the team members.

Negotiating and resolving conflict is a difficult but necessary role for leaders. Many leaders are not only poorly skilled at negotiation and conflict resolution but also avoid conflict, allowing it to fester and to build into situations that are much more difficult to handle than if they were dealt with quickly at the first surface of the conflict or potential conflict.

No leader likes having to intervene in conflict situations. As a rule of thumb, however, leaders must be the initiators of conflict resolution. They should handle any conflict situation when it arises. This frees the leader from having to think about the conflict and makes the leader, and those involved, much more productive. Having the ability to handle conflict situations constructively also has a direct influence on how the leader is perceived by others. According to Lussier and Achua (2004), there are five

conflict management styles that leaders may choose from. Every leader has a preferred style based on their personality and other leadership traits. No single conflict management style works best in all situations, so leaders should be skilled in each of the styles, selecting the one best-suited to the conflict situation. The five styles include - avoidance, accommodation, force, negotiation, and collaboration.

Team communication skills

Leading teams of people is somewhat different to leading individuals and leaders of teams must have a number of team communication skills. The most critical skills include:

MBWA

'Managing by walking around' (MBWA) is a skill that leaders can learn in order to be more available for communication with team members. It enables the leader to find out what's happening in the work team and gives team members the opportunity to make informal contributions. Leaders who get out of touch with the individuals in their work team are also out of touch with their customers. Two important channels of communication are therefore opened using the MBWA technique. To open up these channels of communication in an informal way a good habit to develop is to walk around your area of responsibility on a regular basis. On these regular wanderings a leader is able to:

- use informal conversations to teach and reinforce organisational values to individuals in the team;

- listen and pay close attention to team members in their own work space where they feel most comfortable and confident;

- discover and acknowledge innovation and systems improvements not formally reported and spread them across other areas; and

- coach and mentor individuals in their own surroundings.

Often MBWA, may seem awkward and insincere at first try or can even be perceived as 'spying' on the team. However, perseverance will be rewarded by better team performance in the long run.

Facilitating meetings

Research shows that about 15% of the salary cost of large organisations is spent on employee meeting time. An improvement in meeting skills by the leader can have a significant effect on leadership effectiveness and productivity of work teams.

Dalglish and Miller (2010) suggest that leaders need to acquire the communication skills to manage productive meetings and to use the 'four Ps' of effective meetings— namely:

- purpose,

- participants,

- planning, and
- process.

There are many good books that expand of the 'four Ps' and that can help you run more effective meetings and have better team outcomes.

Strategic and external communication skills

Strategic and external communication skills are needed by leaders at every level. However, as leaders rise towards the top of the organisation, these skills become critical. Communication becomes more complex as leaders need to address both internal and external stakeholders.

Statements of vision, mission and values

Leaders of organisations have long recognised the importance of clear vision and mission statements to articulate the future aspirations of the organisation's leaders to its stakeholders. Most large organisations have formal vision and mission statements in place.

Values statements are a recent addition to the corporate statements issued by organisations to inform people outside the organisation (such as investors and potential employees) about the organisation and where it might be heading. They are designed to complement vision and mission statements and are the fundamental beliefs of the leaders and members of the organisation. That is, they represent underlying reasons for the actions and behaviours of organisational members.

Leaders must ensure that all forms of internal communication align with and reinforce the organisation's mission, vision and values, and that internal communications connect to them and are integrated into operational processes. Research has demonstrated that many organisations and their leaders do not communicate their vision as well as they might, leaving employees and external stakeholders confused about the direction of the organisation and where they fit in to it.

Regularity of communication is also important. Senior leaders must ensure that the people in the organisations they lead are regularly informed about progress towards the vision, long-term goals, principles and strategies of the organisation. They must reinforce the values of the organisation. Regularity can be achieved with techniques like regular (monthly) newsletters to staff or in broadcast emails.

Communication systems

Organisations that have effective communication systems are known to be more effective than organisations with poor communication systems. Communication systems include such things as manual and paper-based reporting systems, information technology systems (intranets and email) and statements of policy and procedures.

Leaders need to ensure that these internal communication systems are working to align with and reinforce the organisation's mission, vision and values statements.

Polices are particularly important as part of the communication system. They provide the guidance and direction that the employees need in order to communicate effectively with each other and express expected standards and norms.

Leaders as communication role models

While policies are important, what leaders actually do and say have a greater impact on employee behaviour in the organisation. Leaders, therefore, need set the standards for communication. They need to be role models for the types and tone of the communication they expect in the organisation. When leaders interact with others on a one-to-one basis, in groups, by email, by internal correspondence or any other form of communication, employees observe and then generally adopt what the leaders do. Leaders set the climate for communications in the organisation by the way they communicate with team members and other leaders, the transparency of their decision making, how often they are seen around the organisation and how often they address staff in person.

Knowledge management

Knowledge in all its forms is the new basis of competition in the global economy. As such, it is an organisational asset that should be closely managed as part of the communication system. Knowledge is not only data or information—it is a mix of organisational experience that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experience and information. It originates in the minds of employees and is captured in documents or filing systems, organisational routines, processes, practices, and norms. If we accept this broad definition of what constitutes knowledge, then the generation, documentation, transfer and creation of knowledge (known as knowledge management) is an important communication function for senior leaders. Senior leaders need the skills to design and monitor the management of knowledge and the management information systems that transmit it.

Communication systems should be a regular item at senior planning meetings when discussion on the way employees in the organisation can be educated in the organisation's vision, mission and values sets the agenda.

External relations

Developing and maintaining a positive public image is a high priority task for all leaders in an organisation. An organisation's reputation is a significant resource to be protected. Any communication from an organisation that goes outside the organisation's internal boundaries (such as sales promotions, advertising and public relations initiatives) is a component of the organisation's external relations. Such matters must be managed very carefully. Leaders need skills in media and public relations if they are to be successful and effective at the top levels.

Communication across cultures

All communication is undertaken in a cultural context. There are many barriers preventing a leader from being an effective communicator and the different cultural backgrounds of people can be one of them. Cultural differences can affect the way a leader chooses to implement any of the skills listed in this article. If cultural barriers are not recognised and acted upon they can stand in the way of achieving shared experience and mutual understanding. There are many good books giving guidance on communication across cultures—they cover topics such as gift-giving, greetings, gestures to avoid, exchanging business cards, and business dinners.

Summary

Everything a leader does to influence others involves communicating. Good communication skills are the foundation of effective leadership.

Our new book titled '*The Leader in You: Developing your leadership potential*', has been designed to assist both individual leaders and organisations to achieve greater effectiveness in communication. The book provides the practical tools and techniques necessary to assist leaders to become more effective communicators at all three levels. The book may be ordered by contacting UBDS Distribution SDN BHD, www.ubsd-dist.com or email enquiry@ubsd-dist.com.

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