

# **Leaders as Strategic Communicators**

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*“Every leader communicates, but few do so strategically.”*

Exhorting leaders to communicate more will not guarantee that they will be effective. Yet the popular press routinely admonishes leaders to “communicate, communicate, communicate!” as if the added emphases improves the likelihood of success. Our research suggests that leaders are more than willing to communicate but they often approach the task on a tactical rather than strategic level. Indeed, they may give stirring speeches, write inspiring newsletter columns, or develop clever slogans. How do these communicative activities translate into meaningful coordinated strategy? We answer this question by discussing a model that can guide leaders’ communicative efforts (See Figure 1). It starts with properly assessing the context.

### **Assess the Context**

Effective leaders assess those they seek to influence. A proper assessment allows leader’s to discern the group’s limits and possibilities. Push too slow and key initiatives never get traction. Push too fast and they falter through sheer exhaustion. We highlight below two specific activities that can help leaders find just the right rhythm to exert influence.

#### **Survey the cognitive, emotional, and volitional landscape of the stakeholders.**

Leaders operate in a multi-dimensional landscape populated by various groups with different beliefs, values, emotions and desires. Leaders, like road builders, need to thoroughly understand their territory before proceeding. In particular, they need to identify the major interest groups and ask the following questions about each group:

- ? What are their key beliefs and values? (cognitive)
- ? What is their emotional state? (emotional)
- ? What are they willing to do? (volitional)

By answering these questions, leaders can ascertain important commonalities and differences between various stakeholders. These insights prove crucial in formulating strategy.

In one case, the leaders at a manufacturing company thought they were doing their employees a favor by offering direct deposit of their payroll checks. Therefore, they were totally unprepared for the resistance that resulted. Employees knew, logically, that this was a great convenience, but *emotionally*, it was a different matter. The labor force was fiercely traditional and they didn't like their spouse knowing how much money they were making or having immediate access to the funds. As a result, this "benefit" was quickly withdrawn. Such examples merely echo a trend noted by Professors Beer and Nohria that "the brutal fact is that 70% of all change initiatives fail" ("Cracking the Code of Change", *Harvard Business Review*, May-June 2000, p. 133).

We are not arguing that leaders should simply acquiesce to pre-existing beliefs, emotions, and desires. Rather, we are suggesting that wise leaders consider which battles are worth fighting and then position proper messages accordingly. The difficulty of this task is compounded by the fact that stakeholders' beliefs, emotions, and desires are constantly evolving. For instance, one can hardly conceive of President Bush leading a galvanizing war on terrorism before September 11. The events of that day permanently changed the cognitive, emotional, and volitional landscape of most people.

**Describe and evaluate the existing communication system.** All communication systems present opportunities and constraints. Some excel at the rapid transmission of information while inhibiting deep understanding of organizational issues. Others focus on the production of elaborate oral presentations that discourage meaningful dialogue.

Consequently, leaders need to discern the impact of the existing communication system on organizational life and accomplishments by first answering these base-line questions:

- ? *What are the existing channels of communication?*
- ? *What are the communicative goals for each channel?*
- ? *What types of messages are typically transmitted in these channels?*
- ? *What is the target audience for each channel?*

Two even more difficult questions emerge during the evaluation phase. *First, are the channels compatible with the communicative goals?* For example, some organizations have constructed elaborate electronic databases in an effort to better manage employee knowledge. They often discover that employees are disinclined to share their ideas in such an impersonal forum. Effective “knowledge management” requires a more intimate face-to-face channel. *Second, is the organization communicating about the right issues?*

Answering this question encourages leaders to think about the link between the content of typical messages and organizational goals. The question also invites to leaders to ponder the concerns of employees. Determining “the right issues” provides the starting point for crafting the leadership strategy.

## **Craft the Strategy**

The context provides the backdrop for developing the strategy. Making the right tradeoffs while formulating a strategy involves a three-step process.

**Select communicative goals that link to the organizational goals.** Executives perform a complex organizational role requiring them to think long-term, synthesize massive amounts information, institute broad policies, and establish corporate objectives. Unfortunately once these priorities are articulated, many executives simply assume that

employees will understand them. Broadcasting the corporate objectives and priorities through existing channels may help. But when questioned about these objectives, employees typically respond by saying, “I’m not sure if I completely understand them.”

That means executives must develop a set of strategic communication goals that correspond to organizational goals (see Table 1). An executive who wants employees to understand the basic business climate might develop a communicative goal of educating employees about the state of the business. The word “education” suggests something deeper than merely providing information. Any serious discussion of communicative goals naturally leads to considering sequencing issues. For instance, in one Fortune 500 company we crafted the objective around “instilling a sense of the vision and organizational priorities” but we realized from the contextual analysis that many employees felt that the communication system lacked credibility. Therefore, we decided the first priority was to “cultivate trust in a new communication system”.

**Underscore and explore a few key themes.** We have discussed elsewhere that executives generally choose one of five basic communication strategies (see Figure 2):

- ? *Spray & Pray*: Executives shower employees with all kinds of information, hoping that employees will be able to sort out the significant from insignificant;
- ? *Tell & Sell*: Executives communicate a more limited set of messages, first telling employees about the key issues, then selling them on the wisdom of their approach;
- ? *Underscore & Explore*: Executives focus on developing a few core messages clearly linked to organizational success, while actively listening for potential misunderstandings and unrecognized obstacles.

- ? *Identify & Reply*: Executives identify key employee concerns and then reply to them.
- ? *Withhold & Uphold*: Executives withhold information until necessary. Secrecy and control are the implicit values of this strategy (See Clampitt, DeKoch, & Cashman, “A Strategy for Communicating about Uncertainty”, *Academy of Management Executive*, Winter 2000, 41- 57).

Many organizational leaders gravitate toward the “Spray and Pray” and “Tell & Sell” strategies for admirable reasons. The “Spray and Pray” strategy creates the illusion that everyone is informed. Some executives will go to meetings armed with their “deck” of 100 PowerPoint slides, delivering the message in rapid-fire fashion. Employees often have difficulty interpreting or making sense out of the information thrust at them. The “Tell & Sell” strategy demonstrates the (cheer)leader’s enthusiastic endorsement of an initiative. Yet, no one ever asks for employee feedback or checks to see if the message was understood.

The “Underscore & Explore” strategy resolves that problem by addressing fewer issues and then exploring employee interpretations. It has the added benefit of creating dialogue around a few core concepts that have the greatest potential to transform the organization. The Boldt Company President, Robert DeKoch, successfully used this strategy to create understanding of the organizational theme of “profitably growing” the company. At a strategic planning meeting, he initiated a conversation about how all employees needed to “find themselves in the financial levers”. He weaved this theme into his communications on every possible occasion. For example, as part of the “exploring” strategy, employees were invited on a rotating basis to ask questions of the executive team.

Whenever someone asked about why the company chose to pursue or not pursue a particular project, the executives linked their answer back to the “financial lever” notion.

**Translate corporate objectives and priorities.** Underscoring a theme is not enough. To be effective, executives must play an active role in translating the theme into corporate priorities and objectives at each level of the organization. To do this, executives need to first understand that the words and phrases in the organizational objectives may have little meaning for non-managerial employees. And forcing them to carry around a card containing the objectives or memorize the words may not help.

One useful strategy is for managers at every level to reword the corporate priorities in language that would be appropriate for their division. For example, if the core theme revolves around “efficiency”, the corporate objective might be to cut \$10 million of costs this year. Managers and employees need to translate that number into specific action and priorities such as “decrease my machine’s down-time by 10%”.

## **Implement the Strategy**

Great strategy cannot overcome poor execution. Executing a communication strategy requires skill, tenacity, and insight that leaders can glean from the following tactics.

**Use repetition and redundancy.** Advertisers have long known the value of repetition and redundancy. Redundant messages replicate a central idea but vary the mode of expression, such as the “Avis, We Try Harder” advertising campaign. Their commercials showed numerous situations in which the company was “trying harder”. Likewise, successful leaders learn that repeating a slogan while varying the examples increases the likelihood that various stakeholders will hear a similar message, remember it and act on it. Reiterating key messages signals that the leaders are serious about the idea; it

serves a legitimizing function. Listeners often have clever ways of discounting messages that conflict with their preconceived notions. Repetition helps break through those psychological resistance points, increasing the likelihood that the message will reach listeners at a time when they are most open.

Leaders at Appleton Papers, like Dave Spencer, use repetition and redundancy to communicate about the importance of a key organizational value, “Customer Focused Quality”. They fund CFQ employee conferences, publish a CFQ newsletter, and even encourage employees to buy specialized CFQ car license tags. They redundantly underscore this key value by seeking out and retelling stories about employees who have lived by the CFQ creed. Does it work? Ask any employee and he/she will probably relate several recent examples of what the acronym means. Most employees want to know the “big picture” and feel part of something bigger than themselves; CFQ provides the perfect rhetorical tool to meet that need.

**Identify and utilize opinion leaders.** Non-managerial opinion leaders are an often overlooked yet influential force in organizations. All groups have at least one informal leader who serves a vital role in the social structure of employees. Leaders can identify these individuals by asking the group, “Who do you typically talk to when you have a question about what you should do?” Opinion leaders are respected for their insight and expertise, are typically more outgoing, and are good at expressing their opinions as well as clarifying those of others. They help members of the group make sense of organizational life, and they set the norms for acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

If executives want their initiatives to be implemented, they must garner the support of opinion leaders throughout the organization. This involves identifying key opinion



leaders, determining their understanding of organizational priorities, seeking their input, and assessing their degree of support. If opinion leaders express resistance, management needs to address how to gain their endorsement. In many respects, the “buy-in” of the opinion leaders is the most important determinant of whether programs succeed or fail.

**Select the right channels.** Channels of communication, and the way they are used, greatly influence how messages are interpreted. Some organizations fall into an event-based communication system that only kicks into action when some major announcement needs to be made, signaling that something “big” is going to happen. Bill Journey of PepsiCo Business Solutions aptly describes the consequences of such systems when he remarked: “Employees know that the organization only gathers for ‘weddings and ‘funerals’. So once ‘the big meeting’ is announced everyone starts speculating about who ‘died’. The channel choice symbolizes ‘importance’ and the rumor mill starts cranking out stories about whose division is going to be downsized.” Such systems restrict leaders’ ability to build their credibility, foster employee commitment, and provide an enduring sense of purpose. So their first order of business might be to build new channels into the system to allow for the routine and systematic discussion of key issues.

Even if the existing communication has all the right mechanisms, leaders still must make the choices about what channels to use. For instance, when announcing major changes, leaders should use multiple channels because it increases the probability employees will hear key messages. Some employees ignore print media or e-mail and only respond to oral messages. For others, it’s the reverse. Leaders should also use “rich” channels, such as face-to-face meetings, to allow for rapid feedback and quick adaptation to employee concerns. The very expense of a dynamic channel sends a powerful symbolic

message that leaders care about effectively communicating with employees. If new initiatives are only announced via corporate memorandum, then it is very difficult to 1) ascertain how employees are responding to the changes, and 2) make the necessary mid-course corrections.

## **Provoke Dialogue**

Some leaders are effective at persuasively presenting information. Dialogue goes further, encouraging give-and-take, and allowing everyone to influence outcomes. Many people fear this kind of interchange, wrongly thinking that it undermines their credibility and diminishes their influence. To be sure, it is a messier affair than a flashy speech, but in the long run, meaningful dialogue promotes deeper commitment to the leader's ideas, purpose or mission. The following methods have proven helpful in provoking meaningful dialogue.

**Attack “thought-terminating clichés”.** Robert Clifton used this wonderful phrase to highlight how people can use language to stop further thought, discussion and action (*Reform and the Psychology of Totalism: A Study of ‘Brainwashing’ in China*, New York, Norton, 1961). Once someone invokes a thought-terminating cliché it becomes difficult to probe much further. In politics, for example, once an initiative has been successfully labeled as “racist”, it becomes difficult to have further dialogue. Every organizational culture creates these kinds of labels and phrases. In one Fortune 500 Company, the cliché was “here we go again”. By linking new initiatives to this phrase, employees subtly resisted change, disengaged from the process, and stopped further discussion, regardless of the merits of the proposal.

Successful leaders identify these clichés, expose them, and trigger more thoughtful discussions about their proposals. In the case above, leaders directly attacked the cliché by

proactively presenting a direct counterargument--“This initiative is NOT one of these ‘here-we-go-again’ ideas and here’s why...”. Then they invited employees to discuss the differences between this initiative and others.

**Clarify confusing events by selecting the right frames.** Message-rich environments present employees with an informational Rorschach test. Employees are exposed to so much information from so many different sources that they can interpret events in almost any way possible. One of the leader’s most important skills is to make sense out of this confusing mush of information, motives, and interpretations. Why, for instance, does a company on a cost-cutting binge build an employee gym? These are exactly the kinds of questions that skilled leaders can field and help employees understand. If they don’t, others will and the leader cedes the conceptual ground to others.

Selecting the right frame helps employees make sense out of the conflicting morass of information (see Fairhurst & Sarr, *The art of framing: Managing the language of leadership*, 1996). The frame acts as a lens through which the other issues are viewed, highlighting certain images and refracting others. For example, many Appleton Papers employees were confused about why cost-cutting was emphasized for some initiatives and not for others. One organizational leader, Tom Cashman, deftly explained the situation by invoking the “three world” frame and discussing the typical product lifecycle (Launch, Growth, and Decline). He noted that there were different funding rules for new products in the “Launch” world than there were for existing products in the “Decline” world. In fact, each of these “three worlds” had a different set of priorities and decision-making rules. Repeatedly using this frame not only helped employees

make sense of seemingly contradictory mandates; it also encouraged employees to “work smarter”.

**Check the pulse.** It’s hard to provoke the right kind of dialogue if leaders don’t know what employees are thinking. We designed a process, called the Pulse, to gather and provide feedback in a time-sensitive way. At the heart of this process are three items:

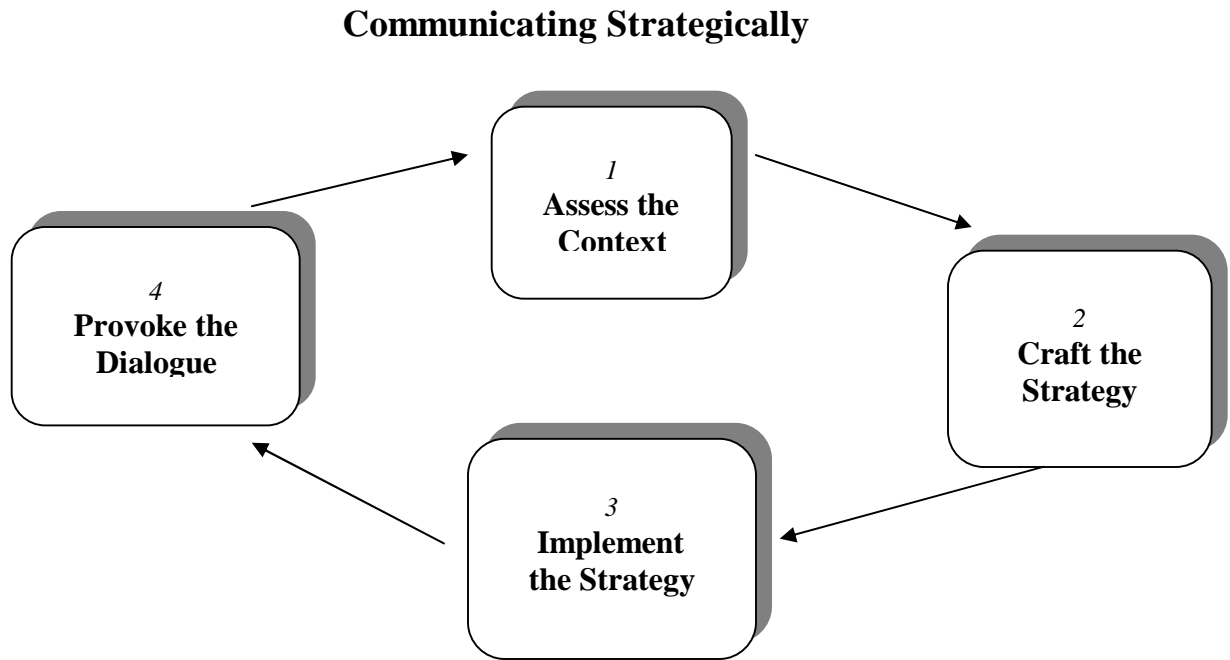
- ? a short survey which is routinely administered to a rotating sample of the organization which identifies employee concerns,
- ? the Pulse Report, which is a 1-page summary of the findings, presenting quantitative data for the numerically-rated questions and major themes for the open-ended questions, and
- ? a “Talking Points” document, which is a 1-page summary for managers, outlining how executives think about the issues drawn from the current Pulse. This serves as the basis for the updates managers provide to their employees.

Originally we thought the value of the process would be that it demonstrates that management is listening to employee concerns and responding to them in a timely manner. That proved accurate. We also discovered some unforeseen benefits: the process acts as an early warning device enabling the organization to address issues that emerge. It also helps focus communication efforts and teaches employees how management thinks about issues through the Talking Points document. Most surprisingly, over time, it changes the way executives think and communicate by forcing them to articulate their decision-making criteria and consistently apply it.

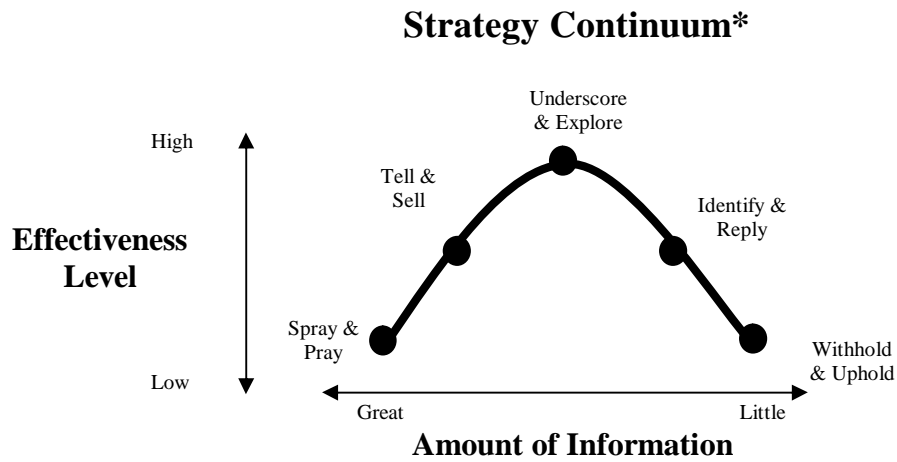
## **Conclusion**

Communicating strategically requires a special set of skills. Leaders need to think like an analyst to assess the context, visualize like a craftsman to fashion strategy, perform like an elite commando to implement strategy, and agitate like a talk-show host to provoke dialogue. Few people possess all these skills. That may explain why effective leaders are so rare.

-Figure 1-



-Figure 2-



\* Adapted from Clampitt, DeKoch, & Cashman, "A Strategy for Communicating about Uncertainty", *Academy of Management Executive*, Winter 2000, 41- 57.

-Table 1-

### Potential Communication Objectives

<b>Sharing Information</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? Providing up-to-date information.</li><li>? Coordinating plans across units.</li><li>? Sharing ideas for continuous improvement.</li><li>? Clarifying job expectations.</li><li>? Providing feedback about the company scorecard.</li><li>? “Pushing” the most critical information while allowing employees to “pull” other information.</li></ul>	<b>Building Purpose</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? Inspiring and motivating employees.</li><li>? Providing a sense of direction.</li><li>? Instilling a sense of vision and values.</li><li>? Praising examples of the “values in action”.</li><li>? Focusing attention on the most critical issues necessary for success.</li></ul>
<b>Maintaining Social Relationships</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? Meeting social and affiliation needs.</li><li>? Building rapport and relationships.</li><li>? Clarifying misperceptions between units.</li></ul>	<b>Making Meaning</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>? Making sense out of conflicting information.</li><li>? Transforming executive “intuitions” into shared information.</li><li>? Teaching about executive “thinking routines”.</li><li>? Clarifying the link between employees’ goals and business objectives.</li><li>? Shaping interpretation of company events.</li></ul>

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