

Leaders



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Communications: The Key to Leadership

It is simply impossible to be a great leader without being a great communicator. Communication is the lifeblood of leadership – it's the way direction is provided, ideas are shared and teamwork is built. Despite the fundamental importance of communication, when the stakes are high and the runway is short, leaders commonly forget to communicate.

In my experience working with hundreds of executives, the failure to communicate is usually unconscious. In the swirl of competing pressures, deadlines and fires to put out, the pace of work for today's executive ranks tends to crowd out a thoughtful, intentional approach to communicating with employees.

The first casualty of an overloaded executive team is communication. The paradox of this truism is obvious: the misfires, disconnects and misalignments that consume the leader's time and energy are the *consequence*, not the *cause* of gaps in communications.

This Guide is designed to quickly build practical capabilities in leadership communication. It uncovers the common challenges and pitfalls in leaders' communications and then recommends fundamental ways to improve performance. A playbook of specialized advice and techniques for communicating in a context of change is introduced, including guidance for the particularly difficult task of advancing culture change. A set of simple, flexible tools is provided for you to use on the go, ensuring a structured and planned approach to employee communications.

Challenges

From my experience working with organizational leaders over the last 20 years, I've observed a consistent pattern of challenges in leadership communications:

Information overload and meaning underload. Quite simply, employees are tuning out of executive messages. Drowning in email, they are quick to hit “delete” on all-staff messages from leaders. Town halls have become a sea of employees glued to their iPhones, convinced that something more relevant is happening outside the meeting's four walls. Executives persist in reading lengthy, canned speeches and by the end of their address, they'd be hard pressed to find an employee who can recall a single thing they said. Leaders and employee communicators are losing the battle for hearts and minds in today's attention economy warfare. At the same time, employees are craving a sense of meaning and purpose in their work – and that appetite is rarely satisfied through their leader's communication.

Trust deficit. The digital landscape we live in has triggered a radical democratization of information, where citizens have unprecedented access to unfiltered information in real-time. Social media has dramatically and permanently shifted employees' expectations about the

speed and transparency of information – and leaders' attempts to keep up have been woefully inadequate. Employees demand unfiltered, relevant and timely communication. Instead, they are usually served up stubbornly corporate and carefully spun information; that is, packaged communication released through a slow drip and choked by a risk-averse hierarchical system of command and control. The result? Erosion of trust in leaders is at an all-time high¹. This is bad news for organizational performance and worse news for communications since *trust is a pre-condition of communication*.

Relegated responsibility. Leaders increasingly struggle to manage their time and focus in the face of unrelenting demands and deadlines. Time-poor and exhausted, many leaders resort to relegating their leadership communications responsibility to the employee communications team. This tends to create a lopsided approach with an over-reliance on transactional channels such as intranets and newsletters. Essential vision, direction, context and meaning for employee communications that can only be brought to life by a leader, is absent. Symptoms of this pattern include the proliferation of CEO blogs, clearly written by communications staff, and executive speeches that sound nothing like the person delivering the

1 [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), 2019.

speech. The deliberate or unintended punting of leadership communication to a corporate communications team is a sure-fire way to end up in a frustration trap: the leaders' are disenchanted with the service provided (often complaining it's "not strategic"), the employee communicators feel they are set up to fail and employees are chronically dissatisfied with the relevance and timeliness of information sharing.

For more on establishing a high performance employee communications function that supports (but does not replace) leadership communication, check out the [Results Map® Guide to Employee Communications and Engagement](#).

Vortex of complexity. As the pace of technology advancements and change continues to rise, employees are increasingly swept up in a vortex of complexity. Corporations' strategic plans, organizational charts, values and policies have become so byzantine, that even the most enthusiastic employee has difficulty following the bouncy ball of where their organization is going, and how they're supposed to contribute. There is a striking lack of shared meaning – executives and staff discuss concepts such as "client-centered service," "modernization" or "transformation," but they lack a common understanding of the terms. The strategic, operational and cultural consequences of these gaps in shared meaning are often disastrous.

The fundamentals outlined in the next section take aim at these common challenges and pitfalls of leadership communications.

