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The Purpose and Power of Leadership Communication

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In a world of extraordinary change and heightened uncertainty, organisational leaders are faced with two core challenges. The first is to remind the organisation of what remains constant, such as purpose, values, and culture. These provide stability and meaning amid turbulence and change, while also sparking the engagement, energy, and creativity of employees at all levels. Leaders need to persuasively remind their team of these anchors, often reinterpreting and reframing them in order to continue making sense in a changing context. Secondly, leaders need to build the agile capabilities required to respond to continuous change in an organisation, including strategic sensing—generating and sharing market and customer insights across the organisation—and enabling collaborative working across the boundaries of the organisation to act on these insights.

In a VUCA world, both leadership and organisational communication have never been more important; sitting at the nexus between strategy formulation and strategy execution, both remain in a constant state of flux. Leadership communication is not just about how leaders convey messages, but critically how they engage employees at all levels of the organisation, including those with formal and informal authority. The leader's task is to create an organisation-wide conversation that is continually evolving the strategic posture of the organisation and how it is to be implemented. This chapter will explore how leaders initiate and sustain this conversation.

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This chapter will seek to help you answer the following questions:

- What is the purpose of leadership communication in the face of uncertainty?
- How do leaders define organisational reality?
- How is leadership communication processed in the informal networks of an organisation?
- What attributes and skills do leaders need to be more effective communicators?
- How does organisational communication support agility?

What Is the Purpose of Leadership Communication?

When I have asked senior leaders across a range of sectors why they invest their scarce time in communication, I receive a range of answers. The chief people officer of a global software business described to me her organisation's hierarchy of objectives when it comes to internal communications. At the most basic level, communication is about the dissemination of general information that people should know, for example, the company's latest set of results. At the next level up, people need to have the information necessary to do their job effectively. The next two levels contain what could be described as 'higher order objectives'. The first is to share with people the purpose and values of the organisation, explaining what we are about and what we stand for in the world. The second is to connect people to one another and forge a sense of community. These higher order objectives encapsulate the experience of what it is like to belong to this organisation and are often communicated through actions as well as words. For example, the chief people officer described the statements made by the company and the actions it took in response to the death of George Floyd in the US and the subsequent events. She described the communications of the company as intentional, with a very clear purpose of defining its stand on an important global issue. Having a point of view on real-world events, rather than simply rising above the debate, is a departure for the company and not without controversy. However, as the global economy begins to recover from the pandemic, and the war for talent heats up again, a clear definition of the company's purpose and values, and the experience of belonging to its global community, is an important differentiator in the marketplace.

Ensuring there is strategic clarity and alignment within an organisation is another important reason why leaders need to invest significant time in communication. Alignment is crucial if you want the efforts of all your people focused on delivering your strategic goals. Much research suggests the greatest challenge is not strategy formulation, but rather strategy execution. The Chief Information Officer (CIO) of a major retail bank discussed the communication process he uses with his team and wider division to achieve alignment. Every quarter, he spends two days with his direct reports. The time is split into three sections: first, he will spend extended time sharing his own perspective on the strategic landscape, reflecting on anything in the wider environment or within the organisation that has changed during the preceding three months; second, team members have the opportunity to replay what they heard and ask for clarifications; finally, once there is clarity and agreement on what has been said, they will have the opportunity to challenge, discuss and share their own ideas. Having role modelled this approach, the CIO then tasks the individuals with replicating this process with their own teams. What was interesting to me was the extent of the preparation that the CIO invested ahead of the quarterly communication event, sometimes stretching into days. He emphasised to me that if he wanted clarity and alignment within his team, then he needed his own thinking to be razor sharp. Other leaders have remarked to me in the past that the need to communicate with others was a means of gaining clarity in their own minds.

This same CIO made another interesting observation about the purpose of leadership communication. He described his ability to create strategic clarity and alignment of action as limited largely to his direct reports. Their responsibility was to translate this for their own teams, thus cascading alignment down through the organisation. However, he viewed communicating the culture to its several thousand employees as a key part of his job as leader. Much of this is achieved through actions, not words. Leaders shape the culture through what they pay attention to—for example, what measures of performance they consistently highlight, what behaviours surface under pressure, what guides their decision making over scarce resources, what they reward, who they promote, and how they role model certain values and behaviours (Schein & Schein, 2019).

A further reason for investing in communication is to achieve higher levels of employee engagement. The MacLeod Report, commissioned by the UK government, identified four drivers of engagement. The first is a strong strategic narrative, that clearly articulates the purpose and vision of the organisation, and the journey the organisation is on. The second driver, engaging

managers, works to combat the old maxim 'people join organisations, but they leave managers'. Engaging managers provides clarity around role expectation as well as constructive feedback and coaching to enable the individual to reach their full potential. A third driver is integrity, meaning there is little or no gap between the espoused values of the organisation, captured in various company publications, and what is lived out in practice by leaders at all levels. The fourth driver of engagement is employee voice. Of course, giving employees voice means leaders learning to listen! Listening does not necessarily mean agreeing with every view expressed or acting on every idea offered, but it does mean acting on some things and ensuring that employees feel they have been heard. I will return to this idea of the listening leader later in this chapter.

When we consider Macleod's four drivers of engagement, communication permeates every single one. However, it is important to note that this does not mean old style, one-way corporate communication, but rather a fully engaged and ongoing organisational conversation. This is even more important when so much of the context in which the organisation operates is constantly and rapidly changing. I discuss how leaders generate and sustain this conversation in the next section.

Defining the Organisation's Reality

While all the things we have discussed so far are important, communication is the essence of leadership and should take up much, if not most, of the leader's time. Karl Weick (1995) in his seminal work on sensemaking in organisations puts it this way, 'One message for practitioners is that what is real is more up for grabs than they realize … managers need to author, examine, and critique realities thought to be in place. They cannot take those realities for granted or assume they are obvious to anyone else'. Max de Pree, the former CEO of Herman Miller, is famously quoted as saying the 'the first responsibility of a leader is defining reality'; this becomes even more important when the environment in which the organisation operates is characterised by heightened uncertainty and complexity. The task of communication is in fact the challenge of managing and making sense out of complex and confusing situations. We step into a leadership role when we do this.

Creating a strategic narrative is exactly this. Ancel (2012) describes a strategic narrative as essentially an imagined future, one that 'sets the stage by

interpreting the relevant history and current conditions. It defines the challenges to be addressed, and it describes how those challenges will be met'. The power of a strategic narrative is that it 'establishes the fundamental understandings that let people find their place, becoming part of the story and taking right actions in the face of a changing environment'.

During the global pandemic, Michael O'Leary, the Group Chief Executive of Ryanair, boldly declared that the clean-out of the airline industry presented real opportunity: 'The real seismic change from Covid will be the growth opportunities across Europe. They are much greater than after the financial crisis or 9/11' (FT 27/12/20). O'Leary re-framed and re-defined the reality for the key stakeholders in his business. Sensemaking and sensegiving in this way enable the organisation to step forward amid uncertainty with confidence and purpose—it can stabilise the organisation in a time of crisis.

If leaders are in the business of defining reality, it does raise the question as to whose interests they have in mind. In another seminal definition of sensemaking, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) describe it as a process whereby leaders 'influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organisational reality'. In other words, leaders have a worldview and through the communication process seek to influence others to embrace this.

For those who may have misgivings about this perspective on leadership communication and its Orwellian undertones (which others may happily embrace it) I would add three additional insights. Firstly, my mantra to many senior leaders is there is no such thing as no communication. Often leaders hold back, particularly in times of uncertainty, waiting for the moment when they can speak with certainty, conveying only facts. Typically, this strategy simply leaves a vacuum that will be rapidly filled by the sensemaking of others. What leaders need to grasp is that everything is a communication. Even the act of not communicating will be interpreted and imbued with meaning by others. Organisational life is like the unfolding drama on a stage, where every action, as well as every word, is observed and integrated into the interpretive process. The choice for leaders is not *whether* to communicate or not, but simply if they wish to *actively manage the meaning* that their words and actions convey.

A second important point for leaders to understand is that they are not the only ones seeking to manage meaning. Other actors, sometimes deliberately and consciously, sometimes unconsciously, will contribute to how those around them make sense of the organisation's reality. Cowan (2017) describes how the intended narrative of organisational leaders is often met by the

emergence of a counter narrative, both of which then contend to become the dominant narrative. This counter narrative can be constructed and driven by formal stakeholders or simply by influencers in the informal communication networks of the organisation, a powerful force that savvy leaders will tap into—more about this later.

The final point I would make is that what removes the sensemaking process from the realms of manipulation is the willingness of leaders to have their own version of reality, their own truth, challenged, informed, and shaped by the input of others. In other words, the communication process becomes a true dialogue. In this way, leaders create a dynamic, collective organisational conversation, one that can evolve to address emergent challenges and opportunities and integrate fresh insights and learning from the organisation's experience. What is most interesting are the ingredients, such as authenticity and trust, that create the conditions where this conversation can thrive, as well as the communication channels, including social platforms that enable it. We will return to this point shortly.

Language and symbolism are key sensemaking devices. I spent the first ten years of my career working for a national telecom's supplier, migrating from being a monopoly provider to operating in a fully liberalised and highly competitive marketplace. One of the most important changes we brought about was replacing the word 'subscriber', with the word 'customer'. This single change in the use of language encapsulated the entirety of the journey the organisation was on. Another example that demonstrates the power of symbolism in sensemaking can be seen in a gift given to Pope Francis. Shortly after his election in 2013, he received a 1984 Renault 4 from a priest in northern Italy. He began using it to drive himself around the Vatican and the vehicle soon came to serve as a potent symbol of his message of humility and simplicity.

All of this points to communication as the essence of the leader's role. Not all leaders understand this. I have had several conversations over the years cajoling and encouraging some to invest more of their time connecting and communicating, challenging them to put communication at the top of the 'to do list' rather than on the 'nice things to do if I have time list! I remember one interaction intending to persuade a senior executive in a large telco to spend more time communicating, gained the response 'what else would I be doing!' He understood that as a leader, communication is the job; this is all the more true in circumstances of great uncertainty and rapid change.

Reflection

- How much of your leadership time is invested in communicating?
- How do you respond to Max de Pree's view that 'the first responsibility of a leader is defining reality'?

Understanding the Dynamics of Organisational Communication

If communication is a critical component of what a leader does, then understanding the dynamics of organisational communication is essential. Many leaders I have worked with indulge in event-driven, 'tick-box' communication. For example, the town hall meeting to kick-off the latest change initiative takes place and can be crossed off as complete on the Gantt chart. In fact, what has happened is the communication process has just begun. I like the metaphor of throwing a rock into a pond. Once the rock hits the water it sends ripples out in every direction. Similarly, the communication that has landed will now begin to be processed by the informal communication networks of the organisation, and often reworked, reframed, and interpreted to mean different things. These informal networks represent the collective and informal sensemaking and sensegiving processes of an organisation.

The CEO's carefully crafted presentation at the town hall meeting represents the official narrative. It will describe how the top team views the organisation's operating environment, what are the key threats and opportunities, the nature of competition and how the organisation needs to think, act, and behave to succeed. However no sooner has the message landed, then sitting around tables at break time the question will be posed to local leaders, and other informal influencers, 'What do you think, what does this mean?' So begins the process of interpretation, where the rational logic of the executive team meets the emotional reality of peoples' experience and feelings. Often, this process happens out of earshot of the leaders whose logic is now the focus of sustained scrutiny.

If the CEO's message represents the official narrative, and we accept that within the informal networks of the organisation this will be reworked or indeed directly challenged with a counter narrative, surely leaders need to know how to influence this process to ensure the official narrative survives intact to become the dominant narrative? Leaders need to go beyond formal organisational charts to understand the informal interactions that shape beliefs within an organisation.

There are two aspects of informal networks that are key. The first relates to structural dimensions such as centrality, which identifies the actors in a network that have the greatest density of connections and therefore the most opportunity to influence. Another structural feature relates to strong and weak ties. We often focus more on the former—strong ties are characterised

as those with whom we have regular and meaningful interaction such as family, friends, or work colleagues. The basic premise is that people are most likely to be influenced by and come to agree with those with whom they have frequent interaction (in network terms, are more strongly tied). In this way informal communication networks could be viewed as a constraining factor, driving people towards conformity in their attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours. Weak ties, in contrast, might be simply acquaintances, people we meet occasionally. However, the importance of weak ties is that they provide a bridge to other networks. From a communications perspective, people with weak ties can connect across organisational silos and boundaries to accelerate the diffusion of a particular narrative.

The second aspect considers the nature of the relationship that binds a network together. Informal networks that construct and propagate a particular narrative are more likely to be based on affective relationships, such as trust and friendship, in contrast to more task-related networks. A few years ago, I conducted research in a large retail bank. The bank had been through two mergers in the previous decade, and, despite the passage of time, employees would often speak about a colleague with reference to the bank they had initially joined. My research focused on the question of what social network people turned to in organisations in times of heightened uncertainty to make sense of what was going on. If people adopted a particular narrative, how did they access it in the first instance and with whom did they process this? There were some more obvious explanations, for example proximity plays a part. Simply put people are more likely to interact with those physically close to them and easily accessed, such as colleagues in their bank branch. Other explanations were more intriguing. One significant network of relationships that surfaced included people who had joined the bank at the same time and shared the initial weeks of training and induction together. Deep bonds were forged during this shared experience, and decades later people remained in touch. The group had followed different career paths and trajectories and as a result were geographically dispersed and located at different levels and functions within the bank. However, the strength of the network was such that it provided opportunities to gain a range of perspectives and gather insight from several sources, later processed and integrated into an emergent narrative.

What are the practical implications of all of this for leaders? Firstly, recognising that there are many actors at all levels of an organisation engaged in sensemaking who will influence what emerges as the dominant narrative of the organisation. Secondly, understanding that many of these actors enjoy high levels of trust and credibility within informal communication networks,

that can be highly persuasive. Thirdly, understanding the power of the social influence that drives conformity of attitudes and beliefs. The famous experiments conducted by Solomon Asch in the 1950s vividly demonstrated the power of social influence that results in a change of behaviour or belief to fit in with a group. There are two types of social conformity—a desire to 'fit in' or be liked (normative) and a desire to be correct (informational). In the context of organisational communication, both operate as a gravitational pull, causing people to align with the dominant narrative within their informal communication network. During periods of heightened uncertainty or ambiguity, while people will listen to what senior leaders say, they will turn quickly to their own personal networks to both interpret and corroborate this. So, the real implication for leaders is to recognise the limitations of their own communication reach and influence, and to harness the power of these informal communication networks. Identifying key influencers at all levels of the organisation and investing time in their understanding of your message is key.

Communication Strategies

In my work around organisational communication over the last two decades, I have observed three core philosophies that translate into distinct communication strategies. While communication technologies and platforms have radically changed, if the core philosophy remains intact, the intent behind the communication strategy is the same.

The first approach is governed by **a control mindset**, characterised by carefully crafted messages, stage managed events, and top-down communication that seeks to sell the strategy and persuade the rest of the organisation of the logic and wisdom of managerial approach. Large amounts of time spent packaging the message and little time spent in real dialogue with employees are signs that this tell-and-sell strategy is in play. Even opportunities for input are managed with 'questions' for the senior team hand-picked and advised in advance to avoid anyone going off message. Most town hall meetings I have attended follow this format. Groysberg and Slind (2012) have described this as the old model of corporate communication; however, it remains surprisingly robust in many organisations, or at least continues to coexist alongside strategies aimed at greater levels of engagement. Of course, this approach offers certain benefits, providing consistency of message as well as speed when you need to communicate something quickly to the organisation. So, there are certain contexts where this model of communication may be the best

choice. However, regardless of how correct the logic may be, the trade-offs remain. The belief that the message can be controlled is an illusion. The less input that others have at the point of delivery of the communication, the greater the likelihood that the narrative will be reworked in the informal communication networks already discussed, with every chance that an alternative narrative will emerge.

The second communication strategy is one designed to **engage employees** and create and sustain an organisational conversation around its purpose, values, and strategic priorities. It is important from the outset to say that this is not a rudderless approach, where the conversation is free form and shaped by the whims of the moment. Rather, there is an intentionality in how leaders frame the conversation and identify the themes for discussion and exploration. Leaders talk *with* employees, not to them; listening is a key skill. Conversation then flows across the organisation, connecting colleagues and peers, as well as closing the gap between leaders and employees. In this way, strategy emerges from a cross-organisational conversation.

This conversation can be enabled in many ways. I have supported several executive teams in the design and implementation of face-to-face workshops that set out to engage the organisation in a strategic conversation. Mostly these have been small, around twenty people, which allowed for maximum participation. However, processes such as Future Search, developed by Marvin Weisbord and Sandra Janoff (2010), can bring together up to 100 people in a room or indeed hundreds in parallel rooms. Future Search seeks to bring together a microcosm of the whole system, connecting people across the boundaries of the organisation, and discovering both the common ground and energy to forge new futures together. The principles behind the approach have been tested and proven over three decades.

Murray (2014) describes three parts to powerful conversations—process, themes, and skills. Process refers to how the conversation takes place, how it is enabled, and whether it results in the desired outcomes like increased organisational agility. The second consideration for leaders has to do with themes, more precisely with whether you have framed the conversation correctly, so that it is focused on the right issues and informed by the right content. Finally, powerful conversations require leaders to have the skills required to generate high-quality interactions.

In recent years, social media platforms like Workplace and Yammer have provided a potent tool to connect people across an organisation, mobilising communities of action around strategic priorities, informing and shaping both the dialogue and consequent actions. Bradley and McDonald (2011) describe the emergence of the social organisation and the potential for mass

collaboration. They make the point that this does not happen by itself, rather leaders must 'actively nurture mass collaboration around a compelling purpose that is both meaningful to the participants and produces value for the enterprise'. A leader of a global function in a large facilities business spoke to me about the use of digital media platforms within the organisation to test and pilot new ideas and emerging strategic priorities. The company uses social media and mobile platforms to connect and engage a global workforce of several hundred thousand in a discussion around key strategic themes. One conversation around diversity and inclusion prompted some 10,000 comments and replies. Similarly, the Chief People Officer of a software firm with a global footprint described the pervasive use of digital channels in their communication strategy. She went on to outline how the business had used these platforms to engage the whole organisation in a conversation about its values, and how the data and insights this generated continue to be used some time after the conclusion of the initiative.

There is a critical point of intersection here between communication and organisational strategy. When organisations operate under conditions of uncertainty and complexity—and its increasingly difficult to point to organisations for whom this is not true—then strategy formulation can no longer be the preserve of the top team. When strategy evolves through a dynamic process of experimentation, discovery, and learning, rather than a static planning process, opens up the strategy dialogue as a capability in its own right. Yves Doz (2020) and Christian Stadler (2020) are among the leading strategic thinkers who urge organisations to adopt this approach. Doz (2020) argues that, in contrast to a debate where one side seeks to convince others of the merit of their viewpoint, a strategic dialogue with both internal and external stakeholders sharpens strategic sensitivity as participants surface and consider issues, assumptions, and underlying frames. The outcome is deeper insight and the capacity to co-create a better and more innovative solution.

The third communication strategy I continue to see in use, although it is in decline, is the **political approach**. Here leaders withhold information until necessary and when confronted by rumours, they stick tightly to the party line. Secrecy and control are often the implicit values of those who embrace this approach. My favourite mantra, mentioned earlier, that there is no such thing as no communication, applies here again. I recall working on a large-scale change project where I was a member of a change team being supported by external consultants. At the kick-off meeting, one of the consultants shared a timeline outlining the communication activity to the wider organisation that was to start some months into the project. It was emphasised that no

communication about the project should be shared before this date. I asked if anyone knew we were meeting that day? This was an off-site meeting, so I imagined that someone else had been involved in booking the room. What had they been told about the purpose of the meeting? How many of those present in the room had shared with colleagues they would be out of the office for two days and had they said anything about why? My point was that everyone in the organisation would already be working with fragments of information, speaking to others in their network to make sense of this, and developing a narrative that would explain what was going on. Any communication vacuum will always be filled and by the time the formal communication starts you are already battling an established narrative.

Of course, there are times when leaders are compelled not to share information, such as the rules governing the disclosure of price-sensitive information for companies listed on stock markets. However, as a rule secrecy is over-rated and can even result in self-inflicted damage. In a recent *Forbes* article, Christian Stadler (2021) identifies the obsession with secrecy as one of the three fault lines in the failed launch of a European Super League in the world of soccer. He argues that strategies most often fail because they are not well executed, and people who are not consulted during the development of a new strategy will most likely resist new strategic initiatives. Many of the most important stakeholders in this project, including managers, players, and fans, were kept completely in the dark. Not surprisingly, when the project was finally announced statements from all three roundly condemned the initiative.

Reflection

- As a leader, is your approach to communication focused on the delivery of carefully crafted messages or generating an organisational conversation?
- What changes do you need to make to how you communicate, in order to engage more effectively?

Effective Leadership Communication

Without doubt, organisations today operate continually under conditions characterised by volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity. However, the global pandemic provided a period during which the gauge was turned to high on each of these. In my conversations with top executives, communication surfaces time and again as a critical leadership capability during times that present extraordinary and unprecedented challenges.

I have spoken with leaders from a range of sectors including technology, banking and finance, global facilities management, and public service bodies about how they approached communication during the global pandemic. Several themes and principles emerged that I believe are applicable not just for times of deep crisis, but also provide insights for how leaders communicate with real impact every day, when we operate in a world that is turbulent and constantly changing.

Authentic Communication

Nearly every leader I spoke to about communicating through the pandemic talked about the importance of authenticity, of being real and genuine and creating connections on a human level. Even after more than a decade of intense debate and discussion by practitioners and experts on leadership, the concept of leadership authenticity remains somewhat ill-defined. It is explored in more depth elsewhere in this book, but it is worth commenting on here, as leaders and followers alike consistently link an individual's authenticity to their impact as a communicator. Even if someone is not a polished public speaker, they will have impact if their audience experience them as open and honest, speaking from the heart and meaning what they say.

George and Sims have identified five building blocks of authenticity.

1. **Clarity of purpose**, or as one leader expressed it to me, being clear on the why? Sometimes this can be what Lynda Gratton of London Business School has described as an igniting purpose, one that inspires and mobilises an organisation. Paul Polman, the former chief executive of Unilever, famously challenged the organisation with an ambitious Sustainable Living Plan which aimed to double its growth, halve its environmental impact, and triple its social impact. This was the catalyst that sparked the creativity of employees and resulted in a surge of innovative projects.
2. **Understanding and living your values**. I am impressed by leaders who have clearly thought deeply about their values and can readily articulate them and talk about how their values impact their leadership in real ways. One leader I spoke with described the importance of family as one of his values. What was interesting was how he extended this to his workforce of 2500 employees, interpreting it as a feeling of belonging, of being 'inside the circle'.

3. **Relationships built on accessibility** both physically and emotionally, meaning being open and honest with those around you, including expressing vulnerability.
4. **Resilience in tough times** that is grounded in your purpose and values. One of the most powerful examples I have come across is Maryam Bibi, founder of Khwendo Kor, an organisation based in the remote and undeveloped areas of north-west Pakistan, that seeks to improve the education, health, and economic wellbeing of women and their children. Despite sometimes violent opposition, Maryam has continued to build the organisation, propelled forward by her sense of mission, purpose, and values.
5. **Compassion** characterised by empathy and action to meet the needs of others. Empathy creates a connection with others and demonstrates how the leader shares their hopes and fears.

Several leaders I spoke with shared small, practical examples, of how they had conveyed or demonstrated authenticity when communicating throughout the period of the global pandemic. Simply turning up—being accessible—is the first requirement. Related to this was the intensity of communication, meaning both the pace and regularity with which communication takes place. Many spoke about the need to respond rapidly to a fast-changing situation, where lockdowns and stay at home orders meant transitioning to remote working overnight. For others, the reverse challenge presented itself, in reassuring a team of essential workers that their work environment would be as safe as possible.

In both scenarios, the need to respond quickly, inevitably meant tolerating uncertainty and ambiguity in communication. A key to building trust is to be open about what you know and what you do not know. I have worked with several leadership teams over the years, who held back on communicating until they had answers to most questions that might arise. As I have repeated several times in this chapter, there is no such thing as *no* communication. If you choose not to say anything the vacuum will be filled by greater uncertainty. Even outside of major crises and events like the pandemic, the constancy of change and the pace at which change happens, means that leaders need to embrace ambiguity and be comfortable communicating before they necessarily have the full picture or definitive answers. Uncertainty can destabilise a situation, but Rock points out that relatively minor actions can mitigate against this, for example, simply providing a specific date when people will know more information.

One final point is that, as the intensity of communication increases, the need for leaders to invest more of their time and to be attentive to the conversations they start also increases. One leader described how her company initiated an organisation wide conversation around the theme of 'Black Lives Matter', sparked by the murder and aftermath of George Floyd in May 2020. This involved a series of town hall meetings and online discussions. She described the intensity of feeling that was generated and the deep reflection that took place at all levels of the business. Several employees reached out to her personally to share their experiences and perspectives, and she made the point that many of these messages needed a quick response, so she sat up for several hours, over several nights, ensuring that people who had taken the step to share their story were responded to and felt heard. If you want people to engage with you, then being too busy to engage with them will not cut it!

One interesting observation that was made related to the setting for communications during the pandemic. Most leaders found themselves conducting town hall sessions from their own home, with all the distractions and intrusions that go with domestic life on display. In most instances, this window into their everyday lives presented the leader in a more human light, made them more relatable and created a connection that made their communication more impactful. While the post pandemic setting may revert to more corporate surroundings, the key insight is that making a connection with people on a personal level, that reveals something of the *real* you, provides the foundation of powerful and impactful leadership communication.

Sharing your own personal story is a way to build connection and empathy. One senior leader I spoke to described how he had participated in an online town hall meeting during the pandemic. At the halfway break, he reviewed some of the comments and feedback. This suggested the conversation to date had been overly focused on the state of the business and had failed to reflect or connect with peoples' lived experience at that moment. After the break, he acknowledged the comments and decided to share his own experience of being prevented from attending the funeral of a very close family member. It was an experience shared by several people on the call and struck a chord that everyone was in this together.

The Art of Listening

Of course, before you can demonstrate empathy, you first need to listen. When it comes to communication, particularly during times of uncertainty and crisis, active listening is a key leadership skill. Stephen R. Covey is credited with one of my favourite wall slogans—'Most people don't listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply'. In contrast great communicators are, in fact, great listeners. They resist the urge to interrupt and ensure instead that individuals and groups feel listened to. Listening is more than simply hearing; it is also about demonstrating understanding and empathy. A helpful model I came across several years ago captures the art of active listening. The first step is to **listen**, which means blocking out all distractions and providing the individual or group in front of you with your full attention and focus. Secondly, make sure your **body language**, including eye contact or simply nodding your head, conveys to those speaking to you that you are in listening mode. Thirdly, **explore further** what you are hearing, to ensure your interpretation is correct. This might involve asking questions to access the underlying meaning of what is being said. Fourthly, **reflect to the speaker** what you have heard. This involves the skill of paraphrasing, capturing the essence of what has been said and providing further clarification. Finally, **summarise the conversation** and the outcomes. Murray describes a 'listening contract', in which only when employees are convinced that they are being listened to and that their views matter are they ready to listen themselves. Of course, one of the most tangible ways a leader can demonstrate they are listening is to respond and take action to resolve an issue that has been raised. When operating in a VUCA context leaders do not have all the answers; recognising that others have insights that you do not and enabling them to elucidate these are key to effective communication. As such, active listening becomes a critical leadership skill.

Avoiding Corporate Speak

A simple step towards more authentic communication is to avoid using corporate speak or a carefully crafted script, and instead use your own words. One chief executive complained to me that she was regularly presented with draft communications that simply did not reflect the words she would use or her more informal and conversational style. It is important to note that being unscripted is not the same as being unprepared. It is possible, indeed

desirable, to put considerable thought and preparation into what you want to say, while still delivering the message in your own words. Another example that was shared with me was leaving the microphones unmuted as leaders chatted informally before the commencement of an online town hall meeting. Those connecting to the meeting get a glimpse behind the curtain, they overhear 'the conversation before the conversation', something the listener tends to perceive as more spontaneous and real than what takes place once the meeting has formally begun.

The Power of Stories

One way of avoiding corporate speak and connecting with people on a more emotional level is to use stories as a vehicle for communication. In contrast to yet another power-point presentation, stories engage people, requiring them to use their imagination, creating in their own mind the film reel of what they are hearing. Stories combine words and images to powerful effect, ensuring that the key messages are recalled long after their telling. One video clip I have shared with many of my executive classes captures President Barack Obama recounting the story of his encounter with a woman in Greenwood South Carolina during his 2008 presidential election campaign. This woman is famous for her chant, 'Fired up! Ready to go!'—something she does at every meeting she attends which prompts everyone in the room to repeat the chant back to her! Sometimes this will go on for several minutes. When Obama tells the story, he shares how the energy generated in the room by this woman transformed his own demeanour on the day and indeed left him feeling fired up and ready to go! Towards the end, Obama explains the meaning of this story—that if one voice can change a room, then one voice can change a city. If one voice can change a city, then one voice can change a state. If one voice can change a state, then one voice can change a nation! The powerful truth at the heart of the story is one of empowerment, that change starts with one voice, one person, and that person can be you.

While the story as Obama relates it delivers a powerful message, it also works for him in several other ways. He speaks about waking up and feeling tired and grumpy, something we can all relate to! With this simple insight, he conveys vulnerability and creates a human connection. His humour is self-deprecating, demonstrates self-awareness and implies that his feet are firmly on the ground despite his elevated status. As he goes on, the story's central character is dressed in a big church hat and in some iterations even has a gold tooth. The scene is of a dark, half-empty community hall, on a

damp day with the rain pouring down and an umbrella that does not work. Our minds instantly create the image in our head as a lasting and memorable imprint long after the story is told. Too often some of those executives that have sat in my classes will meet me and shout fired up, ready to go! It is an important reminder that communication is not an exercise in rational explanation. It is fundamentally about making a connection on an emotional level and about how stories, well told, can move people in a way that facts, statistics, and bullet points never can. Of course, the combination of stories and facts, one connecting with the brain, the other the heart, is particularly powerful.

Murray helpfully identifies four types of stories for organisational leaders: the **'who you are'** story that reveals something of the leader; the **'future'** story that provides insights about the future and motivates and inspires people towards realisation of the vision; the **'values at work'** story that vividly illustrates how the company values, too often only written on the sides of pens and the back of business cards, are brought to life in real and meaningful ways; and finally the **'customer'** story that connects the organisation to the difference it makes in the lives of those who use its products and services, providing meaning and purpose.

To link to a key theme in this chapter, stories are only impactful if they are authentic—you cannot just make them up. Ideally, they will be drawn from the leader's own lived experience. Note that being authentic does not mean you cannot or should not practice telling your story. Gareth Jones who was a renowned author and expert on leadership, and with whom I had the pleasure of working on many occasions, used to describe leadership as 'being yourself, more, with skill'. As he loved to point out, too many people overlooked the last two key words—with skill! Practice makes perfect and this is certainly true when telling a story.

Consistency of Words and Actions

Consistency of words and actions provides powerful, visible evidence of authentic leadership. I met with the chief executive of a vital public service, many of whose employees were required to attend the workplace during the pandemic. She described spending a lot of her time speaking to employees and reminding them of the importance of their work to the public and placing the need to be physically present in this context, particularly at this time

of crisis. Critically she turned up in the public offices and buildings where her staff were required to be present, clearly demonstrating that she was not asking anyone to do something she would not do herself.

Developing Digital Media Skills

One final observation is the now ubiquitous presence and use of digital tools to drive communication. Of course, during the pandemic, online platforms enabled most organisations to simply keep the show on the road, by facilitating operational communication and co-ordination. However, even before this exceptional circumstance occurred, organisational leaders were already turning to digital media and social platforms to exercise strategic leadership and enable them to connect with and engage employees. All the leaders I spoke with referenced extensive use of collaborative social media platforms within their organisation such as Yammer or Workplace from Facebook, combining this with use of external social media including Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok.

Digital communication tools accelerate the trend towards self-organised discourse in organisations, where conversations extend across business units, functional silos, and geographical boundaries, promoting global teamwork and collaboration. All of this tilts the balance of strategic initiative away from the traditional top-down dynamic towards one that is more bottom-up and organic, amplifying the knowledge and insights of employees at all levels of the organisation. In a complex and fast-moving world, the ability of a leader to be a catalyst, curator, and orchestrator of organisational conversations that capture strategic insights and shape strategic decisions and actions becomes a critical organisational capability and a source of competitive advantage.

To embrace this shift, leaders need to become comfortable with several things. Firstly, becoming their own content creator and editor. One thing that happened during the global pandemic was that leaders were literally left *with* their own devices and *to* their own devices! Stripped of the immediate support of their communications and IT departments, many leaders learned how to shoot and edit material such as a video blog. This real-time communication provides an opportunity for leaders to share what is on their mind at any time, enlivening the communication by re-counting stories of their interactions and experiences throughout the day or week, sharing insights that have emerged from these, and inviting comment and input from people at all levels across the organisation.

Allied to this is a willingness to adapt to an era where the rules of the old corporate communication model, such as a finely honed message, professional production values and most importantly control over how the message lands and circulates, no longer prevail. Instead, leaders need to be satisfied with 'good enough' and be aware that what they produce can be re-packaged and re-purposed, almost at will by others. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the importance of communication networks. The emergence of social media only serves to increase the importance of this point. Knowing who the informal influencers are throughout an organisation and cultivating and growing a group of followers on social media platforms who can spread and reinforce the message become key success factors. Another point I made earlier was that when leaders communicate, the communication process has just begun, not ended. A 'tick box', event-driven mentality to communication can generate a sentiment of 'glad that's over', when something like a town hall has been completed. Of course, the conversation has just begun, and this is even more true when leaders make use of social media tools. What is generated is a dynamic conversation, characterised by interaction where employees engage in the discussion not only with organisational leaders but with each other.

Leaders can often be wary of social media, concerned about loss of control and how things they say can be taken out of context or mis-quoted. They may well hanker after the tried and trusted methods of old. However, put plainly, that ship has sailed! Leaders have little choice but to embrace digital communications. These platforms and channels provide a mechanism to engage directly with employees at all levels, enabling leaders to powerfully shape the organisational discourse as well as tapping into the insights and knowledge that exist there to inform and shape strategy. That provides any organisation with a real edge as it seeks to create value for stakeholders in a fast-changing world.

Conclusion

Most organisations now operate in contexts that are both complex and uncertain. Leadership and organisational communication sit at the nexus of strategy formulation and implementation. Leaders provoke, stimulate, and challenge the organisation by how they frame the organisational reality. Through engaging communication and by connecting people to one another, they are able to tap into the collective intelligence of the organisation, which then allows them to discover the pathway to future success. This critical organisational capability enables organisations to survive and prosper.

Learning Points

1. In a VUCA world, leadership and organisational communication have never been more important, sitting at the nexus between strategy formulation and strategy execution. The leader's task is to create an organisation wide conversation that is continually evolving the strategic posture of the organisation and how this is implemented.
2. Sharing the purpose, values, and culture of the organisation, achieving strategic clarity and alignment, and achieving high levels of employee engagement are all outcomes of effective leadership communication. However, framing the organisational reality is the primary task.
3. Leaders need to understand the dynamics of organisational communication, that their message can be altered within communication networks and how counter narratives emerge. It is critical for leaders to grasp that when they communicate it is the beginning of a process, not the end.
4. There is no such thing as no communication. What leaders need to grasp is that everything is a communication. Even the act of not communicating will be interpreted and imbued with meaning by others. The choice for leaders is not whether to communicate or not, but simply if they wish to actively manage the meaning that their words and actions convey.
5. Effective communication is enabled by leadership authenticity, listening with the intent to understand not reply, avoiding corporate speak and crafting powerful stories to convey a message. In today's world, it also means embracing digital forms of communication and developing basic digital media skills.

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