ISB CTO

Week 21: Strategic Communication for Technology Leaders

Strategic communication is a vital skill for leaders, enabling them to effectively convey ideas, inspire action, and build strong connections across diverse audiences. It encompasses the ability to adapt messaging for different stakeholders, from peers and teams to senior executives, vendors, and customers.

This topic explores the foundational elements of effective communication, including mastering networks, preparing for change, storytelling, and communicating with clarity and impact. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of ethical communication and the unique approaches required when engaging non-technical audiences. Strategic communication empowers leaders to navigate complex interactions, drive alignment, and foster meaningful relationships in their professional journeys.

Renowned business guru Peter Drucker once cautioned that the most significant peril during turbulent times is not the turbulence itself but the tendency to persist with outdated thinking. In an era defined by rapid change, we must adapt our thought processes to navigate uncertainty effectively.

To shed light on this transformation, we draw inspiration from the teachings of Professor Isabel Mateo at the esteemed London Business School. Professor Mateo kickstarts this enlightening journey with a fundamental question: How many people do you truly know by name and face?

The global average stands at around 700 to 800 individuals, including family members and acquaintances. However, when considering those you can genuinely engage in meaningful conversations with, the number dwindles to approximately 150. This intriguing limitation has its roots in the wiring of our brains. Research suggests that we are inherently capable of sustaining about 150 relationships at any given time. But here is the exciting part: we can train our brains to surpass this limit.

Expanding Networks

Visionary leaders, like former US President Bill Clinton, who was renowned for his extensive network, have transcended this cognitive boundary. Learning from such leaders, we can nurture the ability to connect with a more extensive network and develop deeper relationships. Bill Clinton, for instance, was known to remember the names and stories of up to 10,000 individuals. His remarkable people skills and expansive network played a pivotal role in his leadership.

To underscore the significance of expanding one's horizons, consider the story of Hedy Lamarr, the Hollywood actress, born in Austria in 1914. Her exposure to discussions about warfare, armaments, and strategy during the Nazification of Austria and Germany kindled an unexpected passion for innovation. She married a Nazi general and later escaped to Hollywood, where her combined knowledge of weapons and her interest in automated pianos led to a groundbreaking patent in collaboration with the Department

of Defence. This invention, initially deployed during the Cuban missile crisis, is now a fundamental technology underpinning Bluetooth telephony.

Sparse and Dense Networks

Effective innovation and problem-solving require both sparse and dense networks. Sparse networks introduce diverse ideas that can be ingeniously combined in unique ways, while dense networks are crucial for implementing these innovations. In today's world, where social media tends to foster dense networks, it is vital to cultivate connections with a variety of ideas, perspectives and industries.

As Socrates or President Roosevelt purportedly said, "Great minds discuss ideas, average minds discuss events, weak minds discuss people."

Engage with ideas that challenge your current beliefs, even if they contradict your views. Learn to respect alternative perspectives, understand their logic and file them away for future reference. By adopting this practice, you will develop the capacity to connect seemingly unrelated dots and become a disruptive creator of fresh ideas.

Embracing the Risk of Learning

Venturing outside your comfort zone is inherently risky. You may encounter ideas you vehemently disagree with, but within that risk lies the potential for profound learning. Sometimes, those we least want to listen to can serve as our most influential teachers. Building this practice of embracing new ideas and expanding your network into a conscious daily habit can lead to a more enriched and innovative life. This habit will require stepping away from the familiar comfort of your dense network and embracing the risk of discovering something new.

Preparing for Change

As leaders, it is essential to recognise that instigating change often encounters resistance. This resistance arises from the fact that change requires individuals to adapt their behaviour patterns, which may have proven effective throughout their careers and lives. Transitioning from a familiar pattern to something new can be likened to learning a new badminton or tennis stroke. At the onset, it may lead to a decrease in performance, leaving individuals uncertain about the change. As a result, reverting to their comfort zone becomes an enticing option. The comfort zone is where predictability exists, and it is a space we naturally gravitate towards when confronted with change.

Communicating the Change

When embarking on a change initiative, the initial step is to clearly communicate what is changing. It involves specifying the current state and articulating the desired future state. It's vital to convey what needs to evolve, whether it pertains to concepts, products, service models, or business strategies, as well as the new behaviours expected from the team to transition from the current state to the intended destination. This initial phase essentially involves instructing individuals on "what" needs to change. Some leaders may go further and prescribe "how" these changes should be executed. However, this can be overwhelming, as it might restrict creativity and buy-in from team

members. Instead, astute leaders encourage their teams to actively participate in devising the "how" – the strategies and tactics needed for effective execution.

The fundamental question remains: Will people embrace the change? This question is at the core of our efforts as leaders and can be a complex challenge to address.

Communicate for Action

In his video, Simon Sinek advocates starting with the 'why.' It becomes evident that merely instructing people on 'what' to do falls short. Individuals are not automatons or puppets that can be remote-controlled. They are motivated by understanding the 'why' behind the change, which goes beyond managerial thinking and taps into leadership principles.

Engaging Hearts and Heads

In leadership, it is not just about telling people what and how to change, but also explaining the 'why.' To effectively communicate the 'why,' you can employ various means, such as verbal explanations, written communications, PowerPoint presentations or charts. The 'why' encompasses changes in the external environment, threats to the business's purpose, shifts in strategies and the implications of these changes for different stakeholders, including employees, suppliers and business partners.

Fostering Creativity and Learning Agility

By addressing the 'why,' you engage people's intellect and encourage them to think critically. This intellectual engagement is pivotal for two key aspects. First, it contributes to developing the 'how' for the transition from the current state to the desired state. Second, it equips individuals with the learning agility to adjust the strategy in response to roadblocks and unexpected challenges. The execution loop, as outlined by Don Sull, involves regularly revising and fine-tuning strategies as the need arises.

Talking to the Heart

Engaging people's hearts is the next frontier in effective change leadership. It involves motivating them to believe in the change, endure the inevitable hardships and actively drive the transformation. Talking to the heart is a skill that requires careful consideration and will be explored in more detail in our upcoming session.

Communicate for Impact

The most effective way to engage the heart is through the art of storytelling. A leader must, in essence, become the chief storytelling officer. Stories have the remarkable ability to shape perceptions, inspire emotions, and drive behaviour.

Imaginary Realities and the Role of Stories

Stories have historically played a pivotal role in creating and maintaining imaginary realities. Yuval Noah Harari's work, as found in his books like 'Sapiens,' highlights how humans established their dominance on Earth. Unlike other predators, humans can

create mass cooperation networks that span vast populations who may never meet in person. They achieve this by constructing imaginary realities through stories and subsequently behaving as though these fictions are real.

Consider the example of currency: a ₹500 or £50 note has no intrinsic value, but as long as individuals collectively believe in its value, it holds worth. Similarly, businesses operate on fictional realities – the concept of a legal person with rights and responsibilities is a collective belief that underpins society's norms.

Storytelling resonates with the emotional brain of a five-year-old, which drives much of our behaviour. While some individuals can engage their rational minds, the emotional brain, especially concerning fear-based responses, significantly influences our actions. Therefore, storytelling is a powerful tool for shaping beliefs, values and behaviours.

The Five Elements of Successful Stories

Stories, whether religious, mythological, political or business-oriented, share five common elements:

Protagonist	Antagonist	Struggle	Action	Success
A hero (Company), richer the hero, the better the story	An enemy (Competitor), richer the enemy more credible the story	Problems faced by protagonist due to antagonist	Packaging of the what, why and how to resolve the problem	Result of the action

Celebrate Ethics

Storytelling holds a central place in effective leadership. As Steve Jobs famously remarked, "The most powerful person in the world is a storyteller. The storyteller sets the vision and agenda of an entire generation that is to come." Stories have the ability to shed light on the past, present, and future, guiding us along our paths and fostering unity among people. They encapsulate the 'what,' 'how' and 'why,' aligning hearts and minds with a common sense of purpose.

Ethical Considerations

While storytelling is a potent tool for leaders, it is essential to discuss the ethical implications. A critical illustration comes from a conversation at the Nuremberg trials, where Hermann Goering of the Nazi regime articulated how leaders can manipulate public sentiment by exploiting storytelling. The dialogue underscores that leaders can manipulate the masses by fabricating threats and condemning dissent as unpatriotic. A parallel, albeit less severe, case can be observed in the corporate context, with Uber's

failure to address ethical concerns until Susan Fowler's memo exposed workplace harassment, leading to the removal of the Uber CEO.

While leaders are the chief storytelling officers, they must equally embrace the role of chief ethical officers. Building and maintaining trust is a long-term responsibility of leaders, and trust depends on adherence to stated values and principles. Deviating from these values erodes trust, and its recovery can be a monumental challenge.

Storytelling is a potent leadership tool, but its ethical use is paramount. By aligning storytelling with ethical values, leaders can inspire, motivate and shape their organisations positively. Learning to be an ethical storyteller is a skill that, when honed, can significantly contribute to your effectiveness as a leader.

The Art of Storytelling

Storytelling is a tool that holds great potential within the corporate landscape. By adopting a structured storytelling approach, leaders can effectively communicate their vision and inspire behavioural change. However, ethical storytelling is paramount to ensure responsible and impactful leadership.

Storytelling Approach

- **Define the Target Group**
  Start by identifying the specific audience for whom you intend to drive behavioural change. This group may include your team members, your company as a whole, your customers or any other stakeholder you aim to influence. This target group becomes the hero of your story.

- **Establish the Enemy**
  Define the antagonist or enemy that your hero must confront. This adversary can be portrayed as competitors, external challenges such as the COVID crisis, or internal obstacles like complacency. Carefully choosing the enemy is vital, as research shows it evokes emotions like fear and anger, making a direct connection with the audience's emotions.

- **Articulate the Struggle**
  Describe the challenges and struggles your hero encounters due to the enemy. Personalise these difficulties to resonate with your audience. For example, if your company lost business or market share due to COVID-19, highlight the specific challenges faced by your team members. The more personalised and specific, the more impactful it is.

- **Define the Actions**
  The central and most critical part of your storytelling journey is outlining the actions you want your hero (the audience) to take. Clearly articulate the steps that need to be taken to address the challenges and resolve the crisis. State what actions are expected from your audience, such as implementing strategies or initiatives.

- **Depict the Picture of Success**
  Conclude your narrative by painting a picture of success, providing motivation and a sense of purpose. Illustrate the positive outcomes that will be achieved through the actions taken. This gives your audience a glimpse of the rewards awaiting them at the end of the journey.

Building Strategic Alliances: From Transactions to True Partnerships

Strategic alliances and effective negotiations are critical for CTOs aiming to extend their impact beyond transactional roles. Too often, discussions with stakeholders focus narrowly on deliverables, efficiency, and cost-to-serve metrics. While these are important, such a limited scope prevents CTOs from engaging as strategic partners. The key lies in shifting the conversation from "Are we meeting your expectations?" to "How is your business doing, and how can we help you succeed?"

This requires a mindset and language shift—emphasizing empathy, understanding the other party's challenges, and exploring collaborative solutions that create win-win scenarios. Drawing from insights gained through networking and exposure to cross-industry practices, CTOs can introduce innovative ideas, propose small, low-risk pilots, and build deeper relationships that transcend traditional service boundaries.

By adopting this approach, CTOs can foster true partnerships, both externally with customers, vendors, and partners, and internally within their organizations. This shift not only elevates the CTO's role but also positions technology as a core driver of strategic success, moving negotiations from transactional exchanges to collaborative, value-driven engagements.