

HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

Article Reprint No. C0204A

Effective Leadership Communications: It's More Than Talk

by John Baldoni



HARVARD MANAGEMENT COMMUNICATION LETTER

A NEWSLETTER FROM HARVARD BUSINESS SCHOOL PUBLISHING

TOOLS, TECHNIQUES, AND IDEAS FOR THE ARTICULATE EXECUTIVE

Harvard Management Communication Letter **Subscriptions**

Harvard Management Communication Letter

Subscription Service Center

P.O. Box 257

Shrub Oak, NY 10588-0257

Phone: U.S. and Canada (800) 668-6705

Outside U.S. and Canada (617) 783-7474

Fax: (914) 962-1338

Web: www.hbsp.harvard.edu/hmcl

American Express, MasterCard, Visa accepted.

Billing available.

Harvard Management Communication Letter **Custom Reprints**

Please inquire about our custom service and quantity discounts. We will print your company's logo on the cover of reprints or collections in black and white or two-color. The process is easy, cost effective, and quick.

Phone: (617) 783-7626 or Fax: (617) 783-7658

Permissions

For permission to copy or republish please write or call:

Permissions Department

Harvard Business School Publishing

60 Harvard Way

Boston, MA 02163

Phone: (617) 783-7587

For a print or electronic catalog of our publications, please contact us:

Harvard Business School Publishing

Customer Service

60 Harvard Way

Boston, MA 02163

Phone: U.S. and Canada (800) 668-6705

Outside U.S. and Canada (617) 783-7474

Fax: (617) 783-7555

Web: www.hbsp.harvard.edu/hmcl

Effective Leadership Communications: It's More Than Talk

What you say is important, of course. But how you talk the talk can make all the difference, especially in tough times. Here's how to step up, stand out, and get your leadership message across.

BY JOHN BALDONI

TWO AMERICAN AIRLINES planes were hijacked on September 11, 2001. The airline suffered another devastating blow two months later when one of its airliners crashed shortly after takeoff in Queens, N.Y. The company's CEO, Donald J. Carty, responded to this catastrophic loss by making a very deliberate effort to be visible both to his employees and to the public.

The usually reserved Carty, who normally doesn't seek the spotlight, was out front fielding questions from the media—he even took a turn on *Larry King Live* to demonstrate his company's resolve. After the crash in Queens, he traveled to New York to offer condolences to grieving flight attendants and gate agents. Carty is not without his critics; union leaders and rank-and-file employees believe he needs to be more communicative, especially about employee issues. American, like other airlines, laid off thousands of workers after September 11. But Carty has since instructed his management team to get out into the field to keep employees informed and boost their morale.

Carty and his team demonstrate leadership communications in action. Establishing effective leadership communications isn't a simple task, but it does boil down to following some fairly simple rules. Be consistent. Establish clear goals. Set a good example. Emphasize that everyone, across the company, needs to communicate effectively.

Too often, leadership communications is seen as the sole purview of public affairs or marketing people. It isn't; it's central to the real business of leaders

throughout an organization. The presence of leaders, actively communicating, is key, not just in times of challenge, but in the ongoing efforts to keep a company's vision clearly focused for customers and employees alike.

Richard Teerlink revitalized Harley-Davidson through frequent and relentless communications with dealers and owners. Herb Kelleher was a veritable communications dynamo for Southwest Airlines, traveling coach to learn about the state of the business from his frontline employees. And Steve Jobs, CEO of Apple Computer, has been key to the company's turnaround by acting as a visionary architect who keeps employees and customers energized and loyal.

"A brilliant strategy doesn't work unless everyone understands and believes in it. That takes communication," says Chuck Snearly, director of stakeholder communications for Ford Motor Company. "Employees of the most effective organizations trust their leaders and have a sense of purpose and belonging. Virtually any duty that you can identify for a leader has a communications element attached to it."

Giving a voice to leadership

A leadership communication is a message of significant importance that flows from the leader to key stakeholders—employees, customers, investors, even the public at large. This message may come in an e-mail, a one-on-one conversation, or a speech to thousands.

A message from the CEO about where she wants to take the organization in the

future is a leadership communication. A memo from the CEO rescheduling a meeting is not. Leadership communications are rooted in the culture and values of the organization, and they pertain to vision, mission, transformation, and calls to action. These messages may be directed at an individual, a team, or an entire organization. Their purpose is straightforward: to establish, or continue to build, trust between leader and follower.

It is a natural tendency to look inward and retreat during times of crisis, but the above examples demonstrate that the natural tendency may not be the right reaction. Better to get out front with the truth than to dissemble behind public relations fronts.

"Communication is the backbone of leadership," says Don Duffy, a Chicago-based executive producer with Williams/Gerard, a leading corporate communications firm. "People need direction and leadership, and without constant communication you have no leadership."

Impact on the culture

Walk into a place with healthy open communications and you find people energized and alive. They have a sense of purpose and know where they are going, in part because they have a leader who has told them. Just the opposite occurs with ineffective communications. People are drawn into themselves and seem fearful. And no wonder. They likely do not know what to expect next—no one has told them.

"If people from the top to the bottom of your organization don't understand your strategy, then you don't have one," says Dr. Daniel Denison, professor of management and organization at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne, Switzerland, and principal of Denison Consulting in Ann Arbor, Mich. "You may have a mission, a vision, or a business plan, but without alignment and understanding across levels, no one can implement a business strategy."

Denison has spent the past two decades doing research on how corporate culture and leadership are linked to bottom-line performance. "It's amazing how much time corporations spend articulating the CEO's values and vision and how little time they spend trying to understand if anyone got the message."

"Executives who are great strategists and think that implementation is a 'no-brainer' often end up destroying alignment instead of building the tight integration that they need from top to bottom," adds Denison. "That kind of management philosophy ends up separating thinkers from doers by putting those who think at the top and those who do everywhere else. In order for an organization to succeed, you need thinkers and doers at all levels."

Leadership messages reflect organizational culture and values, but they also require the leader's personal commitment. The leader endorses the culture by communicating what is beneficial for the organization and the people in it. In other words, the leader links the macro picture—what's good for everybody—with the micro picture—what's in it for each listener. As such, these leadership messages are designed to gain commitment from employees and create a bond of trust between leader and follower.

Today's challenging business environment demands leadership messages. "The slower the business, the more you need to communicate," says Duffy. "When business is slow, employees will have more time to communicate with one another. You can influence that conversation by communicating regularly, or you can let them speculate on what you should be telling them!" People want their leaders to be frank and honest and at the same time provide guidance and direction.

Here are some steps you can take to initiate effective leadership communications.

① Be consistent. Consistency of message is essential. Detractors said Ronald Reagan gave only one speech—the

same one over and over again. Former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, an admirer, said that while it may have been true that Reagan had only "five or six" ideas, those he had were "big ones." Business leaders, too, need to continually reinforce their big ideas in conjunction with the core values of their organization so that key stakeholders understand what the enterprise stands for.

Denison believes communicators have a tough, but necessary, job. "The challenge for communicators is to build vitality through repetition." Alignment of vision, values, and objectives depends on the quality and frequency of the message.

Ford's Snearly, who spends his days invigorating and reinvigorating corporate messages, agrees. "In a large organization, repetition helps spread the word," he says. "It is a mistake for senior leaders to assume that their direct reports will pass along the right message to their direct reports, and so on down the line. In small and large organizations alike, even after the message has been completely disseminated, repetition helps everyone stay focused on the strategy and goals. On a rational level, repetition helps everyone understand what they are supposed to do. On an emotional level, it reinforces the human need to bond and be a part of a group."

② Set clear, credible targets. Tell your people where you want to take the organization. Steve Jobs, for example, uses his vision statements to encourage people to think about the future and stay focused on new products.

③ Gain commitment from key stakeholders. Engage the hearts and minds of your people. Excite them with the possibilities and then ask for their commitment. And get your people to commit to the details: what they will do and when and how. General Peter Pace of the U.S. Marines once reported to six different people. Pace strove to keep all his superiors fully informed. When disagreements arose, as Michael Useem

notes in *Leading Up*, Pace spoke his mind but never went behind any of his superiors' backs.

Pace did not always get the commitments he wanted, but he felt that his transparent communications style served him, his superiors, and the 92,000 Marines under his command well.

④ Coach, coach, coach. So much of leadership is about accomplishing results through others. This is where leadership communications plays a vital role. Your people can succeed only if they have the necessary tools and resources—as well as your personal involvement. Always provide plenty of feedback. Many senior leaders make it a habit to coach their direct reports regularly, dispensing praise as well as advice on improvement week by week, rather than waiting until the annual performance review to give actionable feedback.

⑤ Be out front. As the project or the enterprise moves forward (or even backward), make certain you are front and center helping to steer. See and be seen—as well as heard. Don Carty of American Airlines is a shining example of this; his company is under siege, but he's out front taking the heat.

⑥ Issue calls to action. Need to change direction in the face of unforeseen circumstances? Or need to spur the team along? Speak up and ask for their support. Telling people what needs to be done and by whom is not micromanagement; it's leadership. Football coaches excel at this: let's run our game plan, get our points, and go home with a victory.

⑦ Emphasize that everyone needs to communicate effectively. Leaders aren't the only ones who need to communicate. Employees need to foster communication skills peer-to-peer as well as up and down the organizational ladder. If only leaders speak, the organization as a whole is silent. Teams, departments, and even entire organizations that emphasize commu-

nications seem to have a greater sense of purpose and unity. Why? Because people take the time to keep one another informed.

8 Choose the media wisely. Leaders need to be sensitive to the media they utilize. Good advice can be dispensed though the keyboard, but electronic media should not supplant face-to-face communications, especially when comments about performance are being delivered. E-mail is fine for announcements or for clarifications of ongoing communications, but it is inappropriate for one-on-one communications, e.g., a coaching session. It is, however, OK to use e-mail to supplement a coaching session.

Large-scale meetings are ideal for generating excitement about the company's vision and mission and for communicating an urgent need for change. Ideally, leaders should speak from the heart about where they want the organization to go. Presentations may be scripted in advance, but speakers should try to work from notes, making as much eye contact as possible.

You can likely think of many more examples yourself—these are just for starters.

Enable listening

Effective leadership communications is not a one-way stream of messages from top to bottom; messages must flow uphill, too. If employees are to feel they have a stake in the organization and its mission, it is absolutely critical for the leader to facilitate two-way communication, specifically allowing feedback in the form of ideas, suggestions, and even dissent. The ownership stake is initiated, nurtured, augmented, tested, and fulfilled through leadership communications.

By encountering the leadership message over and over again, and in many different circumstances, employees come to a better understanding of what the leader wants, what the organization needs, and how they fit into the

How the British Bulldog Made Himself Heard

One of the greatest leaders—and communicators—of the twentieth century didn't begin that way. Plagued with a stutter early in life, Winston Churchill determined to rise above his mother's advice that he pick a career that didn't involve public speaking. Rise above it he did, and his rules for success in communicating with an audience were few but seminal:

1 Get their attention. Communication is two-way. You can't communicate with your listeners if they're not listening. You must begin by grabbing their attention powerfully.

2 Repeat regularly. Churchill was known for having a few principles and tirelessly repeating them. There's nothing like artful repetition to make sure a message gets across.

3 Bring language to life. Churchill well understood the importance of variety in tone, speed, language, and emphasis to hold the audience's attention. He paid particular attention to verbs in public speaking, knowing that verbs make language come alive.

4 End powerfully. People remember the last thing you've said, so make it good. Save some of your best stuff for your close.

5 Use simple gestures. A study of videos of Churchill's speeches shows a man who stood squarely, usually with one hand grasping his lapel or resting firmly on his hip. The other arm occasionally comes forward to make a strong vertical gesture emphasizing a point he's making. His arms never "windmill" around his body; the effect of that is to undercut the strength and dignity of the speaker.

6 Pause. One of the longest pauses ever recorded in a political speech came in an address Churchill made to the Canadian Parliament in 1941. Churchill had been told that England would "have her neck wrung like a chicken." His riposte to this threat? "Some chicken. [Pause.] Some neck." Churchill confidently waited for the laughter and applause to end before uttering the next phrase. It's a classic moment of oratory.

picture. In time, leader and follower form a solidarity rooted in mutual respect. When that occurs, leader and follower can pursue organizational goals united in purpose and bonded in mutual trust. □

—**John Baldoni** is a consultant specializing in leadership communications and development, and is the author of *Personal Leadership: Taking Control of Your Work Life* (Elsewhere Press, 2001). He can be reached at hmcl@hbsp.harvard.edu

FURTHER READING

*Leading Up:
How to Lead Your Boss
So You Both Win*
by Michael Useem
2001 ♦ Crown Business/Random House

WEB SITE

For more information on the Denison Organizational Culture Survey and Denison Leadership Development Survey, visit www.denisonculture.com.