

Leaderocity™: Communicating at the Speed of Now: Three Modalities

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Abstract

Leaders today face a macro-environment filled with an unprecedented level of active “stressors” (e.g. technological advancement, increased globalization, nomadic workforce, economic shifts, increased competition, increase in overall pace, increased diversity) (Hamel, Bienhocker, Voelpel) [1,2,3]. It is being routinely argued that the rate of change is increasing (Axtell, Wall, Stride & Pepper) [4]. The overall pace of this environment creates a constant feeling of being rushed and having to be “on” for longer periods. Leaders today must be adept at one to one, one to many and all forms of “e” communication. Effective communication, in real time, is now not only expected it is critical to organizational success and the leader-follower dynamic. Leaders must be able to connect with employees, create buy-in and affect behaviors. The best leadership currency to do this is being an effective communicator. Gary Hamel [5] notes: “It’s not enough to have an ideology; you have to be able to pass it on, to infect others with your ideas.” Barrett [6] states “Through effective communication, leaders lead. Good communication skills enable, foster, and create the understanding and trust necessary to encourage others to follow a leader. Without effective communication, a manager accomplishes little. Without effective communication, a manager is not an effective leader.”

The “Speed of Now”

“Turbulence is occurring at a blistering pace, leaving many businesses unprepared and vulnerable to the chaos it brings.” Kotler & Caslione [7].

. Many of the challenges organizational leaders face today are the same as in past decades but the pace and complexity of changes are of a magnitude never before experienced (Beckard & Pritchard) [8]. Kotler & Casilone, in “Chaotics” [7] argued for the need to manage differently in what Alan Greenspan referred to as the “Age of Turbulence.” They noted; “Change is new status quo, leaving managers without firm ground from which to gaze at the onrushing future as markets, technologies, governments, consumers and products undergo constant change with blinding rapidity.”

Drivers for the Speed of Now

The emergence of chaotics

Leaders need to create “Chaotics Management Systems” that allow for “triple planning” (short, mid and long term), as well as early warning systems, active performance metrics, risk analysis and information filtration systems. Our traditional strategy lifecycles are most likely obsolete and at least under attack. The shelf-life of a strategy is certainly shorter for most organizations and leaders must be more vigilant in seizing opportunities or confronting threats. (Kotler & Caslione) [7]. Leaders in the 21st century need to lead three dimensionally across multiple time horizons in what Jeff Immelt, CEO of General Electric has called a “multi-speed” world (Renaud) [9].

Systemic impatience

We are in an era of “now.” We are surrounded by “instant” access and response. Examples abound from texting, self-service checkouts, online bill paying and debit systems. Time is a prized asset and is clearly worth more to an array of both internal and external stakeholders. There is a systemic expectation of “now.” Organizations and leaders as a result are under intense scrutiny from a variety of stakeholders including: customers, suppliers, employees, regulators, community activists and governance officials. Lombardi [10] dubbed this “The Spotlight Era.” There seems to be a general impatience in both management and its stakeholders and a constant demand for results. Agility and flexibility have become critical leader and organizational competencies. To become truly agile, an organization must embrace speed as a reality and infuse their operations with speed and dexterity with a strong dose of constant vigilance to changes in the eco-system. Companies need to be “aerodynamic” (Poscente) [11].

Turbulence as the new normal

Cap Gemini [12] has noted that managers today must lead in an environment of “permanent volatility.” Reilly, Brett and Stroh [13] described the environment in which managers must perform as “turbulent,” characterized by changes that are, “non-trivial, rapid and discontinuous.

Time and space compressed

“At the most basic level, globalization is the long term trend toward greater exchanges and integration across geographic borders.” (Institute for the Future) [14]. Time and space seem smaller due to the increased reach and access fueled by technology. A 24x7 orientation has become entrenched as stakeholders reach across times and borders to engage on a social or transaction level. Davis noted that “factors of time, space and mass are destroying traditional business solutions. What worked in the industrial world will not work tomorrow.” Speed and connectivity will be at the center of new business solutions. Davis refers to this as the “blur” economy – an economy in continual motion [15].

Inter-locking Fragility

Kotler & Caslione [7], noted that technology and markets are interacting in such a way as

to create “interlocking fragility.” The actions of players in the market will affect many others which some call the “butterfly effect” – “The interconnected fragility of corporations, markets, banking systems, and nations means that turbulence in one sector creates shocks or changes in another.”

Informationalization: the digital workplace

Davis [15] noted that today’s economy centers around information technology and all businesses must “informationalize” above all else. Economic value increase faster through the leverage of information assets and more often today companies are making more returns from information-based operations than traditional operations.

To “SuperStruct”

“New technologies and social media platforms are driving an unprecedented reorganization of how we produce and create value” (Institute for the Future) [14]. To *superstruct* means to create structures that go beyond the basic forms and processes with which we are familiar. It means we have to be willing to collaborate and perform at extreme scales from the micro to the massive. A new generation of organizational concepts and ways of working are emerging (e.g. hoteling, networked & decentralized structures).

Accelerating Interconnections: the culture of connectivity, everyone is a networker

Most workers, especially those under 40, are “hyperconnected” - constantly in touch. This is blurring the lines between work and home. Social media networks and platforms will become the primary way workers communicate, connect and collaborate. We will also see a rise in the use of “corporate social networks” (Meister and Willyerd) [16]. People almost everywhere are expecting instant access to information and immediate responses to their messages. Human contact is pervasive and conversations never really end. Attention spans seem to be shortening, while tolerance for interruptions is increasing.

The Leader as Communicator

"The most important thing in communication is hearing what isn't said."
Peter Drucker [17]

It is simply impossible to become a consistently effective leader without being an effective communicator. Most leaders spend the overwhelming majority of their time each day in some type of an interpersonal situation. A large number of organizational problems occur as a result of poor communications. It is precisely this paradox that underscores the need for leaders to focus on becoming great communicators. Effective communication is an essential component of professional success whether it is at the interpersonal, inter-group, intra-group, organizational, or external level [18].

Leaders today must be adept at one to one, one to many and all forms of “e” communication. Effective communication, in real time, is now not only expected it is critical to organizational success and the leader-follower dynamic. Leaders must be adept at both verbal

and written communication as well as the “softer” skills – listening, observing and the use of questions. Today’s employees demand a more coaching or mentoring leadership style and this is highly dependent on interpersonal skills. Effective leaders focus on the “moment” and to create meaningful interactions with employees. Leaders must be able to connect with employees, create buy-in and affect behaviors. The best leadership currency to do this is being an effective communicator. Theodore Hesburgh notes: “The very essence of leadership is that you have to have vision. You can't blow an uncertain trumpet” [19].

Effective leaders need to master six basic functions: leading, planning, organizing, staffing, controlling, and communicating. But the one golden thread tying all of those functions together – and the most important key to great leadership is clear, concise, compelling and consistent communication [20].

One to One: Creating Personal Connections

Today, communication is too often an exercise in vanity rather than actual communication. Leaders become consumed with the message using language that rings true to their own ears. Over time, they focus on delivering the message (eloquence and the sound of their own voice) and too little about whether their audience actually receives it (true understanding). The leadership voice is dominating at times and may be needed but often it drowns out dialog and meaningful one to one connections.

The holistic approach to leadership communication is more than just words. It is the practiced application of three essential communication elements – Listening, Observing, and Questioning – as part of an iterative and cyclical, and interdependent process. Add the words and statements expected from someone in a leadership position and the result will be more inspiring, motivational, and insightful leadership communication.

The best way to get followers what they want is to talk directly with them. Leaders today seem reluctant, though, to go in front of their followers to talk frankly and candidly about their visions for the future and to lay out the directions the organization must take to achieve them. And when followers don’t know where their leaders are taking them, the road of least resistance makes the most sense.

A big part of communication is relationships. If you have a relationship with someone, you can solve any problem. If you don’t have a relationship with them, everything is a problem. The senior leader needs to set the example by communicating information, being as transparent as possible, and establishing trust. Staff meetings, small group meetings, town hall meetings, one-on-one meetings, and publications like newsletters, announcements, and web pages are all methods used by healthy organizations to share information. It’s important that information flows up, down, and laterally within organizations. In addition to staying adequately informed at the top, the leader needs to create opportunities to get information outside of formal channels [18].

Leaders need to stop issuing corporate communications and have more organizational conversations – dialog not monologue. The more personal and engaging the conversation is the more effective it will be. There is great truth in the following axiom: “people don’t care how much you know until they know how much you care.” Classic business theory tells leaders to

stay at arms length. If a leader stays at arms length they may remain in the dark receiving only highly sanitized versions of the truth. If leaders do not develop meaningful relationships with people they'll never know what's really on their mind until it's too late to do anything about it. The best communicators are not only skilled at learning and gathering information while communicating, they are also adept at transferring ideas, aligning expectations, inspiring action, and spreading their vision. The key is to approach each interaction with a servant's heart. When leaders truly focus on contributing more than receiving they will have accomplished the goal. Empathetic communicators display a level of authenticity and transparency that is not present with those who choose to communicate behind the carefully crafted facades or who avoid the person to person, face to face interactions [18].

It is tempting to rationalize “e” communication as extending reach in an efficient manner, and this form does have its place, but leaders need to get out of the office, out of the email channel and continue to have personal, face to face interactions to create relationships, solicit direct feedback, keep a finger on the pulse and to make each ‘moment’ a bi-directional learning opportunity.

One to Many: Creating Buy-in

Perhaps it's time to restore oratory as a prime means of communications between a leader and his or her followers. Old-fashioned, face-to-face speechifying has to reclaim a prominent place in the arsenal of communications needed by leaders to move an organization ahead. Yes, effective oratory is difficult for many leaders to master, but those who can put an extremely powerful motivational tool into their hands. It's time for leaders, and those who advise them on communications, to re-energize the role of oratory and to use it to illuminate an organization's future and inspire followers to move forward. The time-tested way for leaders to increase both the quantity and quality of followers is by convincing them of the credibility and attainability of the organizational vision.

Leadership oratory is at the foundation of this quest to build followers—and notably, to convince them to invest discretionary time and effort into the leader's vision for the organization. The age of instantaneous and nearly incessant organizational communications has overshadowed what was once called “the landmark speech”—the leadership speech that sets the organization toward a new vision or heralds a major change in strategy.

There is a compelling case for reviving this approach. For one thing, the velocity of change today means that new strategic directions must be devised and communicated more frequently. Being a leader means, as the now retired but highly successful chairman of Warner-Lambert, Mel Goodes, once put it, “having a restless discontent with the status quo.” Simply compare the current Fortune list of Most Admired Companies with that of a decade ago and you understand the momentum of change. One advance in technology can render a whole business model obsolete. Even in the most stable of organizations, the leader will have to take the spotlight from time to time to focus on vision, strategy and goals.

One master of the landmark speech was the late Steve Jobs, who used Apple's rollouts of new products to rally the company's employees and to plot out how Apple's strategy would sustain the company's technological and design leadership. What distinguished Jobs as a corporate leader was his ability to persuade them to buy wholeheartedly into his vision of what Apple could become. His legendary ability in leadership oratory even led to the coining of a

term—“the reality distortion field”—describing Jobs’ ability to get Apple employees to suspend all doubt and follow his vision. Compare the approach of Jobs with that of his far more technocratic predecessor Gil Amelio, and you get a sense of the difference between “leading” and “managing”—and between “leadership oratory” and “management presenting.” You also understand why Jobs had to force Amelio out even after Amelio opened the door for Jobs to return to Apple.

Making the Landmark Speech Work

Of course, few leaders match the brainpower and charisma of Steve Jobs. And charisma does play a part in how followers decide to enroll in a leader’s vision and invest effort in it. The leadership gifts of Ronald Reagan, Bill Clinton, Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and John F. Kennedy included an almost blinding charisma. There is plenty of room for service leadership, but none for silent leadership. Leaders have to become “good enough” to move their followers to action.

Becoming good enough in leadership oratory, especially in the formation and delivery of the landmark speech, means:

1. Thinking through the demands and opportunities of leadership oratory and using it strategically.
2. Preparing yourself to be an effective “convincer” every time you take the podium.
3. Integrating the messages of your oratory into your arsenal of high-value leadership communications.

Speak to groups as individuals

Leaders don’t always have the luxury of speaking to individuals in an intimate setting. Great communicators can tailor a message such that they can speak to 10 people in a conference room or 10,000 people in an auditorium and have them feel as if they were speaking directly to each one of them as an individual. Knowing how to work a room and establish credibility, trust, and rapport are keys to successful interactions.

The Leader as ‘e’ Communicator: Extending Reach

Nearly forty years ago, Mintzberg estimated that communication occupied over 70 percent of a manager’s day [21]. With the advent of mobile communication technology, one can certainly postulate that the percentage today would be meaningfully higher. The central thesis here is that it is the leader who makes the technology effective, not the other way around. Mobile technology is an important emerging resource in the toolbox of leaders, but mere access to the tool is not enough. We need to understand how true leaders are utilizing mobile digital tools in innovative ways to enhance their effectiveness.

Organizational members, be they employees, congregations, or citizens are now more than ever crying out for more from their leaders than the stuff of mediocrity, delivered through blogs, Tweets or Facebook posts. Followers want their leaders to lead—starting with communication that speaks to them, that distills an organization’s vision, clarifies direction and goals, and inspires them to treat what they do as more than just a job.

More has become less as employees struggle with a surfeit of organizational communications, much of it leadership messaging, often seen as irrelevant and boring, and much of it delivered instantaneously, in 140-character chunks, to mobile devices. This is a growing problem in that many employees, in many different kinds of organizations, feel present-day leadership communications is not worthwhile. Much of what is communicated is met with disdain or noninterest and deemed isn’t worth listening to or reading. A leader must be able to communicate honesty, sincerity, and effectively with their followers. The challenge in an electronic/mobile environment is that the leader can become detached from their followers and is often not geographically in the same place. Since communications consists of more than just the content of a message, that poses a problem. As Drucker said, “The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn’t being said” [17].

The central question that this situation creates is that while modern tools expand the opportunities to increase the quantity and accessibility of leader-follower communications, do they enhance or impair the quality of communications and the ability to “virtually” lead? As Salter, Green, Duncan, Beere, and Torti assert, “Technology...cannot make up for unprepared or ill-conceived meetings; managers still need to manage and leaders still need to lead even in a virtual environment. The question we should be concerned with is, ‘What methods or leadership styles can leaders utilize to motivate followers with whom we will never have face-to-face communication in a virtual setting?’” “E-Leadership comprises of two basic elements: technology and leadership. The imperfect situation would be that if one value increases, another decreases and the whole potential of Value is not achieved...Increasing technology usage can bring value...To build strong leaders it is important to reach emotional confidence in face to face communication and the virtual world as well...The peak of people’s effectiveness can be reached by using all means of communication in balance. [22]. It is a reflection of the “always on” executive with constant access to the information and tools that help support additional leadership functions beyond decision making. These include task management, relationship building, cultural sharing, inspiring trust, and demonstrating emotional literacy.

Another significant difference is in the area of top down reach. CEO’s and divisional leaders may now establish a presence that is not bound by location. Email, blogs, distributed videos and presentations provide the opportunity for a sense of familiarity to be created in locations that the leader has never visited. The strength of personality is able to inspire followers in locations far away from the CEO’s main office. With the touch of a button, the global workforce can be reached.

A significant issue also is that communication in the E-environment is more indelible than before. As communication patterns shift away from phone calls towards email, a leader’s remarks may be memorialized - for better, or for worse. This requires a behavioral change on the part of the leader to adjust their communications patterns. The world is full of stories about people who seemingly forgot this (i.e. the Andrew Weiner incident) and has sparked numerous

“tweets” that executives, politicians, and celebrities wish they could take back. For a leader, misuse of the technology could result in a career ending mistake. Johnson points out “The next generation of company leaders will be digital natives - those born in the digital age and who have so fully embraced smart devices that they’re already integrating them into their work lives, with or without corporate blessings” [23].

The challenge is to put time-honored wisdom about people and relationships to work along with the new communication environment that produces a carpet bomb of communication. This requires iterative engagement.

Summary

The notion here is whenever leaders have a message to communicate (either one to one, one to many or in ‘e’ form) they must make sure the message is timely, authentic, well reasoned, and substantiated by solid business logic that is specific, consistent, clear and accurate. They need to choose which modality best fits the situation, message and target audience. They also must use overlapping, repetitive messages creatively across all three modalities to ensure broad and deep reach. They need to establish an active, engaged and vibrant set of both formal and informal channels of bi-directional interaction using all three modalities.

Clear communication is the most important key to a leader’s success. To be a consistently effective leader, the leaders must learn to be effective, compelling communicators. The best leaders are adept communicators. Their values are clear and solid and what they say promotes those values. Their teams admire them and follow their lead. The best leaders motivate and inspire their people through clear communication. The best organizations promote discipline, accountability, and strategic alignment with clear communication. No matter how powerful the message may be or how competent the leader may be, if the leader can’t clearly communicate in any or all of the three modalities they may never reach a maximum level of leadership success.

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