

## Leadership communication model helps IC teams deliver lasting value

***Internal communication professionals sometimes struggle to engage leaders in the wider communications strategy. But by adopting a more robust and analytical approach to leadership communications, even the most distant leaders can become workplace heroes.***

Communication is often a challenge for leaders in business; one that leaders themselves may not care to admit to, or even realise is an issue. And if the relationships between the internal communications team and the executive team are not strong, it's a situation that can be very hard to change.

"While there are plenty of leadership *development* models there are very few leadership *communication* models that help deliver business benefits through greater understanding and openness throughout an organisation. Frequent studies (by Gallup, Hay, McLeod and others) show that good communication is proven to contribute to business success in terms of productivity, profitability, health and safety and talent retention." says Karen Kimberley, who presented at Comma Partners learning and development workshop which was attended by an enthusiastic crowd of communicators.

### Individual style

Every communicator has a leadership war story and what was clear from the experiences shared at the event, is that there is no one right way to communicate well as a leader. Some leaders say very little at all, others love a big stage, some are technically brilliant and others naturally charismatic. Karen's point is that however good, bad or indifferent their natural style, all of them can learn how to be effective in their communication role.

Several of the participants at the event noted how well finance directors and other technical directors got to grips with communications once certain steps were outlined to them. It was agreed that a more linear approach can aid clarity, credibility and trust. It's an interesting point given that so many FDs get the CEO role nowadays!

Richard Davies, who has worked with eBay, O2 and BAA among others, explains, "As professional communicators we need to help leaders communicate with authenticity. When a leader discovers his or her true voice, it becomes much easier to develop their capabilities with different types of audience and to unlock the communicator within. Understanding the gap between a leader's self image and how they are perceived by others is a powerful tool to manage that development process."

And Phyllida Barr, an experienced change communications and employee engagement consultant added, "Leaders must be able to influence intellectually *and* emotionally; we may forget what was said, but we remember how we felt. Once a leader understands this, it's easier to have a conversation about improving their communication skills."



## Choose your moment

There's an opportunity, according to Karen, to make enormous and positive difference to an entire organisation if, as communicators, we put the spotlight on the executive team.

While this innovative approach can really make a difference, giving communicators plenty of opportunity to influence and enhance leadership communication, for many who attended the event, the single biggest issue was just how to find the moment to suggest to the leader that they could improve their communication skills. It's not for the faint hearted.

"It takes real courage for an internal communications team to tackle the executive team on their communication abilities: the key is to find the reason to do so - the trigger for the conversation. A dip in scores on leadership effectiveness in staff engagement surveys is a good start, so for some teams, a healthy relationship with your HR colleagues can definitely help" suggested Karen.

Virginia Hicks, director of leading interim consultancy Comma Partners, added, "Interims have the experience, credibility and impartiality to tackle the communication abilities of the leadership team head on, and this can be of great benefit to a permanent team who haven't got a "burning platform" or the close relationships with the executive team to create the opportunity themselves."

So whether you have an enlightened leader, or a leader in crisis what is the model that Karen was talking about?

## The model

Originally developed by renowned communication specialists The Item Group, the model was developed as a result of industrial research on behalf of the IABC (International Association of Business Communicators) the leading organisation for professional communicators.

The process starts with an audit and analysis of the communication behaviour of each leader using a raft of techniques including observation, assessment, coaching and desk research.

All aspects of communication – formal and informal - are included to build up a complete picture of the communication capabilities of each leader against five key criteria:

**Trust** - do leaders inspire trust, listen to their people and demonstrate integrity and respect? Are they open and sincere?

**Inspiration** – are the leaders good role models who create a compelling vision for the business? Do people want to go the extra mile?

**Clarity** – do leaders deliver clarity about strategy? Are messages clear? Do people understand what they need to do?

**Credibility** – do leaders show genuine interest in and are accessible to their people? Are they authentic and humane?

**Consistency** – do leaders show constancy and focus over time?



Each individual's report contains a mine of information and feedback as well as very specific action plans. Alongside a clear picture of strengths and weaknesses, there is advice on what to do and how to do things better or differently. "It's a behavioural change that's required," says Karen, "and we provide both the tools and the opportunities to make lasting changes to the way in which leaders impact their organisations."

Charles Willy, director at PeopleMakeProfits picks up this point, "Each of us yearns to be led in some way. We want to believe in something bigger. That's why credible leaders are successful leaders; they inspire those around them, creating a culture of trust and belief. In organisations like this, everything is possible. They are exciting places to be."

### **Benefits**

So how does this approach benefit the internal communications team?

Karen again, "Armed with knowledge about why, how and where improvements can be made, the internal communications team can focus time, money and effort appropriately.

They have a sound basis on which to build an effective communication strategy safe in the knowledge that the leader is fully on board."

And a massive bonus in these tough times is that the solution requires little time commitment from the leaders themselves, which means great business results with minimum disruption of normal duties.

The results for the wider organisation are also tangible. Internally - greater understanding between departments, increased loyalty, improved focus on common goals and higher talent retention are the notable outcomes.

Externally - credibility, visibility and the reputation of both the leadership team and the business are increased.

Few still doubt the importance of effective leadership communications in building employee engagement and delivering organisational success. The challenge for communicators is to unlock the communication potential in their leadership teams and this model, based on thorough research and tangible behavioural outcomes, can only help. Certainly those who attended the workshop thought so.

With so much to gain – and so much to lose also, shouldn't every internal communications team find the opportunity to talk to their CEO about leadership communications?

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