

Help your leaders engage people

To get on the radar of your company's leaders, learn to speak their language and mirror their styles

Communicators know that their leaders have a fundamental impact on employees' attitudes and behaviors. Helping those leaders communicate more effectively is where communicators have a real opportunity to make a greater impact.

To do that, communicators need to adapt their own style to that of their leaders—and then get leaders to flex *their* styles for the different audiences with which they communicate.

Style is a big factor. Leaders are usually promoted based on their functional ability and because they get things done. They tend to be task-focused and linear and rational in their thinking. Communicators, on the other hand, tend to be “people” people, who have a strong set of values, who are excited by the big picture and who empathize with employees' concerns. These are undoubted strengths, but often result in a dialogue of the deaf between communicators and leaders. To get on their leaders' radar, communicators need to be able to speak the language of their leaders and mirror their styles.

When it comes to communication, there are four broad types of leaders:

- **The Director** provides a clear sense of direction, and his or her key message is “just do it.”
- **The Visionary** is an enthusiastic, spirited and often charismatic person who has an exciting, but undefined, vision of the future.
- **The Empathizer** is someone who can relate to people closely and “feels their pain.”
- **The Structurer** has been promoted for his or her technical expertise and is good with processes rather than people.

Whatever their style, most leaders have good intentions but bad habits. For example, they

may not think through the details of the messages they're sending, or their implications, and may prefer to leave a lot of “wiggle room,” for fear that new details will emerge. As a communicator, therefore, you may have to press them to be specific.

You can also challenge viewpoints by giving feedback, as the expert on the audiences in question, on how what leaders say and do may be “decoded” by their employees. While leaders may get nervous when they feel their decisions are being challenged in this way, if employees don't understand how a decision was reached, they're less likely to be convinced by the decision itself.

What's more, company leaders can send inconsistent signals if they do not agree on key messages. Inconsistency breeds conspiracy theories, and an organization can lose momentum while employees try to work out which of the slightly different versions of the story is true. Here again, you can help by aligning leaders and getting

them to agree on consistent messages and to act in harmony. You can develop core messages in plain language; leaders often need help translating corporate rhetoric into concrete specifics.

Those who have been promoted for their technical expertise rather than their management skills often communicate in a linear, rational way, using management-speak. This doesn't engage people or connect with them emotionally; the Communications Executive Council says emotional engagement in a strategy is four times more powerful than simple intellectual engagement. Help them increase the emotional impact of their communication.

Leaders make an impact for good or ill. To help them make the right impact, communicators need to take the lead. •

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