

LEADER COMMUNICATION

‘CAN YOU HEAR ME NOW?’

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Technological advancements and innovation have instituted many changes in modern organizations. The Verizon “can you hear me now” catchphrase clearly conveys the message how 21st-century technology makes it easier for us to communicate in a global society today. Communication has always played a vital role in society, but the influence of globalization has changed our views on how we use communication skills in the leader-follower interface.¹ Consequently, the impact on leadership has led to rethinking the theoretical and philosophical approaches towards leadership communication. A major shift in this paradigm has focused on the concept of communication between leader and follower. The leader-follower relationship is a classic symbiotic bond that undergoes adjustments and changes over time.

To be a good leader, it takes more than being a graduate of a leadership course or wearing the rank of a leader that signifies the level of responsibility. Strong leaders are always working on honing their leader skills to attain a higher level of proficiency and mastering their core leader competencies to lead effectively. As officers and NCOs move through the programmed levels of professional military education, culture and doctrine steer them through the military principles of leadership, traits of character, styles of leadership, decision-making process, command and control, communication, current how-to-fight doctrine, military history and ethics, and principles of good discipline. The single most common factor shared across this broad range of leadership themes is communication.

Contrary to popular belief, communication is more than simply transmitting verbal and non-verbal messages.² As a matter of fact, communication has always been and will continue to be central to everything we do in our daily life. In their book *Leadership: A Communication Perspective*, authors Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson describe leader communication as critical to the leader’s survival and the most vital attribute that a leader can acquire.³ If you look closely around you, communication is used in every task and every action that a leader performs as he interacts with followers, colleagues, and superiors. More precisely, communication bridges the gap of understanding and comprehension between the leader and his followers. When applying communication in an intelligent manner, communication has the power to inform, motivate, challenge, shape, inspire, and persuade followers to perform to the leader’s expectation.⁴ While all this seems rather easy to accomplish, the truth of the matter is that mastering communication skills is not a simple laid-back process. Leaders can expect that as doctrine changes the likelihood that change will impact on leadership approaches is great. Consequently, maintaining proficiency in leadership communication is a lifetime commitment toward self-improvement. There is one thing certain about change — it is constant. Doctrinal changes currently in progress will very likely undergo revision with more changes in the future. Hence, as technology redefines strategic and tactical doctrine, leaders must be ready to adapt to corresponding changes in leader communication.

Helpful Techniques on How to Evaluation Your Communication

Sometimes the message that is transmitted is not clear or is misunderstood. To deal with these barriers, leaders should develop a communication strategy to overcome the obstacles hindering effective leader-follower communication. By acknowledging and understanding the deficiencies detected in their communication skills, leaders can initiate the first step towards remedying the situation and achieving the intended outcome.

To determine if they have communication problems, leaders must evaluate their weaknesses before taking corrective action. Leaders have the responsibility to improve their communication skills by seeking help or through self-improvement techniques. Poor communication skills are usually exhibited in the actions of the followers. Evaluating your communication skills is not an easy process. Consequently, leaders need to be vigilant and watch for certain types of behavior that can impede teamwork and mission accomplishment, and determine if communication is the root cause of the problem. The warning signs that something is wrong will be evident if the organization’s overall performance is substandard. This is often manifested in confusion among the ranks of the followers, failure to execute assignments and tasks, lack of clarity in instructions, low morale, and lack of cohesion.

When receiving feedback, you should strive to:

Be Receptive — accept feedback: If you are sincere about evaluating your skills, your attitude will signal that you are willing to accept constructive criticism intended to help you communicate effectively.

Be Positive — avoid a defensive posture: Showing that you are thin-skinned will convey the message that you are not mature enough to accept the fact that you have a leadership deficiency.

Be Open — accept criticism: Perhaps one of the most difficult admissions in life is accepting that you are not perfect. However, by being open to critical assessment, you can learn from your mistakes.

Be Proactive — implement strategy: Develop a plan to address issues that have been identified as deficient.

Be Persistent — don't give up trying to master the skills necessary for improvement.

Start off by realizing that effective communication requires incredible skill and years of dedicated practice. Perhaps the most expedient and effective approach towards self-evaluation is to invite feedback from your audience. Feedback may be from voluntary or involuntary sources that the leader has frequent communication exchanges. By inviting feedback, leaders have multiple sources providing critical assessments that can be used to evaluate the effectiveness of leader communication. When using other sources to help you evaluate your communication, take to heart the quote from Benjamin Franklin, "Critics are our friends; they show us our faults."⁵ Evaluate your communication by having colleagues assess your skills.

What Can Be Done to Improve Your Communication

Possessing great leadership traits and attributes includes the ability to apply communication skills that clearly convey the leader's vision, goals, direction, and expectations to his followers. Donald G. Ellis and B. Aubrey Fisher assert in their book *Small Group Decision-Making: Communication and the Group Process* "that some of the positive communication behaviors that account for successful leader emergence include being verbally involved, being informed, seeking leader's opinions initiating new ideas, and being firm but not rigid."⁶ To maintain a high level of proficiency requires that leaders seek continuous improvement and incorporate new approaches and adaptations resulting from changes to the concept of leader communication.

In improving communication effectiveness, the leader must first determine the leadership skills and behaviors that constitute the competencies associated with leader communication. By comparing the competency expectation required for a leadership level and the individual's standard for the same competency, a leader can gain an expedient appreciation for the gap in his/her skills. The leader must then assess how to bridge this gap and then develop a training plan to overcome this shortcoming. A well-designed and tailored communication training plan will guide the leader through a self-development process that will culminate in the successful attainment of the intended learning objectives. Leaders must recognize that continued acquisition of effective communication skills is a never-ending process. Leaders must apply these newly honed skills to achieve the vision and goals of the organization. James M. Kouzes' and Barry Z. Posner's advice to leaders is: "Your job as a leader is to make sure that people get the information they want and need, when they want and need it, and in the form they can use and understand."⁷

Communication Styles in Global Environments and Cross-Cultural Communication

As mentioned earlier, communication has played a key role in the evolution of societies the world over. Communication is even more vital today as the influence of globalization, interdependence, and innovation have impacted on communication skills needed in cross-cultural interaction. Today, communication has extended far beyond the

homogeneous boundaries of the past. The introduction of sophisticated technology has compressed time and space in such a manner that has drawn societies in a worldwide metropolis. Leaders must understand the implications of globalization in the context of cultures, customs, language, and communication. Acknowledging that changes are needed to coexist in a cross-cultural environment will help the leader select the appropriate skills necessary to adapt to this huge paradigm shift.

The arrival of global communication has introduced new meanings and concepts to communication skills leaders need in the 21st century. Take a survey of your immediate area and envision how communication took place without computers, the Internet, email, teleconferencing, GPS, and portable electric devices such as laptops, smartphones, notebooks, etc. Leaders must understand that they may be required to have direct communication exchanges with a counterpart from an international agency in the acceptable protocol styles of different cultures and countries. As the world continues to shrink in time and space, the realities and dynamics of cross-cultural communication will likely become a common scenario.

Notes

¹ Eric M. Eisenberg, H.L. Goodall, and Angela Trethewey, *Organizational Communication: Balancing Creativity and Constraint* (NY: Bedford/St. Martin's Press, 2010).

² Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson, *Leadership: A Communication Perspective* [6th edition] (Long Grove, IL: Waveland Press, Inc., 2013).

³ Ibid.

⁴ Helio Fred Garcia, *The Power of Communication: Skills to Build Trust, Inspire Loyalty, and Lead* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: FT Press, 2012).

⁵ Quote retrieved from <http://www.iwise.com/RsefA>.

⁶ As cited in *Leadership: Theory and Practice* by Peter G. Northouse (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2013)

⁷ James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Truth About Leadership: The No-Fads, Heart-of-the-Matter Facts You Need to Know* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

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