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COMMUNICATORS FACE

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How to Get Your Leader on Board with Internal Communication

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When communication is good, it informs. When it's great, it engages and moves people to action. Today's employees want more than just information—they want discussion and dialogue. As a communicator, you know all of the benefits that come with effective employee engagement—shared understanding, productivity, innovation, achievement of business goals—can only be realized when a leader prioritizes communication.

But the reality is that despite the tangible benefits, leaders often put up barriers to effective communication. These barriers may arise because leaders buy into some common communication myths, or because they don't see the value in communication, among other reasons.



This eBook will help you recognize the 10 most common barriers to effective communication that leaders construct. You'll learn what to **say** to your leader to help guide his or her thinking and discover a host of **actionable** tips about what to do as well.

I have worked with many executives on communications issues that have come up because of these barriers, and when communicators push through them and put better practices into place, things improve.



In the pages that follow, you'll learn not only how to recognize each barrier, but also how to overcome what stands in your way through both words and actions. For each barrier, we'll share:



Recognize the statements leaders share or warning signs that point to a concern or objection.



Learn the questions to ask or what you can say to your leader to help guide his or her thinking.



Discover the specific actions you can take to push through the barrier and to set your leader up for success.

There's no one answer or approach (or magic pill!) to address the top roadblocks. For each, we'll give you a range of options to choose from. You decide what's the best way to address an objection or hurdle.





Let's tackle the 10 most common barriers

and push through them with tried-and-true solutions that work.

1. No time

2. A leader who wants to withhold information or limit information shared **3.** Check-off mentality

4. A leader who isn't engaged in communication **5.** Little or no planning

6. One who doesn't value communication **7.** A leader who is trapped in the tactical

8. Scattered and reactive communication 9. Limited access and no presence at the table

10. Blind spots



The most common communication myth that I hear from leaders is, "I don't have time to communicate." The leader perceives that either there isn't enough time to draft a plan or that more could be done in the time saved from drafting or sharing a plan.

You can tell when your leader believes that there's no time to communicate because you'll hear things like:

- "I don't have time to communicate."
- "I'm too busy."
- "I'd rather focus on my business priorities and leave the communication to the communications team."
- "There are more important priorities than communicating."



When your leader feels like there's no time to communicate, that should be a cue for him or her to take the time. Use these talking points to help your leader understand that taking the time to communicate, whether up front or at any critical point, can reward you with more time in the end, and that leadership and communication can't be separated.

Here's a starting point for a conversation:

- "You can't not communicate.
 Everything you do communicates something – whom you recognize and reward, what you focus on, how you spend your time – really everything."
- "You can't afford NOT to take the time. If you don't have time to communicate, you don't have time to lead."
- "You can't make assumptions that your message will be communicated."
- "I can help you maximize your communications to achieve your business goals, which will save you time in the end."



Show your leader that making time to communicate is important:

- Role model what you want to see.
- Look for "high visibility, high impact, low drag opportunities" for your leader.
- Make the most of the time you have with them.
- Make him or her aware of the destructiveness of their current style.
- Hold them accountable for communication.
- Measure the impact of senior leadership communication.
- Have your own mini-business case ready on the role of communication your elevator speech, proof points (employee data) and stories (including success stories from other parts of the business).

And take a strategic approach by Taking 5 to help your leader plan his or her communication:

1. The outcome: What do you aim to accomplish? What's the business outcome you seek? Define it as specifically	2. The audience: Who is the audience? Are you communicating with an individual or group? Where is the audience coming from? What are their positive or negative perceptions? Anticipate their needs and	3. The message: Given the audience's mindset, what are the 2-3 messages to move them to action? The fastest way to move someone to action is by creating an emotional connection. Before	4. The tactic: What is the most effective means to reach the audience? Is it best to deliver your message face- to-face, one- on-one, through	5. The measurement: How will you know you're successful? Verbal responses are one way to measure how well your message is received, and so is body language (it often speaks
outcome you seek? Define it	audience coming from? What are their positive or negative	move someone to action is by creating	deliver your message face-	measure how well your message is received, and so

Your leader withholds information or wants to limit information shared



A common communication myth is that people won't interpret situations or give them meaning if no one talks about them. If it isn't discussed, it doesn't exist, right?

Your leader most likely buys into this myth if you hear or see the following:

- "That should be on a need-to-know basis."
- "I want to wait until I have all the information to communicate."
- "I'll tell you what you need to know later."
- "We can't trust employees with that kind of information."
- He or she lacks understanding of employee needs.
- Filtering is also a part of this: "That's not important to say now..."



Help your leader understand that withholding information only creates doubts and inaccuracies by saying:

- "Employees will understand if not every detail is worked out. It's better to share with them what we know, and when we'll know more, instead of letting them fill in the blanks themselves."
- Discuss the "information vacuum" if we don't fill it, someone else will with information that may be true or not true.
- "Employees know the score and need to be treated like adults – they want to know what we know, and when we'll know more. They don't expect you to have all the answers."
- "To move people to action, we need to look at this from an employee's perspective. Here are the questions we might anticipate from employees."
- "Let's talk about where the audience is coming from, and then develop the messages to best meet their needs."
- "If our story is a book, you may be on chapter 12, but our employees may be on chapter 2."
- "Because you talk about something with your senior team doesn't mean it's getting communicated throughout the organization."
- Discuss the pros and cons of not communicating (withholding).
- "Let's talk about where the audience is coming from and then develop the messages to best meet their needs."
- "If we don't communicate about this, employees could easily start spreading rumors and misinformation, maybe even outside the company."

DO

Share the Eight Key Questions All Employees Have with your leader. These are the questions they think about and asks every day, whether they're new to an organization or veterans. These questions need to be answered to get employees engaged and answer the question, "How do I fit in?"



You'll notice that employees' core questions and concerns are "me"focused and help them understand what's going on around them and what it means to them specifically. Once you share enough information to answer those me-focused questions, employees then look beyond themselves and become interested in the "we"-focused questions that are centered around their contributions to the larger organization.

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Check-off mentality

Too often, leaders approach communication with a "check-off-the-box" mentality.



You can tell if your leader sees communication as a one-time event rather than a continuing process when you get the following clues:

- "But I already communicated it."
- "I sent out an email."
- "I'm sick of saying that."
- "We put posters up in the cafeteria."
- "Managers can take care of that."
- "We sent a toolkit out last month."
- They see communication as a one-time event.



Approach your leader by saying:

- "Information and communication aren't the same."
- "Communication is about creating a dialogue that gets to shared meaning – not checking off a box on a to-do list."
- "Repetition is important because people need to hear consistent messages over time before they're internalized."
- "It may be your fourth time saying it, but the first time they're hearing it."
- "What kind of feedback did we get? How do we know if it was meaningful or not?"
- Given the levels of information "overload" we all experience, repetition of key messages is critically important to be most meaningful and create action.
- "Managers can follow up with the 'how?' but leaders are most effective at presenting the 'what?' and the 'why?'"



To help your leader see why communication is a process, not a one-time event, draw on the awareness to action model. Effective communication aims to drive behaviors and action. But before anyone – in this case, your leader – will act upon new information or changes, they go through five stages. And moving employees through these five stages requires repetition.

Use this model as you work to increase your leader's awareness that communication isn't check-off-the-box and help move them to action:

- Awareness: The employee is collecting information about the topic; they may or may not have an opinion yet.
- **Understanding:** The employee begins to form an opinion and talks to others or asks their leader question about the topics.
- Acceptance: The employee absorbs the idea and agrees with it or may question changes.
- **Commitment:** The employee takes a stand one way or another and may verbally express acceptance.
- Action: The employee takes action and may even influence others to do so.

Remind your leader that research shows that many of us need to hear a message multiple times before we get it, and when employees hear the same message repeated, they're more likely to take notice, believe it, and most importantly, act on it.

Assign your leader some homework, so they can know first-hand whether messages are getting through. Suggest they ask a few key questions to employees to see what their response is, i.e. "What are our key priorities in department X?"

Your leader's not engaged in communication



We've entered the dawn of the leader**communicator**, where we can't separate leadership from communication.

CLUES

But if your leader isn't engaged in communication or sees communication as a tactic for which the communication department is solely responsible, you may hear him or her tell you:

- "You'll figure it out."
- "Just tell me what I need to say."
- "I don't have time to talk more about this."
- "That's your job, right?"



Some things you can say to help your leader become more engaged:

- "First, what's the outcome you seek from this communication?"
- "Here's why communication is important to reaching your business goals..."
- "To help you best, here's what I need from you..."
- "Everyone will pay more attention if it's clear that this is coming from you, with your words and your voice."
- Speak the language of business and be well-versed in leader's business goals ("here's how I see this help you get to X business goal").



Engage your leader in various processes as appropriate. Here are some ideas:

- Develop performance contracts that set expectations.
- Find and work with "early adopters" who can model the behavior (and results) you want; then, merchandise their successes.
- Ideally, have someone else talk about the value of communication for you.
- Create a business case with his/her data showing it's necessary to focus on communication, which will lead to business performance.
- Summarize meetings by speaking to what's been accomplished in the meeting.

As you go through this process, give your leader "homework" – something you need from him or her to complete the process. When you do, you give him or her a key role in the process, increasing the chance that he or she stays engaged and is energetic and passionate about the project you're working on together.

Little or no planning



Research shows that a typical leader spends 70-80% of his or her week communicating. Yet only spends 10-15% of that time *planning* communication. How can you tell if your leader has this line of thinking?



You'll get cues and clues that include you leader saying or doing the following:

- "I'm too busy to plan."
- "That can wait."
- "Let's talk about that later."
- "I come across as more genuine when I'm spontaneous with employees."
- You recognize that your executive prefers to ad lib or "wing it," versus working a thoughtful, strategic communications plan.
- You are constantly reinventing the wheel when it's time to communicate.



Here's a starting point for a conversation:

- "For your communications to be effective and drive the outcome you want, we need to plan your communication. Talk to me about what you want to accomplish."
- "We can maximize your visibility, impact and merchandise your results though a strategic communication plan. I'd like to develop a draft for us to review together."
- "Why is this different from budgeting or fiscal year planning?"
- "If we were working on a project for a client, we wouldn't create the project just days before it was due. We would plan and carefully orchestrate initiatives to ensure a positive response."
- "I need time to do quality work for you."
- "Planning drives accountability; the more we plan, the more sure we can be of action."
- "We'll make sure all your messages reflect your voice and highlight the key themes that are most important to you. You'll be more effective in the long run and still come across like the real you."



You'll want show your leader that thoughtful, purposeful and planned communication will help him or her achieve the outcomes they want.

Here's what you can do:

- Explain the consequences of not planning communication in terms of time, money, and resources being wasted.
- Develop a draft timeline of the ideal process for the leader, and get on his/her calendar to review.
- Develop your own core message: have your own mini-business case ready on the role of communication – your elevator speech, proof points and stories (including success stories from other parts of the business).
- Develop a communication plan and platform for your leader, including personal stories that help the leader create an emotional connection with audiences.
- Be outcome-oriented in your approach and encourage leaders to think that way also.
- Ask leaders key questions they may not have thought about to show them communications is a sophisticated discipline and requires planning.
- Demonstrate value when you're at the table...through your actions.
- Don't bite off too much at first; solve smaller challenges the leader values.
- Take a strategic approach to communication and plan all communications well in advance (See Take 5 on page 7).



Your leader doesn't value communication



Too often, leaders see communication as a "soft" activity or goal that should yield to more concrete metrics that directly impact the bottom line.



If this is the case, you'll hear a leader who doesn't value communication say or do things like:

- Operate in silos or have senior managers that don't see communication as their responsibility.
- "I'd rather focus on my business priorities and leave communication to the communication team."
- "We're a bottom-line business, and I don't have time for soft talk about 'communication'."
- "Communication is a nice to have, not a need to have."
- "People communicate every day around here, what more do we need to do?"
- Senior managers don't see communication as their responsibility.



To get leaders or managers within your organization to change their thinking, begin with:

- "Here's why communication is important to reach your business goals..." and connect the dots to his or her priorities (it may also be helpful to have someone else talk about the value of communication for you).
- "Great communication is critical if you want to motivate people to do their best work."



Then be ready to speak about the importance and value of communication.

- Have your own mini business case ready on the role of communication: Use your own voice, but customize it for the leader. Include an elevator speech, proof points, and stories. Consider your key audiences here and where they're coming from. If your leader is a numbers person, you'll want data. If your leader doesn't like to get bogged down in the details, illustrative stories may work better.
- Find and work with early adopters: These are people who can model the behavior and results you want. They can then advocate for you, and you can merchandise their successes.
- Use the power of an objective viewpoint: Get someone else to talk to your leader about the value of what you do.

Here are a few facts to help you get started on figuring out the bottom-line value of communication for your organization in terms that have meaning for your leaders:

- Companies with high effectiveness in communication and change management are 3.5 times more likely to significantly outperform their less effective peers.¹
- Effective communication is consistently cited as the number one attribute of effective leaders, according to employees.²
- Misaligned communication costs small-and-medium-sized businesses an average of \$26,041 for every knowledge worker dealing with ineffective communication, and could cost a 100-employee company more than \$500,000 a year.³

The bottom line is leaders put time and effort into anything that will help their employees become more effective, more impactful and generally better leaders.

1. Towers Watson's 2013-2014 Change and Communication ROI Study

2. Ketchum, "Leadership Communication Monitor Study," March 2013

3. SIS International Research for Siemens Communications, "Communications Pain Study: Uncovering the hidden cost of communications barriers and latency," (2009)

Your leader is trapped in the tactical

KNOW-HOW COGNITION WORD PHILOSOF RATIONAL CREATIVE KNOW-HC BRAN CALCULATING IDEA VILOSOPHY BRAINSTORM

LOGIC METHOD SEARCH SOLUTIONS BRAINSTORM IDEAS

Communication isn't just tactical anymore; it's about strategy.



But if your leader remains trapped in the tactical, you'll hear him or her focus on actions rather than outcomes, which comes across through statements that sound like:

- "I need a memo/voicemail/ brochure, etc."
- "Here's what I want to say."



Get your leader to move from a tactical to strategic mindset by saying:

- "Talk to me about what you want to accomplish."
- "What's the outcome you seek from your communication?"
- "How will we know when we've been successful?"



Here's what you do:

We covered a few pages back in section 1 the importance of planning your communication and defining the desired outcome before communicating. Help your leader define his or her outcome. When you ask "What's the outcome you seek?" you may hear that his or her goal is to "communicate X."

That's helpful to know, but communications is never an outcome; it's a means to achieving a business outcome. If so, follow up with, "What's the business outcome you seek?"

Encourage your leader to think in terms of a measurable result, e.g., widgets sold, customers served, share of market, or people in seats. This kind of outcome is a consequence of action by teams and individuals whose goal is to deliver on the business objective.

Another way to frame this for your leader: If what they want to communicate isn't about moving the business forward, it's important that they think long and hard about whether they should be communicating at all.

There might be other outcomes your leader wants to achieve that are secondary and might be less measurable but still important, like building a critical relationship with someone inside or outside the organization.

Once you've worked with your leader to define the outcome (and you both know your audience), work with your leader to define the behaviors and actions communication will drive:

- Use calls-to-action and clearly communicate the actions you want them to take.
- Be specific and give examples.
- Remind your leader that without defining outcome, behaviors, and actions, communication is just information.

Communication is reactive and scattered

More often than not, organizations don't apply the same rigorous discipline to planning strategic messages that they would to other areas of the business like operations, finance, or sales and marketing. The result is scattered or reactive communication.



Here are some key things you'll see when your leader communicates reactively or is scattered:

- Handling one-offs vs. working a thoughtful, strategic plan.
- Communication plans that are constantly reinventing the wheel.
- Different leaders saying different or even contradictory things about the same topic; no quick, consistent takeaways for the key audiences.
- Jumping around to new tactics without aligning them to goals and strategy.

SAY

To move your leader toward communication that's planned and purposeful, say:

- "We can maximize your visibility and impact and merchandise your results through a strategic communication plan. I'd like to develop a draft for us to review together."
- "We'll save a lot of time and energy if we make sure everything we're doing ties back to strategy."



Then get to work developing a communication plan for your leader. Create a message platform that can serve as the blueprint from which your leader can capture the key messages for any kind of topic – organizational, key initiatives, timely announcements, department plans – and deliver information to audiences in a way that meets their needs. Include in the message platform:

- An elevator speech: This is your leader's main message that can be delivered in 7 to 10 seconds. It provides a brief snapshot of the topic and leaves the audience saying, "Tell me more."
- **Supporting messages:** The "tell me more" part comes with supporting messages. Data, information, illustrative stories, examples, and testimonials bring your leader's messages to life and describe the "why," "what," "how," and "what's in it for me." Remember that a story is worth a thousand data points. Include personal stories from your leader. This will help them create an emotional connection with the audience. Stories can also reinforce the behaviors and action your leader wants to drive.
- **Input from key players:** Message platforms aren't created in a vacuum. If your leader will be delivering messages on a program or initiative, get input from the people who know the program or initiative best. Let them be part of developing the messages.

The best message platforms fit on one page so messages are focused and prioritized. They also factor in how your organization "thinks," e.g., if your organization is visual in how it presents information, then your leader's message platform should be too.

Helping your leader move away from scattered, reactive communication to purposeful, planned communication through a message platform lets him or her make real connections with audiences, share his or her vision and drive the right behaviors.

Limited access and no presence at the table



It's hard to get your leader involved in the communication process when you can't get on your leader's calendar or can't get a seat at the decision-making table.



If you're caught in this situation, you've probably heard things like:

- "I don't think you need to be at that meeting."
- "This meeting is comprised of senior-level folks."
- "We'll bring you in the loop later."



Approach your leader by communicating why it's important that you're at the table:

- "I think I can help you get out in front of this situation much more quickly if I hear everything first hand."
- "To be able to help you best, here's what I need from you..."
- "Here's why my attendance at this meeting would help me help you."
- "If I weren't able to attend this meeting, here's how it would affect my ability to support you."



Here's what to do:

Make sure you're well-versed in your leader's business goals, so you can position the value of your presence in terms of those goals. Using the language of your leader and of your business increases the chances that you'll be heard.

Take things one step at a time:

- Pick and choose the meeting(s) you must be at to best support the executive based on his or her priorities.
- Make the most of the time you have with the leader and demonstrate the value you've provided.
- Explain consequences in terms of time, money and resources being wasted.
- Demonstrate clear, measurable value when you're at the table. The value you provide in what you say and do will speak volumes.
- Summarize the meeting by speaking to what's been accomplished.



You're set on improving communication in your organization. You recognize barriers to effective leadership communication and work to push past them for a clear line of sight to engaged, motivated employees, productivity, shared understanding, and profits.



What you may not expect is that you could also be one of your biggest barriers.

How could you be getting in your own way?

It's most likely through blind spots. They're things that are unknown to us yet obvious to others – areas of our vision we're not able to see. Blind spots cause us to send signals we don't intend, limiting our ability to effectively communicate.



There are a number of common blind spots but there are a few that top my list. If they apply to you, you might find yourself:

- **Doing it alone:** You think you can do it all without any help because your great work as an individual got you to where you are.
- Believing you're always right: Ignoring others' ideas and thoughts not only makes them feel undervalued, but it also limits your ability to succeed.
- Unwillingness to admit when you're wrong: Not being able to own up to mistakes or miscalculations is a sure-fire way to kill your credibility and trustworthiness.

The only way to overcome your blind spots is through input and feedback from others. Yes, you actually need feedback to be successful.



To be most aware of your blind spots, you should surround yourself with "truth tellers," people who shed light on company issues and behaviors not as they should be or as you would like to see them, but as they actually are.

Smart communicators ask a lot of questions to solicit feedback from employees, colleagues, and peers; questions such as:

- How are we doing at (achieving this goal)?
- What three things do I do that serve us well?
- What three things can I do to be a better communicator?

Ask. Listen. Dig for specifics. Check for understanding. If you start to feel defensive based on feedback you get, hold back from defending yourself. As you may imagine, when you're defensive, you're less likely to respond to and act on the comments. An emotional response to feedback is a signal that you need to further reflect on the input someone's shared with you. If something strikes a chord, then you've most likely been given insight into a potential blind spot.

With thought and attention, all leaders can develop effective communication skills. Sometimes, they just need the help of a communicator like you to tackle barriers that get in the way.

Throughout this eBook, you've learned how to identify and help your leader move through the 10 most common barriers:

1. No time

- 2. A leader who wants to withhold information or limit information shared
- **3.** The check-off mentality
- 4. A leader who isn't engaged in communication
- 5. Little or no planning

- 6. One who doesn't value communication
- A leader who is trapped in the tactical
- 8. Scattered and reactive communication
- 9. Limited access and no presence at the table

10. Blind spots

Being able to anticipate and recognize what's getting in your leader's way is the first step. The next is putting in place the tips and strategies to help overcome those barriers—and in this eBook, we've covered both.

> You know that communication separates mediocre companies from great ones, unremarkable profits from excellent ones, and disengaged employees from motivated, productive ones. In coaching your leader through these barriers, he or she will too.

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David Grossman, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

David helps leaders drive productivity and get the results they want through authentic and courageous leadership and communication. He's a sought-after speaker and advisor to Fortune 500 leaders, and author of the highly-acclaimed books, *You Can't NOT Communicate: Proven Communication Solutions That Power the Fortune 100*, and its follow-up, *You Can't NOT Communicate 2*.

David counsels leaders at top organizations to unleash the power of strategic internal communication and drive performance. Clients include AOL, DuPont Pioneer, GlaxoSmithKline, HTC, Johnson & Johnson, Lockheed Martin, McDonald's, Microsoft, Motel 6, Nielsen, Symantec, and Tyco to name a few.

He's Founder and CEO of The Grossman Group, an award-winning Chicago-based strategic leadership development and internal communications consultancy, and teaches at Columbia University, NYC.

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