

Great Leaders are Great Communicators

By Denis Orme

Founder: www.leader-success.com

Sixty per cent of companies that were on the Fortune 500 list in 1970 no longer exist. **Leadership is selling. Selling is talking.** If you cannot persuade, convince or sell the unique strengths of your company, then your company is in jeopardy.

Other articles in this series concentrate heavily on the structure and delivery of your presentations and so now it is time to put your presentation in the context of your role as leader. Leader, in the sense of being responsible for others, whether that be a work team, a small group with you as the supervisor or leading the whole company or public organization.

There are only three types of leaders:

1. Profit generators. Those who consistently generate profits for the company. [Not-for-profit, this means living within budgets]
2. Those who cannot generate company profits. They belong to the 18-month club. Appointed with high expectations, but over a period the Board becomes a little disillusioned. Doubt sets in and after 15-18 months.... still no meaningful profit and so they are replaced. [Not-for-profit, this means never having been able to live within budgets]
3. Those yet unproven or untested as to whether they can generate sustainable profits.

For you it raises two questions:

- *Do I have the communication skills to rise to the top?*
- *Do I have the potential to keep my organization growing?*

You need the presence, poise and power to ignite the passions of those you work with.

Breathing Life into others

Would-be followers, people who may perceive themselves as powerless, confront the same issues as would-be leaders. Both groups need tools for building broader boundaries for themselves.

The growth of electronic communication has been the most important worldwide empowering tool since the telephone. No longer is leader-driven strategy accepted at face value. This fact poses new challenges for leaders in establishing the validity of their opinions, being able to persuade others to their rationale.

It requires powerful verbal communication skills.

Finding Your Voice: The Courage To Take A Stand

This means communicating with and persuading others in an acceptable way particularly during times of change.

Look on the Internet and you will find 393,000,000 references to change management. Organizations must recognize that the key to survival is the ability to anticipate required change and adapt in order to meet that changing environment.

Understanding why employees resist change is the first step in learning how to manage this resistance. Studies indicate that the most commonly cited reason for change failure is employee resistance to change, and that up to two-thirds of all organizational change initiatives fail.

Many leaders when attempting to introduce change fail to get the valuable input of others before they introduce or begin the change process. Too many leaders believe they single-handedly can initiate or force change upon others without ample explanation or consensus.

All this does is guarantee greater resistance and resentment toward change, even when introduced with the best of intentions. What is your reaction when change is forced upon you?

The majority of people naturally resist change whether it is in their personal lives or in the workplace. We all like our 'comfort zone.' Always doing the same things and acting the same way provides a sense of security and stability whereas change is viewed as risky, and unsettling.

The first reason that people resist is because they simply don't understand what you are talking about. People so close to the situation that they cannot see the wood for the trees. They must understand where you are going and how you plan to get there. Employees must buy into the change and understand the reasoning behind it. Without understanding the reason for the change, it becomes quite difficult for people to accept any change.

The second reason people resist change is that they don't have the time to engage with the change. They run out of time to both change and handle their current job. Focusing their energy on change puts them at risk of not meeting their current deadlines. Current workload and change requirements become competing commitments for time.

People also resist because they do not have the skills to do what they have to do in the new world. *They will resist under those circumstances when participating will demonstrate that they are just not competent. The employee may feel that their lack of competency may cost them their job.*

The last reason people resist change is because they do not share the values driving the change. It means that they think you are wrong to initiate the change in the organization and that they have no choice but to resist you strongly in order to preserve their self-esteem. Some people cling desperately to the past. They hang on to what is familiar.

However if an employee understands the necessity of the change and still resists, they must understand that this could very well be the end of their career working for the organization.

Without properly managed implementation, change initiatives will fail, as employee resistance will prevail.

Successful change agents know they must understand the position of employees and communicate accordingly. Further, sometimes it is not made clear that change has to take place and why.

The key is for those leading change to communicate that the status quo is more dangerous and risky than the change.

You must inform the employees as to why, when, where, and how the change is to take place. Listening and addressing the employees' concerns generates a team atmosphere that builds employee ownership and buy-in to the change.

People need to have the opportunity to express their concerns, issues or questions about the change, and have others hear their concerns. If management doesn't allow for that, people will become frustrated and resist the change even more. They may say they are on board, but their actions will show that they are not.

Many managers fail to recognize or understand what obstacles must be overcome in order for the change to be successful. One major obstacle is failing to make clear what the change will produce. Change for the sake of change has little value. Too many people push for a change but do a poor job of explaining where the change will take the organization.

What is the vision?

How does the change connect to the big picture?

Communication lies at the heart of successful organizational change

As stated, explain the reasons for the change, as people are more receptive to change when they understand the reasons and thinking behind it. Talk in person rather than through an e-mail. This type of communication allows staff to respond to the news openly. Ask for reactions. Listening respectfully to what employees have to say will help them feel more involved in the change process. This will also bring forth any concerns or misunderstandings about the change -- you may not have thought of everything.

Be open and honest, as the more informed people are the less anxious they will be. Unanswered questions are fuel for the grapevine.

The more quickly you spot resistance, the more quickly it can be addressed.

Clear effective communication is the key to winning stakeholder buy-in. Careful and thorough communication preparation is vital for an effective change management process. The whole process demands a strong torch-carrier or sponsor at the highest level.

To change an organization, you must change the people, their attitudes and their methods of work.

Your role as a leader is to ensure your people embrace the changes and arrive at a position of at least informed optimism and hopeful realism.

In summary:

- Identify a 'torch-carrier' for the change. Find someone who is well-respected and trusted.
- Provide the rationale by explaining your reasoning to employees. Take time to explain why this change will be useful to the company, how it will help to achieve the company's vision and values of being, for example, more customer-focused, quality-driven or profitable.
- Explain the benefits so people do not see it as change for change sake. WIIFM - show how the change will benefit both the employees and the organization.
- Ensure adequate time for staff to give their input to the change. Suggestions from staff may actually make the change much easier as they understand the processes involved.
- Address the issue of job security. Change brings uncertainty as staff will feel insecure about their future. *You must be honest if job cuts will happen. The process must be clearly explained as to why, when and where in the organization.*
- Provide training. In the Hydrographic Business Unit of the Navy, staff were retrained from the manual drafting of marine charts into electronic chart preparation. Most stayed with the business unit after re-training.
- Have and demonstrate empathy. Make sure that employees understand the problems they may encounter throughout the change.
- Communicate clearly, directly and honestly. Staff cannot implement a change effectively if they do not totally understand the reason and implementation strategy.
- Recognize that change does not happen overnight. Do not be lulled into a false sense of security by early successes.

Finally, make sure that the board and top management consistently behave in ways that support the change. Mixed messages are fatal.

Remember that as a leader you are also a promoter. You must personally model the new change and sincerely listen to others. Recognize success and celebrate it.

Connecting with others

Communication does not happen in a vacuum and as you know people only retain 20% of what they hear and 80% of what they see. Painting a picture, or creating images which are so powerful they are emblazoned in the mind.

Metaphors help you achieve this. Metaphor: "to carry across." They take us from a known to an unknown.

For example, in explaining the power of effective teams the metaphor may be to talk about a group of fine musicians all playing the same piece. The sound and beat may be similar if you put them in the same room, but imagine if they were led by the world's best conductor. All in tune with the same beat and inspired to greatness in front of a 1,000 person live audience.

Your business unit is just like this with a common goal, clear objectives for each team member and a team leader focused on you, and your success.

You are the message

Remember you are the message, not your PowerPoint, not the podium, not your notes. How do you look:

- Dress – professional and appropriate to the audience. If clothes don't maketh the man, then your overall style will. Great presenters of either gender have a signature style starting with the fact that they typically dress one level above their audience.

Women's accessories need to accentuate and not detract from you as the presenter. Jewelry should be minimal but scarves and a simple necklace can become part of your style.

Your overall style from your well-pressed suit to manicured fingernails and well polished shoes are all part of your signature style and professionalism.

- Confident - if you have completed the planning and preparation, confidence will follow. Your gestures should be natural, spontaneous and lively. Relax and show relevant emotions through your facial expressions. *Humor?* Humor deserves a special mention in that not all of us are naturally funny.

Even if we are, too often I have seen jokes used as an ice-breaker but the jokes have no relevance to the presentation. I will say it again; do not try to be someone else. If you are not a joke-teller, then just let your natural sense of humour come out during you presentation, particularly when you are telling your signature story.

- Smile. Your smile will melt your audience. Use it.
- What is your self-talk? Remember, you become what you think. Your self-talk should be – *"I am an effective and proven business presenter."* Note the present tense.

Establishing competence and trust

Your message may be clear but as you know, commitment to make the change happen or implement the plan will only occur if there is a relationship between you and those you hope to inspire. That relationship is based on your perceived competence and the trust you establish with others. If there is trust, then others will listen to you without the filters of fear or suspicion.

People do not have to listen and they do not have to do anything other than just go through the motions. Communication about the change or the plan starts with the need for you to build credibility, establishing that you are both competent and trustworthy.

It starts by you establishing your credentials – explaining to others how you gained your credentials to lead this new initiative.

Well, people may now accept that you have the credentials to lead this new initiative but how do you establish trust?

In my opinion trust must be earned. In a sales situation I use a 'Rule of 7' --- it may take six or seven contacts before a person maybe likes you, maybe trusts you and finally tests doing business with you.

Within your business the quickest way to earn trust is not to 'tell people what to do' but rather 'do it with them.' If you are working with people, there is time for the trust and confidence to develop.

For example, I worked with a company which was going to release new information products without any detailed market research. I went with the sales team into two cities and we all did face to face market research. By doing this I built trust with the team, and established my competence in leading the company change initiatives.

Am I giving them a shared context?

Eluded to earlier and the shared context is to ensure that they sincerely believe WIIFM. What's in it for me?

Conclusion

We know that great leaders are great communicators.

Your bottom-line message must have such clarity that it will fit on a business card. Once you find your key message then the words for your presentation will follow.

In communicating change you simply cannot over communicate. I worked with a large group in twelve locations and we held focus groups, town hall meetings, sent emails and had many tele and video conferences to communicate the new vision.

Some nine months later I went to one location and started asking around about what people understood from the new company vision. I was astounded how little knowledge there was. You simply cannot over-communicate.

Do this by one-on-one conversations, newsletters, blogs and many more town hall meetings.

And remember, in making your presentation you must deliver a powerful close.

Your close may be all they will remember.

In my experience a powerful close always taps into the emotions of your audience and more often than not it will relate to hope for the future, or fear. I only use fear sparingly and that typically relates to where the entire business may be in jeopardy unless an urgent repositioning occurs.

Never close on the Question & Answer session. Wrap it up and then come right back into your powerful close.

***Great is the art of beginning,
But greater is the art of ending.***

- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow