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that Power the Fortune 100*

HOW TOP LEADERS DIFFERENTIATE THEMSELVES

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Starting thought

The ultimate “to do” for any leader—without question

One of my favorite *Harvard Business Review* articles is entitled, “What Only the CEO Can Do,” written by Procter & Gamble CEO A. G. Lafley¹, turnaround expert extraordinaire. In his thought-provoking article, he reflects on discussions he had with Peter Drucker, other CEOs and management gurus a few years back about a central question: What are CEOs uniquely qualified to do? (You also can glean the role of leaders in general from their conclusions.)

First off, I love the question, and I think each of us should ask ourselves what only we can do for our organization because that helps us focus on the most highly-valued and valuable tasks.

Here’s where they netted out for CEOs:

1. **Defining and interpreting the meaningful “outside”**
2. **Regularly answering the two-part question: What business are we in and what business are we not in?**
3. **Balancing sufficient yield in the present with necessary investment in the future**
4. **Shaping the values and standards of the organization**

The critical core competency in three out of four of these is communications.

Once again, we have some powerful ammunition on the essential role, and often-misunderstood super power, we call communications. Like it or not, leaders are accountable not only for operating their organizations, but for shaping the vision and inspiring their employees to thrive. Communication is at the center of it all.

What are you uniquely qualified to contribute?

“The two words ‘*information*’ and ‘*communication*’ are often used interchangeably, but they signify quite different things. Information is giving out; communication is getting through.”

– Sydney J. Harris, American Journalist



Study links communication with improved patient outcomes

A recent study released in *The Annals of Medicine*⁷ showed that communication and culture impact patient outcomes more than any other factor...even the best equipment or surgeons.

The researchers focused on hospitals with the lowest and highest mortality rates from heart attacks, and compared their performance with themes from more than 150 interviews with physicians, nurses and administrators.

According to the study, what really mattered was simply this: **a cohesive organizational vision that focused on communication and support of all efforts to improve care.** *“It’s how people communicate, the level of support, and the organizational culture that trump any single intervention or any single strategy that hospitals frequently adopt,”* said Elizabeth H. Bradley, senior author and faculty director of the Yale Global Health Leadership Institute at Yale University, as quoted in the *New York Times*⁸.

Earlier studies suggested other explanations for the difference in outcomes such as income, affiliation with an academic medical center and number of beds, among others.

“A lot of people think that you have to go to a really big city teaching hospital with really expensive equipment,” Dr. Bradley said. *“But we didn’t find that to be true.”*

“We have to focus on the relationships inside the hospital and be committed to making the organization work. It isn’t expensive and it isn’t rocket science, but it requires a real commitment from everyone.”

Without Context, There's No Meaning

Every employee comes into the workplace with his or her own context. It's a mix of our upbringing, culture, religion, memories, and experiences, along with other cues and clues from the individual communicating the message. Context influences how we interpret information. It's the glasses through which we look at and understand the world. For example, without context, our business plan is simply words on a page with little if any meaning.

Part of the role we have as leaders is to create a shared vision. That requires a common understanding of context from those who will help us achieve our goals. For example, how do we view the current business situation we're in, and why does the plan just developed make sense? Setting context might involve talking about our current results and management expectations, new customer requirements, and recently acquired competitive data ... all of which help us understand the current situation for the business plan for example the "why" behind the plan.

So if you want to get from blank stare to "Ah-ha," connect the dots between what you say and what the listener already knows. Set the context in terms of where the listener is coming from.

How will you know if you've succeeded? Just ask for playback: "Tell me what you just heard, and give me your reaction to it." In the end, it's the listener who's the final arbiter as to whether he or she "gets it" or not.



TIP:

Employee to Manager: Don'ts That Disengage

Here's what employees say managers don't do. They:

- Don't keep employees informed
- Don't explain the "why" behind decisions
- Don't communicate frequently enough and in a timely way
- Don't update employees on changes happening in the business
- Don't share regular business updates and how the team is performing
- Don't ask for feedback
- Don't ask for or listen to concerns
- Don't act on feedback (or at least close the loop as to why feedback wasn't incorporated into a decision)

Defining that all-important context: I like the sound of that!

One of the core responsibilities of a leader in helping their employees with line-of-sight and sound decision-making is to set the proper context (the other is to make information relevant). As you think about how to set context, below are some of the categories of information to consider.

Ask yourself . . . to understand what's happening and why, does your team need information on:

- Background/history
- Assumptions
- Strategy
- Reasons behind decisions
- Metrics/success
- Objectives
- Roles
- Milestone checkpoints
- Relative priority
- Knowledge of the stakes
- Decision-making expectations

Go slow to go fast. Providing the right insights and making them relevant to your outcome up front will help your staff make sound decisions, and avoid false-starts and re-work. When mistakes happen, ask yourself, "What context did I fail to set?"



TIP:

Survey Says....

Recent research we've done with our clients across industries tell us this:

- Employees are confused about where organizations are going and their role in getting there
- They want to hear from their senior leaders more
- They have big questions they need answered about overall strategy and how they fit in
- And, they're looking for meaning... not just answers or words

MYTH #1

I don't have time to communicate.

The most common myth that I hear is, “I don't have time to communicate.” The leader perceives that there is not enough time to draft a plan or to communicate a plan. Therefore, more could be done in the time saved from drafting and sharing a plan—no different from the adage, “Clean as you go.” We all know it's easier to clean up as you go when cooking—to put things away when you're finished using them, rather than wait until later, or worse, hope it will clean itself up.

Taking the time to communicate, whether up front or at any critical point, will minimize problems, create efficiencies, and perhaps even buy you some time. Strategic communication can minimize the downsides of change in which business can be stopped, slowed or interrupted, and can maximize the upside of change to accelerate business results.

In a recent change effort for a Fortune 100 client, the first thing we did was to create a plan that would ensure all people and teams involved knew what the outcomes and objectives were, knew who was responsible for what, knew the deadlines and milestones. We even included a section for tracking progress and planned a section for communicating to everyone on a regular basis. We outlined what was needed in the beginning and how to keep everyone productive, motivated and ‘in the know’ as the project moved forward. All good—all the right things to do.

However, once the tactical parts of the plan were put into place, like timelines, the plan as it was could be distributed to everyone and work could start. The part of the plan for communicating through the project had not been completed yet, but the leaders said “no worries, let's get people started so we can get on with things and then we will finish up the communications part of the plan.” Guess what happened?

The leaders never got around to finishing that part of the plan and, of course, there was never additional communication to the group after the tactical plan went out to everyone. There was some confusion at first because the plan wasn't explained to everyone, and the folks who didn't understand just checked out or were a problem in the overall project, pushing back, and not acting like team members. As time went on, the folks who had understood what the plan meant and started on it lost excitement around it. They lost focus. Confusion occurred and stagnation started. As conflicts arose, stalemates started. Focus and effort waned.

By contrast, a little communication at the beginning of a change effort to set the tone—and during it to ensure understanding, agreement, and focus—can make a huge difference. The time you spend communicating will keep problems from happening and will usually reward you by creating more time long term.



“A bad habit is something you can do without thinking—which is why most of us have so many of them.”

– Frank A. Clark



TRY IT TODAY

Take an honest look at your leadership style and assess which of “The Se7en Deadly Sins” may be at work, then make a positive change.

- **Myopia**—How will you change your communication to ensure employees have the right message? Start today.
- **Hypocrisy**—How can you better align your actions and your words? Do it.
- **Sloth**—How can you increase effort and resources devoted to communication? Take action now.
- **Detachment**—How do you make your team feel? Take three steps to become more connected.
- **Materialism**—Are you more focused on outcomes or output? Develop a statement to explain your big-picture goal.
- **Presumption**—Think about your most important current activity and write a statement of what your listeners need to know considering how their perspective differs from yours.
- **Irrelevance**—Write a statement of context to help communicate the company goals and objective in a more meaningful way to your employees.

Make the Grade with the Four Fs of Feedback

The ability to give meaningful feedback is at the heart of all good face-to-face communication. Without an honest assessment of performance—whether good or bad—you are limiting or undercutting the value of every interaction, and you are most certainly falling short as a leader and failing to help your employees evolve and develop.

If you were to give yourself a grade for how effective you are at giving feedback, what grade would you choose? Many leaders are brutally honest and give themselves an F. They realize that they don't make giving feedback a standard part of meetings and discussions. They give general praise ("Good job!") versus specific feedback ("Here's what you did extremely well on this project..."), and they often don't give feedback at all or wait so long to give it that it does little good for the person receiving it.

The truth is that most of us would be significantly more effective at work if we gave others feedback sooner and more regularly. It helps all of us work better. It helps us to recognize blind spots, know what to keep doing (and when to think about changing specific behaviors), and it helps build relationships with those who give us the gift of their advice.

Although we all might like to blame the challenges of giving feedback on external circumstances, in fact the biggest barrier to giving feedback is often ourselves. It is difficult for most of us to offer criticism when we are looking someone in the eye. We're concerned about how a person will react. At the same time, we want to minimize conflict or protect our ego. Both lead to postponing the conversation or not having it at all.

However, feedback is best given within a face-to-face context, as it is most likely to be well received and acted upon. When sitting down with an employee in person, we are better able to respond, coach and teach to his or her defensiveness, to mitigate criticism with recognition of achievements, and to give someone time to absorb the message. There is simply no substitute for personal interaction when it comes to imparting honest feedback.



Starting thought

Courage

It's a little-discussed term in business today, yet is at the very core of dealing with the tough situations many leaders face.

I was working with a leader who was preparing to make some significant changes in his organization's structure, including people changes. As we talked more, and his eyes welled up with tears, I realized how tough these decisions were for him. In the end, it was the right thing to do—his customers' needs had changed; the market had changed; and his organization wasn't set up for success.

Through our conversation, he was realizing how difficult this announcement was going to be. In many ways, this was a leadership litmus test—whether he had the courage to not just make a tough decision, but to communicate it with empathy, respect, and sensitivity.

We talked about how he could be authentic about his feelings while still providing the leadership needed to paint a picture of a new future and deliver some difficult messages:

- Clarity would be critical (what is happening and why)
- Courage is needed to be direct and straightforward
- Compassion and care are vital in communicating how difficult but necessary the changes are
- Creating a conversation about current and future plans

In the end, the changes were accepted as well as could be expected. As important, his team got an even better sense of this leader who showed great compassion and courage.

In many ways, his ability to communicate effectively was integral to leading and managing change.

He's someone you'd want to work for in a heartbeat. And his advanced communications skills make the difference.

What courageous conversation might you need to have today and how can you develop your communications skills to prepare?

“Courage is what it takes to stand up and speak; courage is also what it takes to sit down and listen.”

– Winston Churchill



The Next 'Next Generation

More than 80 million strong¹⁵, Millennials—those born roughly between 1981 and 2000—are entering the workplace in growing numbers. Just 23 percent of the workforce in 2009¹⁶, they are expected to account for more than 40 percent by 2015¹⁷ and as the estimated 54 million baby boomers reach retirement, Millennials will inevitably have even greater impact on organizations.

As it has with every “next generation,” the entry of Millennials into the workplace is likely to involve some adjustment. The leader’s role is to leverage the talents of all age groups for the greatest competitive advantage. Understanding how they think, work, and communicate—as well as how they relate to one another—is important to achieving that goal.

Whatever their age, the more employees feel understood and valued, the more productive and engaged they are. On the flip side, if they feel misunderstood, it can lead to lower productivity or even disengagement. Millennials are no exception. To better connect with this powerful segment of the workforce, leaders must understand Millennials and how to draw on their unique talents.

What makes Millennials tick

Like any generation, there are certain cultural experiences that affect the way Millennials see the world. Baby Boomers grew up watching man walk on the moon, the Vietnam War and the civil rights movement. Millennials were shaped by events including the 9/11 terrorist attacks, ethics scandals, and a digital revolution.

A variety of characteristics are commonly seen in this generation. Millennials tend to be socially minded, technology-literate, confident, and team-oriented. They grew up in an era of choices—whether it was hundreds of television channels, crayon boxes with 96 colors or multi-colored iPods and cell phones. As a result of having so many options all their lives, Millennials value flexibility and convenience more than previous generations. Their experience in group settings such as daycare and after-school sports has also shaped the way Millennials learn and interact. After working with peers throughout their lives, they learn best through collaborative efforts.

Millennials are already shaping the future of many industries and their impact will only grow. Understanding how to tap their talents will benefit every team and organization.



TIP:

Four things you need to know about Millennials:

- 1. They are change agents.** Don’t expect Millennials to be comfortable with the current workplace “status quo.” They thrive in evolving environments and generate change by continuously looking for ways to improve their work with a pioneering mindset. Few Millennials expect to stay with the same organization for many years.
- 2. They are technologically sophisticated.** Millennials are comfortable leveraging new digital tools and using technology in new ways. They adapt quickly, so they are good candidates to pilot new processes and help streamline technological transitions to maximize business results. Having Millennials on your team will help your organization roll out new business technologies successfully.
- 3. They embrace diversity.** One of the most racially and ethnically diverse generations in business today, Millennials are naturally prepared for globalization. Their approach as part of a global workforce is to offer new ideas and perspectives. As businesses grow, Millennials will be eager and well-suited to contribute because they are both comfortable with and inspired by diversity.
- 4. They flourish in a challenging environment.** Millennials enjoy working to their highest potential. When encouraged and coached properly, with regular feedback and opportunities to grow, Millennials will be motivated contributors to your business success.

Leadership is a two-way street

Leading virtual teams requires more than just presence and project management skills. It means engaging employees who are not in your space and ensuring they feel connected and valued by the organization.

Some key things to remember:

Employees want visible leaders who listen—They want to know their voices are heard, whether they work remotely or not.

Two-way communications is more critical than ever with a distributed, hard-to-reach workforce—Be sure to ask for input and check direction once in a while to be sure everyone has a common understanding of the goals and focus. Don't assume that silence means there is nothing to be said—or heard.

Everyone matters—Ensure everyone participates and is heard during virtual team meetings, either through prepared presentation or spontaneous discussion. If people aren't volunteering information in a virtual meeting, ask them what they think about a topic or invite them to share what they've been doing.

Technology can be a barrier to engagement—Especially when connections are slow or equipment isn't working well, remote workers can become frustrated trying to follow along and participate at the same time they are trying to work out technical issues. Be sensitive to these technological barriers and the learning curve for people using a new technology or system for the first time. Be patient and recognize they may not be as adept at following along as their more experienced peers.



TIP:

What non-wired employees want when it comes to communication

- Fewer and shorter messages
- Clear priorities and direction
- Action-oriented information
- High visibility material
- Signs that get to the point
- Easy access to information



TRY IT TODAY

Evaluate your workplace and determine which individuals may benefit from a different approach to your communication:

- **How often do you connect directly with remote workers?** Have you had the chance to get to know them and their needs? Pick and implement two more ways you will try to work better with these employees.
- **When did you last measure employee engagement?** What were the results, and how are you addressing employees' needs?
- **What strategies do you use specifically for non-wired employees?**
- **Where do you see opportunities to do better?** Choose one large and one small activity to take action in this area.

Everything you do communicates something, whether you intend to or not. The most effective leaders choose to make the most of their communications, and recognize that virtually all problems in business today lie in the absence of effective communication.

These leader**communicators**—who are differentiating themselves and driving business success—know effective communication is the critical tool for bridging strategies and actions, strengthening teams, inspiring others, and accelerating results.

In his second book, award-winning leadership communication expert David Grossman expands on his proven approach to tackle common challenges including, “The Se7en Deadly Sins of Leadership,” along with critical but less commonplace opportunities such as motivating Millennials, mastering messaging, and engaging hard-to-reach employees and holding them accountable. Proven with Fortune 100 companies, the tips and tools presented in *You Can't **NOT** Communicate 2* will, without a doubt, help propel any leader to the next level.

“Once again, David Grossman proves why he’s one of the most sought-after communication experts in the field.”

— *Jim Sabourin, Vice President, Corporate Communications, Unum Group*

“Grossman’s combination of instinctual perception and practical advice is rare.”

— *John Greisch, CEO, Hill-Rom Holdings, Inc.*

“Grossman’s principles and fundamentals for effective communications are constant reminders that to truly make progress, we need to share information across our company in the right way, at the right time, with the right people.”

— *David B. Speer, Chairman and CEO, Illinois Tool Works, Inc.*

“If you aren’t using the principles that David teaches, you are not optimizing the power of your people.”

— *Susan Schmitt, Senior Vice President, Human Resources, Rockwell Automation*

“Practical, wise, smartly designed.”

— *Jon Iwata, Senior Vice President, Marketing and Communications, IBM Corporation*

“The Tom Peters of Internal Engagement.”

— *Frank J. Oswald, Consultant, Frank J. Oswald, LLC*

“Reads like a conversation with a good (and very WISE) friend.”

— *Kathleen L. Lewton, Principal, Lewton, Seekins & Trester*

