

THE *A* LIST

*The 17 Most Read, Most Commented On,
and Most Thought-Provoking Lists for
Communicating Your Way to Great Leadership*

GETTING TO KNOW YOUR EMPLOYEES



In the past several years, I've written a lot of articles: many were original posts on the *leader**communicator** Blog*, others were excerpts from *You Can't **NOT** Communicate* and *You Can't **NOT** Communicate 2*, and still others originally appeared in various business publications. I've written about leadership and communication from all kinds of angles and all kinds of perspectives.

I've addressed hot button issues and tackled the communication successes and failures of some of the nation's biggest companies. Along the way I've discovered there's one thing that consistently grabs readers: **Lists**. *The Top 5*, *The Best 10*, *The 4 Steps*, you name it. There's just something about a list.

Without fail, my list articles have been the most popular and the most shared. And contrary to what you might expect, readers spent more time on these pages and were more likely to comment on these posts. In short, the very posts I created with the intention of saving readers time ended up drawing people in and encouraging them to give more of their time.

Why?

Because they're useful, they're practical, they offer up tips and strategies that can literally be put into practice immediately. They give leader**communicators**™ a clear path to communicating better to become better, more effective leaders. Honestly, this shouldn't come as a surprise to me. I regularly advise leaders to break down key message points into digestible pieces that give clear, actionable direction. How nice to find my advice validated in practice on my very own blog!



In celebration of my readers' love of lists, I decided it was time to create a list of...you guessed it...***lists!***

The A List: The 17 Most Read, Most Commented On, and Most Thought-Provoking Lists for Communicating Your Way to Great Leadership is my new two-part ebook series. As the title suggests, it is a collection of readers' favorite list articles and blog posts together in one place.

Part 1: Getting to Know Your Employees focuses on strategies and tips to help leaders communicate better with employees, directly and indirectly. The second part focuses on communicating big-picture thinking and strategy across an organization.

Whip through them all in one sitting, pick them up and put them down, take notes in the margins... The reading should be the easy part, so you can save your energy for what really matters: Becoming a better leader**communicator**.

Leading in Person: **6 Reasons** for Communicating Face-to-Face



We all know how technology enables communication—email, voicemail, text messages, instant messages, Twitter—the list goes on. There are more than enough ways to communicate, and too often they add up to message overload for employees.

That's why when something is important, nothing compares to communicating face-to-face. When a leader needs to inspire people—or move them to action—the best way to do it is to look people in the eye and tell them exactly what they need to know. Communicating face-to-face sends a message before you say a word. People will not only hear what you are saying, they will perceive the greater meaning of your tone, voice inflection, emotion and body language.

Here are six good reasons for leaders to make the time to communicate face-to-face:

- 1. Demonstrate importance:** Being there in person tells your audience they are important to you and the issue you are discussing is worth your time and theirs. Your focus will get people's attention and increase the potential for your message to be heard.
- 2. Interpret thoughts and feelings:** When you are face-to-face, you can see and respond to people's reactions—like facial expressions and body language—as well as their tone of voice. Leaders have the chance to show they care by asking probing questions and actively listening to understand the audience's perspective. This is especially critical when you need employees to adopt new behaviors to advance your goals, such as in times of change.
- 3. Enhance credibility and trust:** Leaders need to build employee trust to be effective. Face-to-face situations allow you to share your strategy, explain it clearly, and answer questions honestly. Employees see how actions align with words, which enhances leaders' credibility and trust.
- 4. Build relationships:** Interacting directly with other leaders, managers and employees expands your network and establishes shared experiences that can enhance future communication. It also helps create camaraderie that is the basis of cooperation and success across the organization.
- 5. Gather feedback:** Meeting in person helps employees feel valued and gives them a chance to contribute input to organizational strategies and communication. It gives the leader a chance to confirm people's understanding of key issues, identify gaps and encourage ongoing feedback and engagement.
- 6. Address sensitive issues:** You demonstrate respect for employees and a commitment to a successful outcome when you deal with a sensitive issue face-to-face. Whether you are providing specific feedback to increase their success or delivering a tough message, focus on your desired outcome and prepare by understanding the employee's mindset and possible reactions. Ultimately your involvement means a lot and taking the time to meet can help turn a challenging conversation into a trust-building interaction.

What important or challenging issue in your organization should be handled face to face?

A man with a thoughtful expression, wearing an orange sweater, has a robotic arm extending from his head. The arm is silver and black, with a gripper at the end. The background is a bright, modern office space with large windows.

The 7 Things Every Employee Wants

I read an article in USA Today about how many consumers are “app-y” because they can use their mobile devices to store their gift wish lists. That got me thinking: If employees in today’s global organizations were to develop their collective “wish list,” what would be on it?

1. Less BS and more humanity: Enough beating-around-the-bush or, worse yet, “spinning” of messages. Employees want to know what’s happening and why, in a direct way. Tell me what you know when you know it. Chances are, you’re waiting too long after getting key information to communicate it.

2. Understanding of your expectations: People rise to the expectations set for them. Many problems in business are caused by a lack of understanding of expectations or a misunderstanding of what’s needed and expected.

3. More listening (to me): Stop talking so much. Ask for input and feedback. I am more likely to support what I help create. Stop the monologues and talking at me; let’s have real, two-way conversations.

4. Take action on employee suggestions: The action might be to loop back with the employee to share appreciation for their thoughts, and help them understand why you’re not implementing their suggestion for an alternate approach. The action is closing the feedback loop, which can be as worthwhile as implementing an employee’s suggestion.

5. Show me you care (in a genuine way): Find out what’s important to me, and please be sure to acknowledge critical milestones that are important to me.

6. Empathize with me: Pause and imagine how I’m feeling. Show you hear me, and validate my feelings. The payoff is an employee who knows you care; at the same time, you gather information that’s useful to motivating that employee.

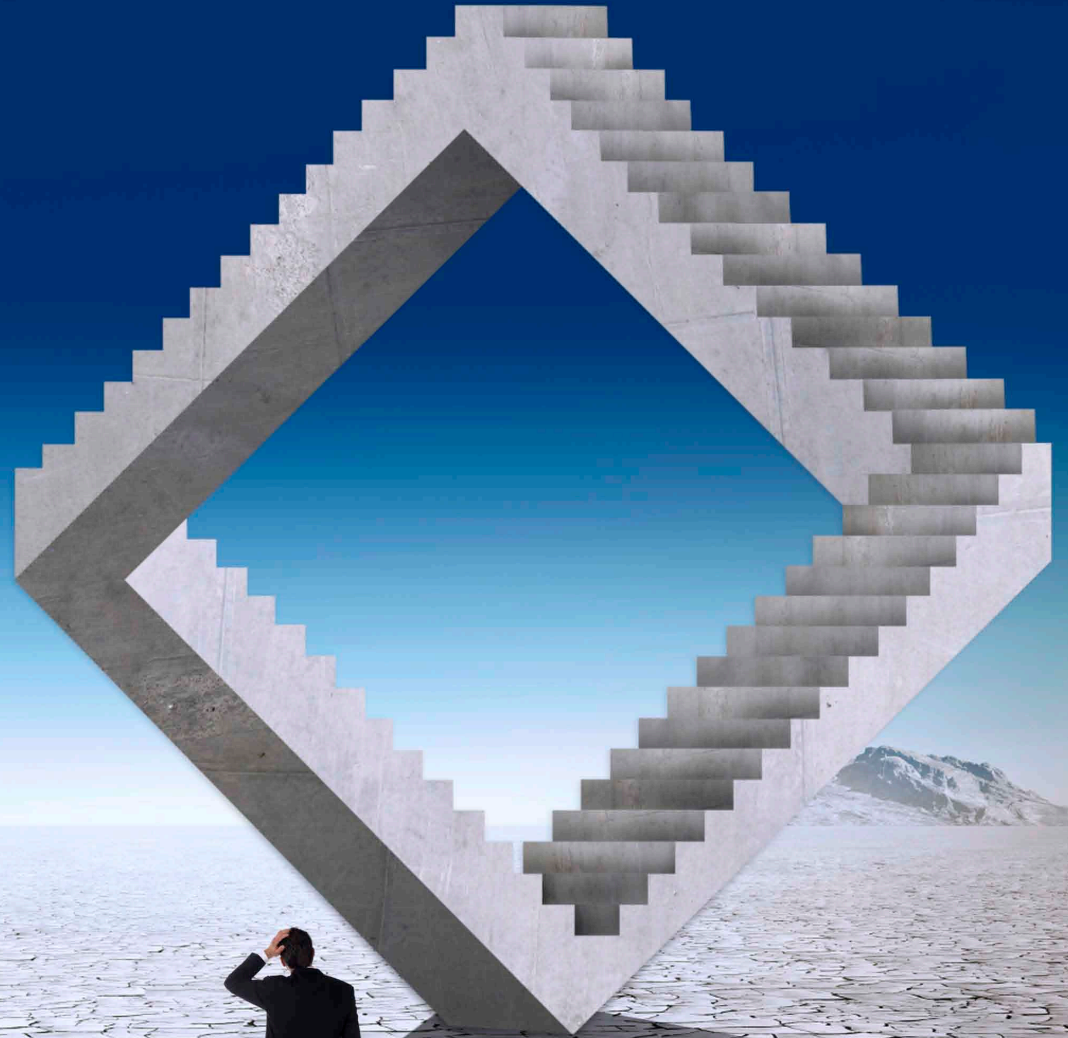
7. Recognize and appreciate me: Say “thank you” for a job well done. Reinforce very specifically the behaviors you want to continue to see. At a two-way communication training recently, a woman asked whether she needed to reward and recognize someone on her team for “just doing his job.” Absolutely. Jobs don’t inspire and motivate people; leaders do.

So that’s my short list. Best of all, these “gifts” on the wish list are free. No coupons required. You don’t need to fight the crowds. All that’s needed might be a little training or coaching to help you improve your leadership impact. And that could be the best gift you give yourself (and your staff).

Which of these skills would have the greatest impact on your results?

The 8 Questions All Employees Have

(and You Need To Answer)



Whether employees ask them or not, the reality is there are several key questions that are on their minds—The Eight Key Questions™.

These questions are a lot like Maslow’s hierarchy of needs—which states that only after a person has fulfilled certain levels of needs can he or she begin to move to more complex levels of thought, self-awareness, and understanding of others. In other words, employees’ basic needs have to be addressed first before they can begin to think beyond themselves. Employees’ core questions are “me”-focused questions that help them understand what’s happening around them and what it means to them specifically.

Once the me-focused questions are answered, then employees are able to look beyond themselves. “What’s going on?” they often ask as they then become aware of changes or initiatives happening outside their department or function. It’s only then that they become interested in the “we”-focused questions, which are focused on the larger organization. The ultimate payoff is when employees ask, “How can I help?” This is an expression of engagement—a willingness to do more—which also demonstrates a strong emotional connection to the organization.

It’s important to remember that these are questions that employees think about, and perhaps ask, every day—whether they are new to the organization or veterans. When change happens, as it often does in today’s fast-paced business world, employees immediately go back to the me-focused questions. Our job as leaders is to get them back to question eight as quickly as possible. If we don’t, that’s when business often gets stopped, slowed, or interrupted as employees work through—or are challenged by—change.

THE EIGHT KEY
QUESTIONS
 ALL EMPLOYEES HAVE ?

- 8. How can I help? _____
 - 7. What’s our vision and values? _____
 - 6. How are we doing? _____
 - 5. What’s our business strategy? _____
 - 4. What’s going on? _____
 - 3. Does anyone care about me? _____
 - 2. How am I doing? _____
 - 1. What’s my job? _____
- we**
- transition**
- me**

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4 Steps to Help You Get to Know Your Frontline Employees

If you feel the only way to really know what's going on at the front lines of your company is to go undercover, there's something wrong. Leaders should not be in the dark about the interface between their front-line employees and customers.

How can you get to know your frontline employees, what motivates them, and how to get them to be highly-valued brand ambassadors?

- 1. Spend time with employees:** It's a simple theory—and it works. Allocate time each month to walk the halls, eat lunch in the cafeteria, talk face-to-face with the factory manager or employees on the floor. Ensure that on every trip, you allocate time to talk with employees at the location you're visiting. Schedule these activities in your calendar, just like any other critical appointment.
- 2. Ask questions that connect to the strategy:** For example, "Help me understand how you see the work you're doing contributing to our strategy?"
- 3. Reinforce what you want to see more of:** Hear a great idea? Recognize it. See someone exhibiting one of your core values? Recognize him or her. Share genuine, appreciative feedback with employees.
- 4. Provide an avenue to listen regularly:** Use technology appropriately to create channels of communication so that employees can reach out to you when they have a question, concern or idea. Don't commit to this, however, unless you plan to answer the questions or emails yourself. Employees know canned responses or those that don't sound like they're coming from you.



5 Strategies for Engaging Millennials



Millennials work a little differently than the current workforce and respond better to certain types of communication. Use these five strategies that are key to their engagement.

- 1. Start strong:** Studies suggest that Millennial workers decide on the first day whether they will stay with an organization long-term. Engage them at the beginning with a solid understanding of the organization by sharing its history, mission, vision, and values. If Millennials believe in the company and feel aligned with its mission, they will feel instantly connected.
- 2. Encourage and foster creativity:** Millennials aren't shy about wanting an interesting, dynamic, creative and above all, fun working environment. They look for workplaces that have creative communication, open working environments, technology, and flexibility.
- 3. Make sure they are challenged:** Millennials have high expectations of themselves and aren't afraid to make mistakes as they learn by doing. Giving them the opportunity to build their experience will pay off in increased capability as it shapes the next generation of leaders.
- 4. Coach, coach, coach:** Motivated and open to feedback, Millennials are eager to do well and easy to coach. They want to hear from managers often about their progress throughout the course of the month—or even week. If you catch a Millennial regressing, approach that time as an opportunity for learning. They want to know where they can improve to become the star employees they strive to be.
- 5. Chart a career path:** Millennials need to know where they fit and where they can advance in the organization. Establish goals and expectations to help them set their sights on career opportunities. Letting Millennials know there is room for them to grow in the organization over time will engage them and help them reach their goals and yours.

Engaging Millennials is all about understanding them, and what makes them tick. The more you know, the more you can leverage their talent and energy.

5 Easy Strategies for Managing the Company Rumor Mill



It's amazing how quickly a single spark can become a conflagration. Gaps in communication and messaging open room for small bits of gossip and misinformation to take on a life of their own, as they spread from person to person, gaining momentum and traction. It's up to leaders to be mindful of issues, to address and manage employee anxieties, and to ensure that strategic messaging rises above rumor.

Here's how:

- 1. Pulse your people:** Ask your direct reports what they're hearing from their people on a periodic basis. Or, better yet, walk the halls and ask employees what's on their minds. Having a better sense of what keeps employees up at night will help you get ahead of any rumors that might be waiting in the wings. The best part is that employees will know you're listening and that you care about what they're thinking.
- 2. Be open, but be careful:** We know that remaining silent in tough times feeds anxiety and fuels the rumor mill. But being too open can hurt more than it helps, especially if it adds to people's fears.
- 3. Maintain your credibility and use it to your advantage:** Credibility won't stop rumors from developing, but it will unleash the truth. Communicate what you know, when you know it, and make sure your messages are consistent across all touch points.
- 4. Anticipate and address concerns:** When people are worried about what they don't know, they often imagine the worst and share their concerns with others. If leaders don't anticipate and address concerns, the vacuum will most certainly be filled by rumors. Get out in front of anticipated worries by understanding the mindset that causes them and immediately addressing those concerns.
- 5. Include your own messages in the rumor mill:** Engage thought leaders who typically feed and influence the rumor mill, along with supervisors throughout the organization. When employees hear the same messages from their supervisor (always their preferred source) or from the CEO, read it on the intranet, and hear it through the rumor mill, they're more likely to believe it and, most importantly, to act on it.



7 Actionable Tips

for Leaders to
Build Trust That Lasts

In the graduate course I teach at Columbia University, my students thirst for practical ideas and insights on ways to build trust.

The burning question I often hear from them—and just as often from senior executives—is, how can I get employees to trust me? And not in a way that is about reputation and saving face, but in a way that creates a deep bond of believability between executive and manager, superior and subordinate, and that motivates employees to commit the extra effort that is essential to any successful organization.

Let's start with the basics. Trust is built on follow through and delivery. Say anything you want, but if you don't back up your words with action and results, your employees will get the message loud and clear that you are not a person on whom they can depend. Fail to follow through even just a few times, and you've all but squandered the chance to build the trusted relationships that are at the heart of productive, engaged workplaces. Why does trust matter?

Greater trust in leaders benefits the bottom line. People like being a part of an organization they believe in. This means they are willing to work harder, smarter, and be engaged and active in the workplace in ways that drive business results. Furthermore, greater trust fosters employee well-being. This might seem like a touchy-feely soft business issue, but the fact is that unhappy and disconnected employees can have a profound effect on business through absenteeism, lack of motivation, and turnover.

So back to that question that both senior executives and Columbia grad students have: How do I get employees to trust me?

- 1. Be approachable and friendly** (people trust leaders they like).
- 2. Balance the need for results with being considerate of others and their feelings.**
- 3. Instead of using your position power, work hard to win over people** by being respectful of their ideas and perspectives.
- 4. Ensure that your words and actions match.** Not just some of the time—all the time.
- 5. Actively listen and check for understanding** by paraphrasing what you've heard.
- 6. Show support for your team members,** even when they make mistakes.
- 7. Be honest and tell the truth.** Telling people what you think they want to hear erodes trust.

As leaders, whether of an entire company or of a small team, we can't underestimate the power of the shadow we cast and our ability to influence behaviors and drive results. We must learn to drive the results we want by modeling them.

What are you going to model today to build trusted relationships?

The 4 Fs of Feedback



If you were to give yourself a grade for how effective you are at giving feedback, what grade would you choose? Many of the executives I work with are brutally honest and give themselves an F.

They don't make giving feedback a standard part of meetings and discussions; they give general ("good job!") versus specific feedback ("Here's what you did extremely well on this project..."); they often don't give feedback at all or wait too long to give feedback; and they would have a hard time giving their boss feedback.

Chances are, most of us can be even more effective if we gave others feedback sooner and more regularly. Feedback helps all of us be better, recognize blind spots, know what to keep doing that's effective, and helps build relationships with those who give us the gift of feedback.

Here are the "Four Fs of Feedback" to help you move from F to A:

- 1. Frame:** Set up the discussion and share why you're sharing feedback, including your intention (most often your intention is to be helpful, and it's critical to say that).
- 2. Feedback:** Discuss what went well, or what could be better and suggest an alternative: "This behavior had this consequence, and here's what I'd prefer to see..."
- 3. Feelings:** Check-in to see how effectively you're communicating: "How do you feel about what I just said?" Allow the person to respond, and clarify or amplify, if needed.
- 4. Follow-up:** Discuss next steps and how you can help and support.

I'm a big fan of being direct and not beating around the bush. Avoid emotionally-charged language or judgments, and just state the facts as they are: "I need to give you feedback..., here's my intention..., here's what I saw and the consequence..., here's what I'd prefer to see..., how do you feel?"

Finally, pick a time that's best for you to ensure you're in the right frame of mind. Then, ask the other person whether they're open to feedback. If so, proceed. If not, schedule a follow-up. Either way, offering up the choice gets you off on the right foot.

What feedback haven't you addressed yet that would be helpful to someone else?

The 1 Question You Need to Answer for Every Employee



Know your audience and speak to them. Great leaders inspire employees to action by giving them feelings of significance, community, and excitement.

It's your job as a leader to use communication to help your audience make the connection between business objectives and their role in helping you meet them. But it's important to understand that before you can get to the business big picture, you'll need to address employees' personal needs first.

At the end of the day, every employee wants to know “What’s in it for me?” They might articulate that need in any number of ways:

- **“How does this affect my life/job?”**
- **“What does this have to do with me?”**
- **“What should I be doing?”**
- **“Does anyone care about me?”**

There's real magic in addressing your audience's needs first. When you do that, your audience is more likely to trust you, and, as a result, be more generous, more open and more receptive to big-picture; strategic communication.

And don't forget to keep your audience in mind when you're thinking about the big picture. All communication should always be tailored to the specific audience to make them aware of their role in the organizational whole. That's what leads to engagement and the discretionary effort all of us want.

Specifically, a leader should:

- **Contextualize organizational information to ensure your team understands how it fits in.**
- **Craft information so that it's relevant to individual employees and teams.**
- **Provide job-related information so that individuals and teams can do their jobs effectively.**

Because when it comes right down to it, it doesn't matter what you say, it's whether you can make it relevant to them (which is what they will hear).

How are you doing at answering the question, “What’s in it for me?”



Imagine having your own personalized business messages and stories in the palm of your hand.

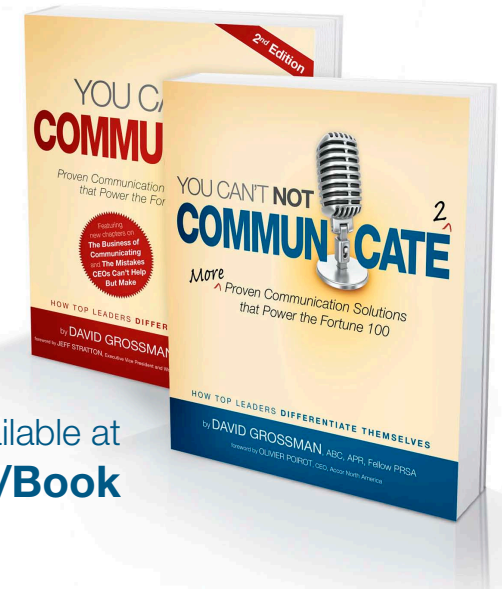


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Our leader**communicator**™ platform is now available for the iPad or tablet, enabling leaders to have quick and easy access to their core messages. Not unlike a political platform, the award-winning leader**communicator** platform is a customized tool for senior leaders to help them develop and articulate strategy, drive change, and engage employees to achieve business results. It's never been easier to ensure leaders stay on track with the messaging they want to drive.

David Grossman, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA is the founder and CEO of The Grossman Group

David is both a teacher and student of effective communication and counsels some of the world's leading organizations on internal and leadership communication. He's author of the highly acclaimed, "You Can't **Not** Communicate: Proven Communication Solutions That Power the Fortune 100" (Second Edition) and its follow up, "You Can't **Not** Communicate 2." David is often quoted in media, providing expert commentary and analysis on employee and leadership issues. Specifically, he was featured on *NBC Nightly News*, *CBS MoneyWatch* and in the *Chicago Tribune*. Share your internal communication challenges or tips with David at dgrossman@yourthoughtpartner.com.



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