

Leading Ways: EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

"The single biggest problem with communication is the illusion that it has taken place."

-Attributed to George Bernard Shaw

When I ask organizational leaders to identify the top three development needs of their most promising direct reports, the most common item on the list is "executive communication." Like most higher order skills this is hard to pin down, can vary with the leadership style of individuals and is always recognizable to others. The suggestions below are not about how to make an effective speech, (that is another topic entirely) but about how you effectively communicate when leading a team, participating in a meeting, discussing something with a peer, delegating to a direct report or managing up.

FRAME IT

The people you are talking with just came from another meeting, they are headed to another when this one is over. You have been working on this topic for a solid month, they may or may not know why you are here or what this is about. So, while it seems obvious to you, take a minute to reorient them. Here are some likely touchstones for this:

- a. What is the project? I know this seems absurd, but it's worth the 15 seconds to do this so the three people that don't know will not spend time trying to figure it out. Also helpful to quickly remind how it fits to quarterly goals and strategic direction.
- b. What work has been done – briefly. They just need the sketch, they don't care how long you've spent on it or what you did, just what you learned.
- c. Where you want them to focus today. Help solving a problem, resources in taking next steps, possible fallout that could impact them and is beyond your control.

THE MAIN MESSAGE

This part of the communication needs to be as clear and focused as you can make. There are certainly going to be unknowns, and these will inevitably mean that the way ahead will need to be adjusted as new things arise. In times of change this is reality, so better to acknowledge it. It will be helpful to commit yourself to keeping them informed as new information is available and the course shifts. Some examples are:

"Responding to the current situation, we will move to conduct all work using technologies that let us maintain social distance."

"The new challenges we must meet means we will move the majority of patient care to telemedicine interactions."

"Because of this situation, we will need to reduce staffing on new projects and allocate them to the crisis response."

WHY ARE WE DOING THIS?

The real opportunity of change in times of crisis is that you do not need to spend much time putting this in context or offer justifications. “We have a government mandate.” “We want to keep all of our staff as safe as possible.” “Given other demands the resources have to be reallocated for now.” Behind each of these is a complex or pretty straightforward decision process that should be a part of the explanation, but details in these moments are probably not too helpful. What is needed is decisive action that has been informed by all relevant constituencies, information and constraints. And an explanation that is just as clear and straightforward.

WHAT IS THE UPSIDE?

There is always an upside. “We still have work to do.” “We have the opportunity to play an essential role.” “This provides us a chance to do something – telecommute, consolidate services, provide telemedicine, work with a new collaborator- that we have been wanting to do for a while.” Your description of the upside should be something that is real and tangible and at least somewhat familiar to the audience. They may not all see it this way, but this is your first step at putting the change into a positive context. Being positive does not mean stretching the truth or offering uninformed opinions.

WHAT IS THE DOWNSIDE?

Be honest about the pain. If there may be layoffs, say so. Be as specific as possible. Do not sugar coat the pill. Give the best estimate of the impact on the organization and individuals within. There are two elements leaders need to always add to grim news. First, the impact, whatever its - extra work, downsizing, need to change, reduced budgets- are a **collective burden to bear** and all will participate in one way or the other. Second, the decisions will be made in a manner that is **consistent with the core values and culture** of the organization. (Hopefully these are clear and understood by all assembled.)

HOW DO WE MOVE FORWARD?

This part is very important and often fails to make it into the first communication of change. This should provide the general process and specific details of the next steps that will be pursued. It has two dimensions. First, it is a more detailed statement of what the change is about, building on the first step, but tends to be more operational.

In addition, this part of the communication provides guidance as to how the audience is to move forward with this change. It will be important for everyone to take responsibility for questioning and adjusting the change as the process goes forward. Everyone will need to assume the role of problem solver, not merely critic. The messages here should be about collective ownership, positive attitude, and dedicated teamwork.

Any communication of this sort should be complete and as focused as possible. The message should be conveyed in a manner that exhibits the values that you want to call out in the attempt of focusing on the challenge, whatever it may be.