

# NACBA Ledger

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# STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT Communication

by Lee J. Colan, Ph.D.

**WHAT'S THE ONE THING** we do more than anything else but typically do it less effectively than anything else? Communicate.

Virtually every leader with whom I have ever spoken, regardless of the team's size or maturity, acknowledged the need to improve communication. Here are some reasons to pay attention to your communication:

- Watson Wyatt Worldwide conducted a study that links effective employee communication with a 7.1% increase in market value.
- Kip Tindell is co-founder of The Container Store, a top ranked company on *Fortune's* "100 Best Companies to Work For" several years in a row. The guiding mantra for Tindell and his team was "Leadership Is Communication."
- Deloitte & Touche, also on *Fortune's* list, conducted a study that found communication was the best predictor of employee commitment.
- Jack Welch, former CEO of GE, argued, "You have to communicate until you are sick of hearing yourself and then communicate some more."

**The bottom line**—If you want a fully engaged, high-performing team, you must talk with them about your business. Although these examples come for the

secular industries the realities translate to congregational teams.

## THE POWER OF WORDS

Words are the most powerful tool invented by human beings. Since you cannot change what you cannot see, words allow the mind to see what your eyes cannot. With the rise of various forms of remote communication channels (text, email, social media sites, etc.), the words we choose are more important than ever.

Words have propelled our greatest achievements, prevented opportunities to create great companies and triggered many wars and loss of life. Words create passion, energy, and focus around a common goal for people who share the same words. When people share the same words a community is formed, whether it is around the arts, religion, sports, a profession, or your company. In fact, the word "communication" stems from the word community.

Ask yourself, "What five words do I consistently hear and see in my team?"

Your response to this question will reflect your team's real culture versus the culture you may desire. The words your team uses create the behavior and assumptions that shape your culture.

## THE MESSAGE TREE

The Message Tree helps describes the four rings of communication. The inner two rings represent the private arena of communication and the outer two rings represent the public arena (Figure 1).

Figure 1



## THE INNER RING—INTRAPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

The most important conversation you will ever have is with yourself. These conversations help you mold the lenses through which you see the world. These lenses (i.e., assumptions, paradigms) directly influence your view of team member trustworthiness, your own capabilities, your control over the external world, others' need for information, risk of sharing information, etc.

In this intrapersonal ring of communication being a good listener is a double-edged sword. Effective listening is great if the messages you send to yourself are constructive, reality-based and result in leadership responses that serve your team's best interests. On the other hand,



### THE THIRD RING—ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION

Communication is historically the top concern for employees, but deeper analysis of years of employee attitude research reveals that employees want answers to these four questions—the Fundamental Four:

1. Where are we going? (Strategy)
2. What are we doing to get there? (Plans)
3. What can I do to contribute? (Roles)
4. What is in it for me? (Rewards)

Ensure that you are answering these questions before communicating about other topics. Your team is asking these questions whether or not you hear them. When questions go unanswered we tend to fill in the blanks with our own assumptions, and these assumptions are typically worse than reality. As an example, a national retailer made costly aesthetic improvements to the grounds of their corporate offices. These improvements were made on the heels of a workforce reduction. Both surviving and terminated employees were extremely disillusioned as they saw the new landscaping being installed. The leadership failed to communicate to employees that these improvements were required by a local city ordinance, carried substantial fines for non-compliance and had been planned for nine months. Without this information, employees assumed the worst, and their commitment was significantly eroded. These types of examples can be found in congregation as well. On a given Sunday a strong message is given from the pulpit about the lack of offering to support ministry and staff cut backs possible but dur-

ing the week members and staff see major upgrades being made to space that appear to them to be adequate and not in need of renovation.

Below is a simple tool to help you craft an organizational communication plan (Figure 2).

Your communication channels might include memo/email, video, newsletter, home mailings, intranet, meetings, social media, town hall chats, training sessions, focus groups, company parties/celebrations/rituals, bulletin boards, paycheck stuffers, running banners on PCs, video conferences, etc.

Do not get too fancy with your channels. Select those that are perceived as most reliable. **The message is in the medium.** For example, if you are announcing an important new strategy, sending an email might be perceived as matter-of-fact and that the new strategy is not critical. Alternatively, church-wide or staff meetings with a presentation and opportunity for asking questions suggest to people that the time, effort, and preparation to hold these meetings correlated with the importance of this new strategy.

Predictability is key when creating your communication plan. Start with two or three reliable channels to support your key messages, and then build on them slowly. Resist the temptation to create a myriad of channels and messages. Keep it simple and stick to it!

Here are **Seven Keys to C<sup>3</sup>** (Crystal Clear Communication). Your communication should be

1. Aligned with the Fundamental Four questions (first column left)
2. Honest
3. Consistent
4. Multi-channeled
5. Timely
6. Concise
7. Three-way (downward, upward, and horizontal).

### THE OUTER RING—EXTERNAL COMMUNICATION

External communication addresses capturing mind-share and creating a workplace brand with prospective employees, customers, vendors, partners, and local communities.

Trying to be all things to all people is a sure recipe for mediocrity. Instead, focus on a few key features that distinguish you as an employer. The five words you most commonly hear and see in your organization are a good starting point for describing your value proposition as an employer.

A clear, concise message about who you are and what you value as a congregation serves as an effective self-selection mechanism for recruitment.

Once you have articulated the essence of your identity (e.g., innovation, teamwork, operational efficiency, member engagement, having fun at work, intellectual challenge, ministry responsibility), weave those messages into your communication with your external message, particularly with your volunteer leadership and community outreach. **Ki**

Figure 2

Who (Sender)	What (Message)	Why (Objective)	Where (Receiver)	How (Channel)	When (Frequency)
1.					
2.					
3.					



if your self-talk is maladaptive, then effectively listening to those messages can start a destructive cycle for you and your team.

Using behavioral assessments and seeking feedback (which takes leadership courage!) can help build self-awareness, reduce blind spots (weaknesses that others see, but you do not). Fact-based feedback can help create more constructive conversations with yourself.

### THE SECOND RING— INTERPERSONAL COMMUNICATION

As a leader, it does not matter what you say; it only matters what your team hears. Since a mere seven percent of the meaning from interpersonal communication is derived from words, even the most beautifully crafted message can be missed if many other factors are not consistent with your words, including

- the communication channel you use,
- your confidence and conviction,
- sincerity,
- pace,
- eye contact,
- gestures,
- fluency, and
- the vision you create with your words.

The most critical and influential communication occurs between a leader and his/her employee, so here is a simple four-step process for using your interpersonal interactions to engage your team (taken from the rapid-read book, *Power Exchange*). The level of engagement is shown parenthetically:

1. Explain (observation)
2. Ask (participate)
3. Involve (commitment)
4. Appreciate (ownership)

**Explaining** the level of performance you expect, where your team is going, how the congregation is doing, and what your team's role is are great starting points for engaging staff. If you do this you are ahead of many leaders, but this is only the first step in building staff/volunteer commitment. Some leaders say, usually to them-

selves, "They don't really need to know that." or "They won't really understand." Remember, those who underestimate the intelligence of their staff/volunteer generally overestimate their own.

**Asking** staff what they think engages them one step further. Now they are participating in the discussion. The key here is to LISTEN, **but do not ask if you will not listen.** Asking without listening only builds cynicism, and ultimately disengagement. The leadership pickle is that if you do not listen, you will not learn. That goes for any area of life, but particularly with your team. If you do not listen to your staff, members, suppliers, etc. you gradually create larger leadership blind spots. These are areas of apparent weakness to others that you are unaware of—a precarious position for any leader. The higher you are in the organization, the more the information you receive is filtered; therefore, it is critical to build in mechanisms for *unfiltered* upward communication. These will prevent you from being "the emperor with no clothes." The higher your position, the more you must listen. Engaging leaders listen at least fifty percent of the time.

**Involving** staff and members in creating solutions to problems, defining areas for improvement and identifying new opportunities builds commitment. Many leaders feel threatened by taking this step. Some lack the skills, but most leaders feel like they are giving up control over *how* they will achieve their goals (it all goes back to their conversation with themselves about control and trust). In fact, leaders have *more* control over the messages employees hear if they involve their teams.

**Appreciating** your team and their contributions is the single most powerful leadership practice for an engaging leader. We do more for those who appreciate us ... and we want to take ownership for our own performance when we are appreciated. Leaders tend to think they appreciate their teams more than their teams feel appreciated (this might just apply to your loved ones, also). The key is to convert

your private thoughts of appreciation into public acts of appreciation.

### Summary

- Every leader, regardless of the team's size or maturity, acknowledges the need to improve communication.
- With the rise of various forms of remote communication channels, the words we choose are more important than ever.
- The words your team uses create the behavior and assumptions that shape your culture.
- The most important conversation you will ever have is with yourself.
- There is a simple four-step process for using your interpersonal interactions to engage your team.
  - Explain (observation)
  - Ask (participate)
  - Involve (commitment)
  - Appreciate (ownership)
- Analysis of years of employee attitude research reveals that employees want answers to The Fundamental Four questions. The article provides a simple tool to help you craft an organizational communication plan.
- There are seven keys to clear communication provided here.
- A clear, concise message about who you are and what you value as a congregation serves as an effective self-selection mechanism for recruitment.

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