

Leadership Moments – Communicating Confidence



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Dear Clients, Colleagues and Friends,

These are times of great uncertainty and anticipation - times that require, more than ever, leadership and effective communication. Leaders are of greatest value to their organizations, not in good times, but in times like these.

The recent election provides many examples of leaders communicating in challenging times; and underscores how critical it is that a leader have the ability to instill confidence, and to connect with his or her audience. A primary lesson for all leaders is the importance of communicating authentically with stakeholders, while responding to the stakeholders' need for information, reassurance, and direction.

When it comes to delivering good news to receptive audiences, most leaders can be masterful communicators. The same should apply when the circumstances are difficult, and the audience is skeptical, or even hostile. In these situations, some leaders, thinking that saying something will only exacerbate the situation, avoid saying anything at all; others, unknowingly, say the wrong things. As a result of my experience counseling executives and executive teams through periods of uncertainty, crisis, and change, I have come to believe that having no message is as dangerous as having the wrong message; both can increase the anxiety of the very groups the leader must engage. **In difficult times and in times of change, leaders are expected to have a plan and the ability to implement it; but they must *communicate* that they are aware and in control or run the risk of losing the confidence of the enterprise.**

A Leadership Moment

A *Leadership Moment* is one in which a leader's message is most needed and most powerful. Leadership Moments do not come in pretty packages. They come in the form of attacks on the organization, threats to the organization's value and reputation, controversial and difficult decisions, and occurrences that undermine the safety and security of employees, investors, customers and the public. Even so, Leadership Moments offer important windows of opportunity to engage employees, investors, and customers in a way that builds trust and understanding, as well as that most important resource for any organization: Confidence.

The work of the leader is to preserve, restore, and build confidence

As a communications adviser to corporate leaders worldwide, I am often asked what to communicate when the outlook is not good. While the specifics of the statement may change with the situation, my general counsel remains constant: **Deliver a message that is relevant, truthful, fact-based and sincere; and, most importantly, a message that instills confidence.**

I am not alone in this thinking. Rosabeth Moss Kanter, in her bestselling book *Confidence*, points out this fundamental principle. *“Any company, any group, can be swept along by one of these fortunate or unfortunate cycles. What causes them to rise or to fall is often a matter of confidence. Confidence is the bridge connecting expectations and performance, investment and results. Building organizational confidence, and turning losing streaks into winning streaks, is the work of leaders.”*

Worry, confusion, and fear are like thieves that rob organizations and the people in them of their full potential. Confidence is the first line of defense against the pervasive sense of powerlessness that can take over an organization in times of uncertainty.

A leader's silence can be a dangerous thing

A leader is always communicating, with or without words, in ways that might be negative or positive. In crisis situations, for example, leaders can often be found in the war room, working with a handful of key executives to resolve the situation in the most expedient and least visible way possible. Even when the problem period is protracted, leaders tend to work with a few key executives, and fail to recognize the need to communicate with the organization as a whole. Leaving communications out of the strategy is an all-too-common mistake and a missed Leadership Moment.

C. Northcote Parkinson reminds us that *“the vacuum created by failure to communicate will quickly be filled with rumor, misrepresentations, drivel and poison.”*

Silence provides fertile ground for negativity to grow and spread throughout the enterprise. It takes a serious toll on the organization's belief in itself. An effective leadership communications strategy can help employees remain productive, customers loyal, and investors calm. No matter how bad or unclear the situation is, the leader must communicate.

Leadership Moments in Action

This moment in time offers a tremendous communications opportunity. Step forward and seize it boldly. The following may be helpful to those of you responsible for keeping the organization and stakeholder relationships on an even keel through the upcoming months:

Develop a plan, not a series of one-offs

While knowing the objective before attempting to communicate it may seem obvious, a leader should take the time to ask himself or herself two critical questions before speaking or writing: *What do I want the listener to know, understand, and feel as a result of my communication so that he or she will be motivated to undertake the desired action? What does the listener need to know, understand, and feel as a result of my communication if he or she is to be motivated to undertake the desired action?*

If the answers to these two questions are not the same, any attempt at communication will result in “corporate speak,” which only serves to agitate and alienate the very people the leader must engage. Better to start with a well-thought-through communications objective that aligns the interests of the leader, the stakeholders, and the organization. Once the objectives are established, the leader can begin to build a communications strategy to retain, restore or build confidence within the organization and with all key stakeholder groups based on these essential principles:

Be the leader . . . visible, responsible, credible and assured

Visibility – Leadership is both functional and symbolic. When uncertain, stakeholders look to the leader to interpret the situation. It is the leader’s temperament, words and actions that give the organization and outside observers clues on how to respond. Inaccessibility, invisibility, or silence in challenging times can have a profound impact, and communicate an unintended – yet powerful – message of shame, helplessness, or indifference. In building or restoring stakeholder confidence, leadership must be apparent. You must be seen *and* heard.

Responsibility – When communicating in troubled times, the leader’s first task is to take the helm. In assuming responsibility, the leader begins to fulfill the stakeholder’s critical needs: To know that the right person is in command, someone who understands the problem and who has the courage and ability to hold the organization on a steady course and guide it to safe harbor.

Credibility – Credibility is the leader’s most essential asset. Nothing undermines credibility faster than being vague, talking down to the audience, or hiding vital facts. General statements and claims must be supported by truthful, relevant, and fact-based information.

Speak to the need for information, reassurance, and direction

Context – Context broadens perspective and helps the audience to see the big picture. Effective leaders use context, not as a way to shift blame or responsibility, but as a means to establish the significance and to explain the nature and scope of the situation.

Assurance – Statements of assurance create confidence, which is essential for all members of an enterprise, and especially so in difficult times. Leaders help the organization brace for uncertainties ahead. They remind the organization of past struggles, and of difficulties that were overcome through endurance, flexibility, and heightened productivity. However, leaders must use statements of assurance with discretion and responsibility. Remember that such statements can call forth hope, but that encouraging false hope is damaging. Only assurances based on truth, delivered in positive but measured tones, inspire sustainable confidence.

Lay out a sustainable plan, and engage the enterprise in carrying it out

Action – The leader’s plan for change, survival, recovery or growth must be communicated if it is to be supported. The leader’s plan must be rational, comprehensive and achievable, yet simply stated. The leader must acknowledge the challenges, yet affirm that they are surmountable. The leader must help the listener envision what success for the organization will look like, and focus on the specifics of what it is going to take to get there.

Engagement – The mark of an effective leader is the ability to inspire others to maintain focus, and, if required, to act in new and different ways. The astute leader understands that dependency on others is not a sign of weakness, but an acknowledgment of the intra-dependency of each member’s contribution to the enterprise, and of its impact on the success of the plan. The leader who overtly solicits support is both powerful and empowering.

Sustainability – No matter how good the leader is at communicating, if the message is not reinforced or substantiated, the message will be lost.

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A leader who understands and acts on these principles of communication can inspire all members of his or her team and the organization. Conversely, a leader who fails to communicate confidence, realistic optimism, and possibility may soon find the organization's morale – and with it, the organization itself – slipping away.

The good news is that the ability to communicate effectively is a skill that can be assessed, taught, and improved. The questions provided below will help to uncover leadership communications opportunities.

Leadership Moment Communications Checklist

- Are we seizing our Leadership Moments to enhance the trust and confidence of our employees, investors and customers?
- Do we have an effective and sustainable communications plan to engage and maintain the confidence of our employees, investors and customers?
- Are we confident in our message: Does our leadership team have the skills to authentically deliver it?

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Grayling Global is a strategic communications firm specializing in corporate communications, investor relations, and public affairs. We assist leaders with communications training, message and strategy development, executive visibility, and provide other tools with which to communicate more effectively with their key stakeholders. I invite you to contact me to learn more about Grayling Global's offerings, and how they are all designed to help the organization and its leadership to strengthen confidence within essential stakeholder groups.

I look forward to hearing from you.



Jacinta C. Gauda

Jacinta Gauda oversees a global communications practice that offers a full spectrum of corporate communications services. With over 22 years of experience working with some of the most respected companies worldwide, Ms. Gauda has served as a trusted advisor and media consultant to CEOs, Boards of Directors, and executive leadership teams. Her expertise focuses on issues of reputation management with specialization in crisis management. Sought for her guidance on a wide-range of corporate issues, some of her most prominent initiatives include providing litigation support in high profile cases, developing global issues management programs for multinational companies, and developing corporate strategies to accelerate cultural change. Jacinta has managed issues and crises associated with employment class actions, corporate outsourcing, boycott threats, environmental justice, accidents, workplace violence and situations associated with controversial counties and political regimes. Ms. Gauda has developed many executive training programs that help US and international corporate officers to better understand the American corporate and cultural environment, and to more effectively communicate with shareholders, the public, and the media.