JOEL SCHWARTZBERG

Author of **GET TO THE POINT!**

The

LANGUAGE

of

LEADERSHIP

HOW TO
ENGAGE AND INSPIRE
YOUR TEAM

"Applying the ideas and approaches in this book will make your communications more purposeful, meaningful, and inspirational."
—**Kevin Eikenberry,** bestselling author of *Remarkable Leadership*

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The Language of Leadership

Dedicated to the thousands of leaders—
actual and aspiring—I've been honored
to help for the last fifteen years.

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Contents

Where you lead, I will follow, anywhere that you tell me to. If you need me to be with you, I will follow where you lead.

—Carole King

Introduction: The Language of Leadership

There's no shortage of advice on the Internet and in bookstores about business leadership.

We all know well, for example, that great leaders Eat Last, Lean In, Break the Rules, Dare to Lead, and are Radically Candid. We also know they're extremely aware of their Tribes, Drive, and Principles. For some, leadership boils down to just two words: Steve Jobs.

We also know that admired leaders are empathic, optimistic, visionary, responsive, authentic, supportive, confident, humble . . . and a bunch of other hashtag-friendly adjectives that convey what great leaders are and do. (That's not even counting synonyms.)

However, consider this: it's one thing for a leader to *be* empathic, optimistic, visionary, responsive, authentic, supportive, confident, and humble, but another to *convey* those qualities to their teams. So how are those qualities

conveyed? Do leaders draw pictures, engage in interpretive dance, or employ telepathy?

No. Leaders *speak* and *write*. They communicate.

The impression made through these communications could not be more critical—leadership language is often the first and most influential piece of evidence internal teams use to assess their leaders and the most potent device leaders have to lay essential foundations of confidence, competence, and commitment.

Throughout my professional life, including stints with Nickelodeon, Time Inc., and PBS, the leaders I admired most were executives who found the right *language*—whether prepared in advance or uttered spontaneously—to get my attention, earn my trust, inspire my best work, and make me want to stay at my job.

I'm not alone. In an April 2019 survey conducted by the strategic advisory firm Brunswick Group, 93 percent of US workers indicated that "leadership that communicates directly and transparently" was a "very important" (57 percent) or "somewhat important" (36 percent) reason to stay at their current job.

This value scored higher on the survey's job retention scale than other weighty considerations, including "leadership you recognize and respect," "the role the company plays in the world," and "the role your job plays in the world." In fact, in terms of positive job retention considerations, "leadership that communicates directly and transparently" was only bested by "pay" and "benefits."

Because the perception of leadership is dominated by language, the critical ability to engage and inspire teams with effective language—in everything from speeches and videos to emails and meetings—is crucial to successful leadership. Even with finicky board members, anxious shareholders, and pivotal bottom lines to manage, a leader's top job is to lead through language. Effective communicators are exalted; ineffective communicators are excused.

The language of leadership is not merely about the words you use. It's also about the philosophical and tactical approaches you take to succeed in communication opportunities, including asking yourself vital questions about your purpose, knowing what to include and exclude, and taking deliberate and mindful measures to not just share, but sell your ideas.

This book contains the most valuable leadership communication ideas I've witnessed, learned, experimented with, and taught to help leaders engage and inspire their teams. I'm also covering as many platforms, scenarios, and event triggers as I can—from crisis communications and corporate restructuring to personal videos and Zoom meetings.

My ultimate hope is that, whether you lead a Fortune 500 company, a top-notch marketing team, or a small nonprofit committee, these recommendations will elevate the impact you have on employees, customers, members, and followers. So, what do you say? And how do you say it? Let's start by getting inside your head.

Ninety percent of leadership is the ability to
communicate something people want.

—Dianne Feinstein

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Think Before You Speak: Developing a Leadership Communication Mindset

Utilizing the Language of Leadership starts where all ideas begin: in your head, not with your mouth or on your keyboard. This first chapter focuses on strategic mindsets that will enable you to formulate meaningful points.

Content Is Not King

Some of my executive clients—and a surprising number of online articles—insist that "useful information" is a crucial driver of effective leadership.

These may be leaders who do the following:

- ► Read the content on PowerPoint pages but don't contextualize it or explain why it matters

- ► Convey data points but not the point of the data

- ► Define and describe a campaign but don't champion its potential impact

- ► Share, but don't sell their ideas

These inclinations may come from a bias that content is inherently substantial and influential, whereas messages of inspiration are inherently shallow and fluffy. But here's the problem with focusing heavily or exclusively on content: information alone rarely inspires.

Think back to the last time you were inspired. Were you inspired by paragraphs or by a point? By content or by commitment? By details or by dedication? By a book's table of contents or by its blurb?

In each of these examples, the former word informs, and the latter word inspires.

I'm not saying information isn't valuable. It certainly educates and enlightens. It also fills in gaps in understanding and provides essential context and updates. It informs, but it does not typically inspire, and if it does inspire, that's because the audience is already fully aware of the content's value and implications.

In leadership communications, information only becomes inspiring when it's explicitly connected to a purpose—often in the form of a goal or a vision statement.

Here are some examples of that connection:

► "Those statistics clearly indicate where we should be focusing our efforts in the fourth quarter."

  Informational Content: Statistics

  Inspiring Content: The impact of the statistics

► "These three tactics will drive us toward our goal of becoming a much more diverse and inclusive organization."

  Informational Content: Three tactics

  Inspiring Content: The result of adopting the three tactics

► "Understanding how we got started gives us the best clues on where we should go next."

  Informational Content: The history of our organization

  Inspiring Content: The beneficial lessons we can extract from our history

Executive communication coach and author Laurie Schloff, whose clients include Bain Capital, Fidelity Investments, and Allstate, says that although many of her clients are

experts in their fields, their greatest communication successes pair knowledge with inspiration.

"One of my clients tended to focus on facts, research, and statistics about their product's ingredients, which was interesting to them but overwhelming and boring to their audience of prospective customers," Laurie told me. "With coaching, these executives shifted the focus of their communications from merely informative descriptions of their product to influential and inspiring messages about the health, well-being, and environmental impact of the product, resulting in a measurable increase in online sales."

Keep in mind that while subject matter experts are qualified to share content, only leaders have the official job of inspiring a team through clear and succinct expressions of hope, vision, context, purpose, drive, appreciation, impact, aspiration, empathy, and the "why."

The Dynamic Duo: Purpose and Power

I consider two forces essential for effective executive communication: purpose and power. I call them *forces* because their value is in their potency.

Purpose is the *compelling reason* an idea has value and should be activated. It inspires a team because it gives them a meaningful cause to align with and a motivation to commit.

Purpose often manifests in language dealing with goals and strategy and is frequently referred to as the "why."

The following are three examples of purpose-driven statements:

- ▶ "The data demonstrates that doubling down on our awareness campaign will enable us to *beat last year's revenue forecast*."

- ▶ "Adopting this strategy will enable us to *protect vulnerable children in ways we never have before*."

- ▶ "This product will enable people to *save thousands of dollars every year and live healthier lives*."

Parul Agarwal, an executive coach whose clients include leaders from Morgan Lewis and Deloitte, says executives who convey purpose regularly can inspire their teams to think more strategically themselves.

"Leaders who successfully embed purpose into their organizations' DNA create employees who not only care about their day-to-day work—they also become purpose-driven brand champions," she told me.

Power is the leader's perceived strength of commitment. It engages a team because it grabs and holds their attention.

Power manifests in the confidence, credibility, authority, and competence with which you convey a message and is often referred to as *presence*.

To be clear, power doesn't mean displaying *aggression* or *dominance*—nor is it gender-specific. It merely means you stand behind what you assert. Leaders can communicate messages of kindness and empathy as powerfully as they convey messages of accountability and ambition.

These words can project power when delivered with volume and emphasis:

Commitment	Compassion
Kindness	Elevate
Vision	Impact
Propose	Empower
Critical	Enable
Investment	Purpose
Inspire	Together
Now	Empathy

Conveying power in a presentation or speech takes so much energy that it may exhaust you when you're done. Low on energy? Eat a candy bar, drink some coffee, splash water in your face, because no matter how important your message is, it won't sell itself.

✔ QUICK TIP

To best leverage the must-haves of purpose and power, ask yourself some of these questions before you address your team—and don't proceed without first knowing the answers.

Purpose: What is the purpose of this communication, and am I making that purpose clear?

Purpose: If I communicate this effectively, what do I expect my team to think or do anew as a result? Am I making that clear?

Power: Am I merely describing this idea (and hoping they agree with it) or selling this idea (and making a compelling point)?

Power: Am I conveying a confident commitment to my point or proposal? (You may have to solicit feedback from trusted colleagues in a rehearsal to assess your projection of power this way.)

Making Your Points Matter

My previous book, *Get to the Point! Sharpen Your Message and Make Your Words Matter*, argues that knowing, sharpening, and championing a valid point is pivotal to effective communication. Many speakers confuse topics, themes, and titles for points, rendering their communications pointless. Communicating real points is especially critical for leaders whose success relies on making clear and convincing cases to their teams.

The Difference between a Topic and a Point

The difference between *sharing a topic* and *making a point* is that the first is merely throwing out a concept for consideration ("Let's discuss a theme"), while the other is selling a proposal for adoption ("I believe that this approach is

best"). Strong leaders don't simply blurt out their ideas and hope for the best. They argue for and build consensus to sell their ideas.

To see if your idea is a valid point or not, I recommend an exercise I call the "I Believe That" Test. Simply add the words *I believe that* to what you consider the point of your next address or presentation—no matter how short or unofficial that event is. If it now forms a grammatically correct complete sentence with little editing, you're on your way to making a strong point. If not, you need to reimagine it to create a complete sentence.

For example, these are not points:

- ► "Branded podcasting."

- ► "The importance of authenticity."

- ► "What our new Learning & Development department will do for us."

They are not real points because, when you add "I believe that," they do not form complete sentences:

- ► "I believe that branded podcasting."

- ► "I believe that the importance of authenticity."

- ► "I believe that what L&D will do for us."

The following are complete sentences and, thus, points:

- ► "I believe that branded podcasting will expose our products to new audiences."

- ▶ "I believe that authenticity is critical to building trust."

- ▶ "I believe that our new commitment to L&D will elevate the skills and productivity of our staff."

Now remove the "I believe that" part:

- ▶ "Branded podcasting will expose our brand to new audiences."

- ▶ "Authenticity is critical to building trust."

- ▶ "Our new commitment to L&D will elevate the skills and effectiveness of our staff."

The "I Believe That" Test conditions you to propose a point. Then it's up to you to support it.

End with Impact on People, Not Things

A few years into my work to help clients sharpen and elevate their points, I spotted a pattern. Their most inspiring points almost always ended with an impact on people or society (living things) versus places and things (non-living things).

Here are three examples:

- ▶ A pharmaceutical innovation increased revenue, quadrupled website traffic, and enabled the company to open more offices, but those impacts were not as inspiring internally or externally as the impact of *saving more lives*.

▶ An environmental organization's new clean-energy campaign dramatically increased donations, inspired a television show, and received major celebrity endorsements, but none of those impacts galvanized the team as much as the idea of *making the earth a more sustainable planet.*

▶ When a public television show won a significant grant, it used the money to hire more fact-checkers, insert more sophisticated special effects, and conduct international investigations, but the impact that mattered most was *making people better informed*.

With this in mind, focus your leadership communications on impacts that improve the lives of people—whether it's the people on your team, in your organization, in your city, or around the world. Articulating those human-interest outcomes gives you the best chance of inspiring the humans on your team.

Points on Parade—2018 Commencement Speeches

I consider 2018 an outstanding year for commencement speeches, many of which serve as useful models for grounding your messages in substantial points.

I've excerpted five of these speeches to demonstrate the clarity and power behind the speakers' points. You may disagree with their ideas, but I know their points were conceived and expressed efficiently because it was easy for me to spot and extract them.

One strong caution as you read these (or experience any speeches for that matter): Don't try to emulate other speakers' communication styles, no matter how much they impress you. Your objective isn't to speak like Michelle Obama or Steve Jobs. Who can? You are unique as both a leader and a communicator, so your objective is to come across as the most purposeful and powerful version of you.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie at Harvard University

Above all else, do not lie. I grew up in Nigeria through military dictatorships and through incipient democracies. And America always felt aspirational. When yet another absurd thing happened politically, we would say, "This can never happen in America." But today, the political discourse in America includes questions straight from the land of the absurd. Questions such as, "Should we call a lie a lie? When is a lie a lie?" And so, class of 2018, at no time has it felt as urgent as now that we must protect and value the truth.

The point: Protecting and valuing the truth is critical for a democracy.

Extra credit: Ngozi does a great job of using her unique personal story to illustrate and add relevance to her point.

Justin Trudeau at New York University

I think we can aim a little higher than mere tolerance . . . Saying "I tolerate you" actually means something like, "Ok, I grudgingly admit that you have a right to exist, just don't get in my face about it." . . . Let's try for something a little more like acceptance, respect, friendship, and yes, even love. And why does this matter? Because in our aspiration to relevance,

in our love for our families, in our desire to contribute, to make this world a better place, despite our differences, we are all the same.

The point: It's critical that we respect, not just tolerate, each other.

Extra credit: Note how Trudeau uses the words "And why does this matter?" to draw attention to his point. Learn about attention magnets and see more examples of them in Chapter 2.

Abby Wambach at Barnard College

There was a picture taped next to the door—the last thing every player saw before she headed out to the training pitch. You might guess it was a picture of their last big win, or of them standing on a podium accepting gold medals. But it wasn't. It was a picture of their long-time rival, the Norwegian national team, celebrating after having just beaten the USA in the 1995 World Cup. In that locker room, I learned that in order to become my very best, I'd need to spend my life letting the feelings and lessons of failure transform into my power. Failure is fuel. Fuel is power.

The point: Failure can be a powerful tool for success if you allow it to motivate you.

Extra credit: Wambach's personal story centered around an image—the photo of the Norwegian national team. Focusing on that specific image made the story more visual and accessible, making her point more penetrative. She also boiled her point down and restated it in two punchy and memorable lines: "Failure is fuel. Fuel is power."

Jake Tapper at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst

I had to be so skilled and tough and industrious and vigilant that, if my bosses at ABC News made anyone else the White House correspondent, they would look like idiots. I had to force them to give it to me out of their own best interests . . . Have something that they want. And show it to them—over and over, every day. Make them need you. Work twice as hard as the job requires. Make sure they know that you will show up and act like a professional, that you don't feel entitled to anything. Make them hire you for their own good, not yours.

The point: Making yourself vital to your employers will open doors of opportunity.

Extra credit: Tapper doesn't rely on clichés like "do your best" or "persevere through challenges" but finds a fresh point in encouraging his audience to make themselves invaluable to their employers. He also makes the lesson relatable by sharing a personal learning experience.

Oprah Winfrey at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism

You are in a position to keep all of those who now disparage real news in check. Why? Because you can push back, and you can answer false narratives with real information. And you can set the record straight. And you also have the ability and power to give voice . . . to people who desperately now need to tell their stories and have their stories told.

The point: You are uniquely able to defend truth and tell vital stories.

Extra credit: Oprah knew her audience (journalism and communications students) and customized her message for them.

1. Try to avoid the word *share* when conveying important ideas ("I'd like to share this with you . . ."). When you "share" an idea, you're merely throwing it out to your team, hoping they find it relevant. But establishing the value of your point is your job, not theirs. When you remove the word *share* from your lexicon, you'll find yourself championing points through more engaging and inspiring words like *propose*, *recommend*, *establish*, *assure*, and *demonstrate*.

2. When you rehearse your speeches in front of colleagues, don't just ask, "Was it good?" or "What would you change?" Ask, "What point do you think I was trying to make?" If they hit the nail on the head or come close, you've succeeded. If they can't articulate your point back to you, then rework the presentation until your point is clear and delivered firmly.

Balancing Realism and Idealism

One of a leader's most essential—and tricky—communication responsibilities is balancing realism and idealism. You want your language to be pragmatic but also visionary. You want to focus on today's challenges as well as tomorrow's hope.

Conveying realistic messages is crucial to developing *trust*. Conveying idealistic messages is crucial to creating *inspiration*.

But the peril of overdoing idealism is that you might over-promise or seem tone-deaf to reality, and the peril of over-doing realism is that you may be limiting your projection of ambition and vision.

Like I said: tricky.

Most teams want and need to hear messages that are both realistic and idealistic. They want to understand the road under their feet and know it's leading to an amazing place.

For sufficient balance, the trick may lie in transitions. Instead of addressing the real and the ideal in completely separate chunks, consider connecting them explicitly, similar to a well-known quote by American philosopher Eric Hoffer:

The leader has to be practical and a realist yet must talk the language of the visionary and the idealist.

Here are more examples of a realism/idealism transition:

- ► "While we need to keep one eye on today's challenges, the other should be squarely focused on our goals for the remainder of this year and beyond. That's how we keep moving ahead and understanding where we need to be."

- ► "We will inevitably make mistakes and may not always meet our objectives, but taking risks and thinking big are critically important to our success, so I encourage you to aim high. Remember, every moment of failure is also a moment of learning."

> ### ✔ QUICK TIP
>
> Always end your communication and phrasing with the idealistic piece, not the realistic piece, because you want your team thinking in an optimistic direction: today → tomorrow, good → better, challenge → solution, not the other way around.
>
> As radio host Casey Kasem famously signed off from his radio show week after week (with a nice transition line of his own), "Keep your feet on the ground . . . and keep reaching for the stars."

Know What Your Audience Wants and Needs

One of the biggest public speaking mistakes I ever made was in 2000 when I oversaw the launch of a major news website for kids. On the day of its launch, I was asked to give a short celebratory speech to dozens of people, including my team, my bosses, their bosses, and other executives.

I spoke about how much the moment meant to me—given my professional history and personal aspirations—and how proud and thrilled I was to be affiliated with the effort and for the opportunity to lead it.

When I finished, the reaction wasn't so much "yea!" as "okay." I didn't inspire. I didn't engage. I didn't impress.

I expressed the kind of speech you would expect from a best supporting actor, but not from a team leader. Those

very words—*team leader*—indicate the crucial elements I omitted. My speech was about me, not about the project, the objective, or my team. It prioritized what mattered to me well above what mattered to my audience.

That's an enormous mistake because, in leadership, there's no point communicating to your team if your message has little value or relevance to them. Your leadership is only valuable to the extent you influence the people you're leading.

That may sound obvious, but I often meet executive clients who start with "what I want to say" versus "what my team wants and needs to hear." In taking that route, leaders run the risk of seeming self-centered and oblivious to important organizational realities.

Expressed as an equation, the most effective leadership communication is "team wants to hear" + "team needs to know" = "what leader needs to say." Only when that equation is satisfied should leaders even consider incorporating "leader wants to say."

Needs to Know

Work with other leaders in your organization to determine what your team *needs* to know. Collaborating with others will help ensure that you're focused on an organizational imperative and not a primarily personal concern.

Also, try to develop an actual and vital "*need* to know" versus a less valuable "*neat* to know." To know the difference, ask: How important and relevant is this message?

"Very" = Need to know. "Somewhat" = Neat to know.

Wants to Know

Understanding what your team wants to know from you can be tricky. Lean on your internal communications and HR teams for insight. You can also conduct staff polls, solicit questions and concerns directly, and run breakfast meetings with small groups to get a sense of their feelings and ideas.

One HR executive I worked with—Jeanette—wanted to speak to her team about how inspired she was by a new book on innovative approaches to employee benefits.

Jeanette had not raised these ideas with her staff before, and her only rationale for sharing it was that the book appealed to her. As a result, her concept flunked the "want to hear" test and scored a solid "inconclusive" on the "need to know" test.

I asked her, "How would *your team* benefit from this insight?"

Of course, it would appeal to Jeanette's team for the same reason it attracted her. So, working with that question and her answer, we changed Jeanette's focus from "what I want to say about this book" to "how thinking outside the box can make our benefits package more understandable and valuable for employees." Jeanette framed the book as a resource, but not as a point unto itself.

TED Talks are strong examples of communications that emphasize audience relevance over speaker interests. All TED Talk topics have very high audience interest, and that item of interest is usually reflected in the title. You'll never see a TED Talk titled "A Conversation with [Famous

Person]," but you'll find thousands of TED Talks about how to conduct successful conversations.

If reimagining your presentation as a TED Talk doesn't help, ask the same question I asked Jeanette: "How will my team benefit from this communication?"

The answer to that question should reveal whether the topic is relevant or irrelevant, as well as potentially elevate the topic—with a little help—from "what I want to say" and "how this affects me" to the much more meaningful "what my team needs to know" and "how this affects them."

✔ **QUICK TIP**

It may help to create a preparatory worksheet template for speeches and presentations that requires answers to questions like these:

► What is my most relevant point?

► What's the relevance of that point to my team?

► How do I hope my team thinks or acts as a result of the point?

► Is this something they want and need to hear right now? Why?

The answers to these questions will tell you whether to proceed (this point serves my team's interest) or to reimagine your point (this point primarily serves my interest).

Problem-Solving versus Problem-Sharing

I recently reviewed a nonprofit leader's quotation promoting her new environmental awareness campaign. It read:

This environmental emergency puts a new face on a truth we've known for some time: When we disregard the Earth, we disregard our lives.

Catchy. Direct. Tweetable. But it's missing one crucial element: a leadership communication obligation to not only identify the challenge but—even more importantly—propose the solution. Here's the fixed quote, which the leader also shared on social media:

Our government must commit to meaningful environmental protection because when we disregard the Earth, we disregard our lives.

Yes, we cut "new face" and "known for some time," but, at the end of the day, how important or unrealized are those details?

Focusing on solutions is already a requirement in many settings where one human being is relying on another. For example, you don't bring your car to a mechanic primarily to learn how worn down your brake pads are. Nor do you invite a plumber into your home to tell you your pipes are clogged. Those diagnoses may be part of the conversation, but ultimately you want professionals to *fix* the problem, not dwell on the damage.

Like those specialists, leaders need to recognize they are in the problem-solving business, not just the problem-sharing

business—no matter how fascinating or destructive the problem or challenge is.

This guidance doesn't mean you should avoid referring to challenges and obstacles to your organization's progress, but that you should get in and out of that description quickly so you can spend more time communicating about learnings, countermeasures, and solutions, which is your role as a leader. In volleyball terms, the obstacle is the set, and the solution is the spike.

✔ QUICK TIPS

1. Brainstorm short- and long-term solutions you can eventually present to your team. Sharing these ideas may inspire them to conceive their own solutions, which is a win-win because you enlisted their feedback and ideated solutions collaboratively. Just be careful not to present the ideas on your list as the only possible solutions—frame them as suggestions and be open to feedback and collaboration.

2. Consider various communication events, including panel discussions and Q&A sessions, to create broader opportunities for exploring challenges and uncovering solutions. These events can also give subject matter experts in your organization the role of exploring specific obstacles while you focus on big picture solutions.

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3. Always end discussions of challenges and solutions with inspiring messages of hope. For example: "Though this has been a very stressful time, I've seen many inspiring efforts and ideas around the company that show how we will overcome this together."

We, Myself, and I

Leaders are most engaging and inspiring when, in their expressions, they position themselves *among* the team, not *above* the team, particularly by framing their points from the perspective of "we" versus "I."

"We" and "us" are instantly inclusive and inviting. They imply a commonality of challenge or purpose. They also reinforce critical workplace values like teamwork and collaboration.

Example:

"*We* are going to overcome this challenge," and "This will enable *us* to increase our revenue."

Implication: We are unified.

"I" and "me," on the other hand, speak to individual effort and, in some cases, conceit. Using these pronouns sounds very personal—which can have advantages in some instances—but it also creates distance between leaders and their teams.

Example:

"*I* am confident we will overcome this challenge" and "Increasing revenue is important to *me*."

Implication: My primary goal is to satisfy myself.

In most cases, it's not difficult to turn an "I" into a "we" without changing the meaning of an expression:

- ► "I believe we should" becomes "We should."

- ► "This is something I care about" becomes "This is something we should all care about."

- ► "This is one of my proudest moments" becomes "This is a proud moment for us all."

Kilar and Sarnoff

Writing for the website of *The Hollywood Reporter* on September 17, 2020, Katie Kilkenny shared separate internal memos written by WarnerMedia CEO Jason Kilar and Warner Bros. CEO Ann Sarnoff to their staffs in response to workplace complaints of improper behavior on the sets of two of their television shows.

Their memos, both roughly 600 words, had common elements, including disappointment and rejections of inappropriate employee behavior and announcements that third-party organizations would be brought in for assistance.

But in terms of "I" versus "we," the memos couldn't have been more different.

In Kilar's memo, there were at least 15 instances of "I":

- ▶ *I am both concerned and disappointed . . .*

- ▶ *I've always been a believer that . . .*

- ▶ *In my first four months . . .*

- ▶ *I've thought a lot about . . .*

- ▶ *I've come to the conclusion . . .*

- ▶ *I'd like people to say . . .*

- ▶ *I believe it entails . . .*

- ▶ *I say the above as prelude . . .*

- ▶ *I want to understand . . .*

- ▶ *I also am encouraging all of you to . . .*

- ▶ *I anticipate . . .*

- ▶ *I also anticipate . . .*

- ▶ *I also want to say that . . .*

- ▶ *I am certain that we will make mistakes . . .*

- ▶ *I know we can and will be better . . .*

That's a lot of "I"s for 600 words, all of them positioning Kilar above his team, not among them. He focuses almost entirely on his singular perspective, and it feels professorial.

The subtext: "This is what I think you should know and how you can please me. Take notes."

By contrast, Sarnoff's memo had fewer "I"s, but more importantly, many more "we"s and "our"s. Here's how they looked:

- *We have the opportunity . . .*

- *We're all working from the same playbook . . .*

- *Our success will be based on innovation . . .*

- *We all have a role in supporting our code of conduct . . .*

- *We will be redoubling our efforts . . .*

- *This is how we will operate going forward . . .*

- *We all have a responsibility . . .*

- *It's how we'll do our best work . . .*

- *We will be asking a third party . . .*

- *Our opportunities and success are only limited by our imaginations . . .*

- *Let's show everyone what we can do together . . .*

Are you already feeling more inspired? These phrases are warmer and more inclusive than those from Kilar, placing Sarnoff among her team instead of above them.

The subtext: "We can and will fix this together."

A Powerful "I"

"I"s aren't all bad. "I" can be a powerful instrument when used to convey authenticity and personal commitment.

Sarnoff does this several times:

I take responsibility for what happens on my watch . . .

I will hold them accountable . . .

I will state here today that this is how we will operate going forward . . .

These register as inspirational because they are statements of accountability to the team, not just self-centered pondering.

Bottom line: When your communication is mostly about you—what you want, what you think, what you expect—you build separation, not engagement. You need your team's support as much as they need your leadership, so take every opportunity to convey "we are one team, and we work best when we work together."

It, This, and That

Leaders only benefit from frequently reiterating and reinforcing their key points. (No one ever said, "Felicia is a great leader, but she makes her point too many times.") But even leaders who know this still miss key opportunities when they over-rely on pronouns like "it," "this," and "that" instead of explicitly saying what they mean.

Look for these pronouns in your text and speaking habits, and try to supplement or replace them with words imbued with greater meaning and relevance. The more specific your addition or replacement, the more it will resonate with your team.

Look at the impact of pronoun replacement in the following three groups of sentences.

Weak: This will take us to the next level.

Better: This idea will take us to the next level.

Best: Adopting this innovative approach will take us to the next level.

Weak: It will make our processes much more efficient.

Better: This product will make our processes much more efficient.

Best: Using a cloud-based filing system will make our editorial processes much more efficient.

Weak: That should inspire us all.

Better: That story should inspire us all.

Best: Magda's story of resilience should inspire us all.

The Beauty of Brevity

We've all heard "less is more," but Albert Einstein took it a step further (and wiser) when he said, "If you can't say it simply, you don't understand it well enough."

I take Einstein's quotation to mean that brevity is not merely about cutting words. It means understanding your core message thoroughly enough to recognize what can be stripped away and what needs to be preserved.

The importance of brevity in leadership communications can't be overstated (and, by definition, *shouldn't* be overstated), especially when you consider an average audience's attention span. I don't mean that to be disparaging, but consider an audience's job versus a speaker's job:

A speaker's job: Say something you've been thinking about and working on for days or weeks.

An audience's job: Hear it for the first time, then digest it, process it, consider it, attach relevance to it, and perhaps write it down.

Given that enormous disparity in cognitive burdens, it's critically important to be concise, which will give your team more time to process and record your points. It also demonstrates that you value their time.

Occasionally, often at a holiday or town hall meeting, it may become necessary for a leader to run down a "laundry list" of achievements or acknowledgments across the organization. In these "must include" cases, focus on three key approaches:

1. Do the "Need to Know/Neat to Know" audit you read about earlier in this book to keep the list as tight as possible and to consolidate ideas into themes where you can.

2. Make sure you hit every item on the list with ample *energy* and clear *articulation*. Often the biggest problem with laundry lists is not the lists themselves, but the way leaders seem bored by the recitation and rush through the lists. Keep in mind that people

in your audience will be lifted with each mention, so give every item strong emphasis to ensure that impact.

3. To prevent perceptions of favoritism or bias, make your list of lauded individuals and teams as diverse as possible, including considerations of work function, geographic region, hierarchy, ethnicity, race, gender, and age.

✔ QUICK TIPS

1. Cut unnecessary words, especially useless and redundant adjectives.

2. Cut less crucial concepts so they don't compete for attention with your most relevant content.

3. In your writing, break paragraphs often, with no more than three sentences in each one. Use bullets when you have groups of ideas that require no elaboration.

4. Read your document aloud or have it read aloud to you to find new parts to tighten and cut.

5. In your presentations, slow down to give your mind time to be judicious with words. Slowing down will also give your audience more time to process what you're saying.

True leadership stems from individuality that is honestly and sometimes imperfectly expressed.

—Sheryl Sandberg

2

Make It So: Key Targets and Tactics

Now it's time to move from thinking to doing. This section will cover specific communication tactics that enable leaders to engage and inspire their teams. Try them on, and know you will never wear them out.

Communicating Hope

In a cage match of communication themes that generate internal inspiration, *hope* roundly defeats other important themes like empathy, honesty, transparency, perseverance, and unity, and it's not hard to understand why. Hope is the articulation of your team's professional desires, goals, and expectations.

Imagine yourself as the captain of a ship in uncharted waters and your team members as the passengers. Empathy

is nice. Transparency is nice. Teamwork is nice. But they want and need to hear hope.

Hope is such an important theme that every moment of leadership communication should contain a hopeful sentiment. All it requires is the completion of this sentence:

"My hope is that _____."

Once that hope is identified, you can communicate it in many different ways.

Examples:

► "If we work together, we can overcome any obstacle."

► "I know we will get through this challenging period."

► "Our future looks promising because we have the right people and abilities to succeed."

To Leaders, Hope Is a Noun

Note: Use the word *hope* as a noun, not a verb, because hope as a noun has baked-in optimism ("There is hope for us yet," "I am filled with hope"), whereas hope as a verb is merely a preference without faith in the outcome ("I hope the weather changes soon").

Eric Yaverbaum, president of Ericho Communications and author of *Leadership Secrets of the World's Most Successful CEOs*, says focusing on hope makes employees feel safe, supported, and valued by their employers.

"Focusing on hope and optimism in my own agency has been critical to seeing my team through shutdowns and even the uncertainty of my positive COVID-19 diagnosis," Eric told me. "This commitment to positivity demonstrates my faith in my teams' abilities to succeed, my vision for the company beyond the struggle of the present, and my dedication to providing whatever resources are necessary to help them with their own struggles."

✔ QUICK TIP

If you're out of ideas for optimistic sentiments in an upcoming communication, "hope" is not lost. Ask trusted colleagues or members of your team what they hope for in their work, and consider giving them credit in your communication:

"Alice told me yesterday about her hope for X, and I share that hope . . ."

Communicating Vision

No team expects their leaders to predict specific future events like Nostradamus. But teams *do* expect leaders to communicate a fairly specific vision of what the organization will look like—and what purpose it will serve—5, 10, even 15 or 20 years into the future.

A *vision* is not so much a prediction as it is a goal. It's also important to understand that a vision is a destination, not

an action. It's the future we will experience if we do our jobs well, not the tactics we will take to get there.

Visions:

► Ten million dollars in annual revenue

► A Keurig coffee system in 70 percent of American homes

► A cancer-free world

Tactics:

► Creating a new line of consumer financial products

► Launching a million-dollar advertising campaign

► Courting corporate sponsorship for humanistic medical research

Vision statements are important because they give your team's work a meaningful purpose. While accomplishing a task is fulfilling, working toward a better future is inspiring.

Conveying that vision can be tricky. It shouldn't seem too easily achieved, but it shouldn't seem impossible either. It shouldn't depart too far from the organization's core mission, but it should consider ways the organization might need to adapt to changing times, tastes, and attitudes. It's a great idea to include measurable quantitative goals, but it's not so great if you eventually miss the mark.

The first part of a leader's job is crystallizing that vision with help from other organizational leaders and executives. But the

second part—communicating that vision—must be addressed with equal care and precision. You want your team to have a rock-solid understanding of the vision and, ultimately, how their jobs support the actualization of that vision.

Here are recommendations for effectively communicating a vision:

► Be concise. If you need more than a sentence or two to make your vision clear, it may be too complicated and not easily remembered. "Boil your vision down to a single sentence that people can easily repeat and share," advises executive communication coach Lauren Sergy, author of *The Handy Communication Answer Book*. "Don't worry if it doesn't capture every nuance—make it bold, inspiring, high-level, and simply phrased. That will capture people's attention and leave an imprint on their brains."

► When presenting a vision in text or a speech, don't bury it under excessive preface. Bring it out early, explain what it means and implies, how it was conceived, how it will affect day-to-day work, and why this is an exciting moment for the organization.

► Don't just describe your vision, paint it: "I want you to imagine a world two decades from now in which . . ."

► Use resolute, nonambiguous language: "We will get there" (versus "We can" or "We might"). If you want to make a personal commitment to that vision,

add an "I believe that" to the front: "I believe that we will get there."

► Many leaders and writers say *allow* when they should be saying *enable*. Use *allow* when an obstacle is merely being removed, but use *enable* if you are acting as a change agent: "Our work will *enable* millions of people to . . ."

► Be hopeful, confident, and optimistic: "Working together, we can and will achieve this."

► Recognize and give credit to staff members and teams who contributed to the development of the vision: "I appreciate the participation and input of . . ."

Communicating Confidence

Even as we prioritize vulnerability, transparency, and humility for leaders in modern times, old-school confidence is still a premium attribute because, simply put, it's hard to put faith in leaders who don't display faith in themselves. And the magic of conveying confidence is that it can build and elevate confidence within your team.

But conveying confidence is not merely a matter of saying, "Hey y'all, I'm confident!"

One of the most effective ways to convey confidence in communication is through decisiveness. Leadership coach Kimberly Penharlow, whose clients include executives from Mastercard, Pfizer, and Salesforce, encourages leaders

to project confidence by avoiding "decision paralysis" and communicating clear positions and decisions. "People are looking to you—especially in a crisis—to articulate where things stand and how the organization should be moving forward," Kimberly told me. "While it may feel safer to avoid commitments, that ambiguity can breed more concern and distrust."

Leaders can also project confidence through expressions of faith in people or processes, statements of recognition, and vision statements.

Faith in people or processes:
"This new protocol will enable the program to advance much more efficiently."

Statements of recognition:
"Patricia was integral to the success of this project, thanks to her complete ownership from start to finish."

Vision statements:
"I see us dominating the market within 10 years."

What all of these expressions have in common is fearless commitment—indicating publicly that you have so much confidence in an idea that you're willing to put your credibility behind it.

Convey the Most Confident Verbs

The work you lead may *overcome* challenges, *respond* to threats, and *create* impact. But sometimes, a leader's verbs—even

when they're specifically conceived to inspire—convey an impression that falls short of that intention.

The following verbs are often used interchangeably, but they shouldn't be. One is taking a weaker stance than the other, and you should choose the one that reflects the most accurate and impressive effort.

► **Enable vs. Allow**

If your action produced a result, you *enabled* it. If you only removed an obstacle, you merely allowed it.

"Innovations in customer service enabled ~~allowed~~ the stores to sell more customized products."

► **Prevent vs. Avoid**

If your action stopped something disastrous from happening, you *prevented* it. If you just moved something out of peril's way or put off that peril, you merely avoided it.

"We must prevent ~~avoid~~ a housing crisis for people and families."

► **Act vs. Address**

If you took action on an issue, you *acted on* it. If you simply considered the situation, you merely addressed it.

"We acted on ~~addressed~~ the severe impact of poverty on these communities."

► **Respond vs. React**

If a situation spurred you to action, you *responded*. If the issue only triggered an emotion, you merely reacted.

"We responded ~~reacted~~ immediately to the power outage."

▶ **Overcome vs. Face**

If you successfully conquered an obstacle, you *overcame* it. If you only encountered an obstacle or just stood your ground, you merely faced it.

"We overcame ~~faced~~ the systemic challenges."

▶ **Propose vs. Share**

If you're making an important point, you are *proposing* the idea. If you're simply throwing out facts and letting the audience decide what to do with them, you are merely sharing the idea.

"I'm proposing ~~sharing~~ a new approach that will make our process more efficient."

▶ **Accomplish vs. Meet (a Goal)**

If you *accomplish* a goal, you imply that you achieved that status as a direct result of your effort. If you merely meet a goal, you're only indicating that you technically hit the milestone—possibly by accident, circumstance, or gravity.

"I'm thrilled that we accomplished ~~met~~ our most ambitious goals for the year."

This equation may help you construct a confident statement:

Articulated challenge + Championed change agent + Hopeful outcome = Confident point

Finally, certain complementary behaviors can boost your projection of confidence (some of these suggestions may sound familiar from your childhood):

- ► Look people in the eye (in virtual meetings, into the camera).

- ► Sit or stand up straight.

- ► Do not fidget.

- ► Speak slowly and loudly.

- ► Listen closely, and nod when you agree.

- ► Make your first sentence clear and polished (practice it in advance).

Communicating Empathy

Some say one of a leader's key roles is Chief Empathy Officer. Although this title may be asking too much of some leaders, there's no question that even a little empathy can go a long way in making a team feel cared for, especially when an event or crisis affects the entire organization.

Quoted in a July 2020 McKinsey & Company article entitled "The CEO Moment: Leadership for a New Era," Paul Tufano, CEO of AmeriHealth Caritas, explains, "This has been a sustained period of uncertainty and fear, but also a great opportunity to forge a stronger, more cohesive and motivated workforce. If CEOs can step into a ministerial role—extending hands virtually, truly listening, relating to

and connecting with people where they are—there is enormous potential to inspire people and strengthen bonds and loyalties within the company."

So, what is empathy (as opposed to being sympathetic or simply having a working conscience)? Any good psychologist will tell you that empathy isn't about solving a problem or being merely sympathetic to someone in distress. Empathy means truly *understanding someone's feelings*, almost to the point of standing in their shoes.

The 1992 film *White Men Can't Jump* illustrates empathy brilliantly during a scene in which Gloria Clemente turns to her boyfriend Billy Hoyle and says she's thirsty. When Billy brings her a glass of water, Gloria looks at him with disappointment and says (as only Rosie Perez can), "Honey, I said I was thirsty. I didn't want a glass of water. I wanted empathy. I wanted you to say, 'I know what it's like to be thirsty.'"

When your team is thirsty, they also want that thirst acknowledged and understood, even before they want it quenched.

Remember that we're talking about *communicating* empathy, not just being empathic. No one will know if a leader is empathic unless that leader conveys empathy, so work on your points, which you can easily control, not on your personality, which you largely cannot control. Focusing on communication tactics also enables an empathy-challenged leader (you may know a few) to still convey meaningful empathy.

During challenging times, the most effective leadership communications are ones that *acknowledge* distress, demonstrate *care*, and—not necessarily at first, but eventually—take appropriate *action* to mitigate the situation or at least provide comfort, so focus on those touchpoints in your empathic communication. Each of these can and should be communicated explicitly.

> **Acknowledge:** "I recognize this is an anxious time for all of us."

> **Care:** "I care about your sense of safety and stability."

> **Action:** "We are introducing new policies to address these challenges and provide stability where we can."

The following table contains some specific dos and don'ts for conveying empathy, whether the triggering circumstances are personal and momentary or global and lasting.

Dos	Don'ts
Do focus on how a crisis might be affecting people.	Don't focus on how a crisis might be affecting profits or other financial measures.
Do create multiple opportunities for you to listen to and learn from your team.	Don't be the predominant talker during these opportunities.
Do acknowledge feelings of sadness, frustration, and anxiety and offer helpful resources.	Don't jump in too quickly to "solve the problem." Make sure you fully understand the problem and can define it.

Dos	Don'ts
Do respond quickly to the needs, questions, and suggestions of your team.	Don't presume to know your team's reactions or propose solution steps without first checking in with them.
Do provide communications as frequently as your team indicates they need them or if there are important updates.	Don't stick with regular crisis meetings if they've outlived their usefulness and relevance.
Do use phrases like "Rest assured" and "We will get through this" to encourage resilience and demonstrate a commitment to responsible and confident corporate stewardship.	Don't focus on things you fear, "don't know," and "don't understand." If you do need to say, "I don't know," follow it up with "What I *do* know is . . ."
Do be forthcoming, transparent, and truthful about bad news. In addition to building trust, this can mitigate fears of the unknown and curb rampant speculation.	Don't forecast or give probabilities for future bad news, which will only increase fear and anxiety.
Do use simple language. "When expressing empathy, use language that even a 12-year-old would immediately understand," says Lucille Ossai, a leadership communications trainer and author. "If people don't understand your message clearly, they won't be able to appreciate the sentiment or your intention behind it."	Don't try to put a happy spin on crises or oversell "silver linings" to tragic events. They will ring false and damage credibility and trust.

Dos	Don'ts
Do show appreciation for your team ("I thank you for your cooperation and understanding").	Don't talk at length about difficult decisions you had to make. Referencing yourself this way may feel soothing to you, but it transforms a moment of empathy for the staff into sympathy for the leader. Your job is to support your team, not to have your team support you.
Do be realistic and honest, making clear the difference between what is known and unknown. Just know that, as a leader, you may be held to your predictions and pledges.	Do not overpromise. Unfulfilled assurances can severely damage your credibility.
Do consider if you might be softening a message or making it more equivocal to make yourself—the communicator—feel more comfortable delivering the news. Ask: Who is benefiting most from "softening a blow"? Keep your team's needs ahead of yours.	Do not be ambiguous. Employees need and deserve facts from their leaders, not speculation. Ambiguity breeds fear instead of understanding.
Do remind your team of available counseling opportunities and reinforce your commitment to honest communications and transparency. Sometimes bad news is preferable to no news.	Do not use a word-for-word script. Use natural language to ensure you sound authentic and not like a press release. This is a critical time to be human.

Dos	Don'ts
Do keep messages in a hopeful and progressive perspective, which means "do" over "don't" and "we will" over "we won't." This approach conveys a commitment to overcoming the crisis, not just coping with its consequences.	Do not overfocus on details and description. Instead, maintain your role as the provider of context, headlines, and hope. Others on the leadership team or subject matter experts may better match those granular communication needs.
Do share positive and uplifting stories of resilience and ingenuity across the organization as much as possible. Your team may be inspired by you but will model the behavior and spirit of their colleagues. Make sure to share that appreciation with a strong "why."	

✔ **QUICK TIP**

Work in advance with your Human Resources and Internal Communications teams to ensure your communications and their communications are consistent in both tone and content, but don't have them script you. Your remarks must sound completely authentic.

Communicating Authenticity

We know authenticity is vital to effective leadership, building critical trust and relatability, but how does a leader *communicate* authenticity?

Let's start with what makes a leader sound *inauthentic*. At the top of the list: words and phrases that don't match the leader's speaking style or vocabulary. Whether they write their own speeches or not, leaders need to reject words or phrases that sound more like they come from a press release or a poet laureate than from their own mouths.

As a speechwriter, I once proudly ended a manuscript with a very creative but meaningful phrase. I thought I nailed it. But the client crossed it out and wrote, "I'm not this clever." He was right; I was wrong. In the language of leadership, personal always comes before poetic.

Skip the Script

If one of your aims is to create an authentic connection with your team (hint: it is), the last thing you want to do is write a word-for-word speech and read it to them. Reading turns a presentation into a performance, focusing on the speaker versus the audience, and on the script versus the points. It sabotages not only your authenticity, but also your conviction, credibility, and engagement.

If you're hung up on giving a "perfect speech" and think having a script is the best way to achieve that objective,

remember that you're not in a public speaking competition. Your job is to engage and inspire, not impress. And in this job, spontaneity and authenticity eat precision for breakfast.

Instead of writing a word-for-word speech, create limited notes that simply remind you of your outline and details you might otherwise forget. You ultimately want to use your notes as you would a supermarket shopping list—looking down for quick scans, then looking up and proceeding to produce.

Say What You Believe

It's also important for leaders to avoid saying things they don't fully believe. Their teams may not always pick up on exaggerations or disingenuous sentiments, but their brains will make note of it, and may reveal that disparity in a range of nonverbal communications. In my book, truth is an absolute requirement of successful communication. If your aim is to deceive, you're no longer presenting; you're polluting.

If you sense a disconnect between your mindset or voice and something you absolutely need to communicate, experiment with different types of messaging to discover the unexplored parameters of your authentic voice. Work on identifying new words, phrases, and concepts that you feel comfortable saying aloud.

If you disagree with an opinion coming from your team and need to overrule it, start with language that acknowledges

and shows respect for their opinion, and focus on *supporting what you believe* versus *disputing what they believe*. For example:

> **Disrespectful Authenticity:** *"That's not a good idea. What you don't understand is . . ."*

> **Respectful Authenticity:** *"First, I hear what you're saying and appreciate your perspective because I know it comes from a place of concern and commitment. I believe that X is our best approach, and we're going to go in that direction, but I definitely want your feedback as we progress."*

Both versions are honest statements, but one conveys a sensitivity to audience impact; the other reflects a disdain for it.

Tell Stories

Authenticity is conveyed particularly well through personal stories and examples. These short narratives don't need to be monumental events in your life. Even the smallest details—like a hobby, a pet, or a funny parenting moment—can humanize a leader as effectively as a life-changing incident.

One of the reasons true stories are compelling is because you're using the very personal words *I* and *my*, which are *authenticity superconductors*. In fact, any executive statement can sound more authentic merely by starting with the words "I believe that."

But use *I* only when relatability and trust are critical values, such as in stories and personal declarations. As you read a few pages ago, most statements with the intent of galvanizing your team should begin with *we*, not *I*, to reinforce that success hinges on the entire team, not on the leader alone.

Leaders Make Mistakes

Another authenticity superconductor is imperfection. To err is indeed human! This doesn't mean you should intentionally make mistakes; just forgive yourself if you do. And never make perfection your objective.

Some leaders hyper-focus on perfection—overestimating the amount of audience attention directed not only to a forgotten detail or word fumble but also to a shirt stain, a bad hair day, or a sudden cough. Psychologists Thomas Gilovich and Kenneth Savitsky call this hypersensitivity the *spotlight effect* and warn it can lead to crippling anxiety or excessive apologizing, which erodes your credibility.

As Sian Beilock, a cognitive scientist and former professor of psychology at the University of Chicago, wrote in *The Financial Times* on August 27, 2019, "We will inevitably make mistakes at work or embarrass ourselves among colleagues . . . Thankfully, most people are self-absorbed and not paying much attention to us. When we accept that, we'll be able to shake anything off."

Bottom line: When you make a mistake, know that the authenticity points you gain are more valuable than the perfection points you lose.

Be Mindful with Your Truth

Being authentic doesn't necessarily mean being completely transparent and aggressively candid. In professional settings, don't express personal opinions you wouldn't want to be repeated to your full staff or post comments on social

media you wouldn't want to be shared with local news media. Those are communication cautions that simply come with being a leader.

✔ **QUICK TIPS**

1. A phrase that *reads* authentic may not actually *sound* authentic when spoken aloud. Use the "Read Aloud" feature under the Review tab in many versions of Microsoft Word (or another text-to-speech program) to hear what your written text sounds like when spoken.

2. If you make an error, don't apologize. Quickly correct yourself, forgive yourself internally, and move on.

3. Don't encourage behaviors you wouldn't consider engaging in yourself. They may ring hollow—especially if you're asked about it—and injure your credibility. Try to be a role model, not just a role manager.

This Should Give You Pause

Of all the language tools leaders have to boost their communications, one of the most powerful makes no sound at all: pausing.

Pausing is a gift that gives in many ways.

(Pause)

First, pausing gives your brain the critical time it needs to consider, select, and arrange your next words with precision. When our mouths run ahead of our minds, we tend to jumble our words and thoughts, resulting in messy and unclear expressions. But pausing enables our minds to stay ahead of our mouths, laying a logical groundwork of thoughtfully curated words and ideas.

Try it: Pause more frequently when you speak in your next meeting and see if it helps you make more precise points.

(Pause)

Second, pausing gives your *audience* critical time to digest and process what you're saying before you move on to your next point.

(Pause)

Third, pausing creates small but powerful moments of drama and suspense, which are effective engagement drivers. When you pause briefly in the middle of a sentence, it also appears as if you're thinking, which can be very compelling to an audience.

(Pause)

Finally, pausing is the antidote to overusing filler expressions like "ah" and "um." Train yourself to deliberately pause instead of using those verbal crutches that call attention to themselves and can project a lack of confidence.

Can you pause too much? Doubtful. I've never heard of a leader having a reputation for over-pausing because

pausing is a moment of nothingness and hard to remember, much less criticize.

Bottom line: When you embrace the pause, it hugs back by giving you incredible control over what you say next.

✔ QUICK TIP

If you're a naturally fast talker (guilty as charged), pausing helps slow you down by immediately dropping your speaking speedometer to zero.

Making Your Thanks Matter

If there's one thing *every* team wants to hear from a leader in *every* communication, it's gratitude.

In addition to boosting your team's morale and motivation, public recognition also reinforces that you're paying attention to and in full support of their endeavors. Even minor expressions of gratitude can have a meaningful impact on those who receive them. In a study published in the June 2010 issue of the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, researchers Francesca Gino and Adam M. Grant revealed that simple expressions of gratitude "increase prosocial behavior by enabling individuals to feel socially valued."

For those of you who don't read the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* religiously like I do, *prosocial behavior* is behavior connected to positivity, helpfulness, and an intention

to advance social acceptance and collegiality—the kind of behavior leaders want to foster.

But while you have more than 170,000 English words to choose from to create a nifty compliment, not all word combinations and phrases have the same impact. In fact, just the words *thank you* convey little meaningful impact. It registers as polite but not substantially praising.

Supply the "Why"

To give your appreciation rich meaning and value, it must answer the question, "Why is this person deserving of thanks?" Answering this question credits not only the achievement but also the level of commitment, ingenuity, and hard work it took to accomplish the achievement.

Also, make sure your appreciation is specific, timely, and unique to the person you're acknowledging. You'll get extra appreciation points for including a true story or example about them that illustrates the effort's value.

The more details you provide, the more meaningful your appreciation will be.

Note the progression of impact as this moment of public recognition from a leader to "Sam" expands to include more telling details.

> ► "My thanks to Sam, who delivered a presentation last week."
>
> (Translation: "I understand Sam completed a task.")

► "My thanks to Sam, who delivered a great presentation last week."

(Translation: "I noticed Sam did a good job.")

► "My thanks to Sam, whose presentation on inventory innovations last week was powerful and had good ideas."

(Translation: "I paid attention to Sam's presentation. He did a good job, and his effort can have value for the team.")

► "My thanks to Sam, whose presentation on inventory innovations last week demonstrated how much time and energy we can save if we think as creatively as he did."

(Translation: "Sam got my attention with his presentation. He impressed me with his points about innovation, and I think we can all learn from them.")

Another element that makes the last version especially effective: the elimination of adjectives. When you banish adjectives, you force yourself to use more meaningful and specific words.

Yes, giving meaningful, contextual thanks takes considerably more time and energy than simply saying or emailing the word "thanks," but when you see it as a valuable opportunity to reward and inspire, the return on your investment is clear.

Don't Sit on Your Support

Leadership coach Darcy Eikenberg, whose clients include The Coca-Cola Company, Microsoft, and Deloitte, discourages leaders from saving their appreciation until a project's completion, and I agree. Appreciation is valuable at any stage and can inspire further commitment.

"Sometimes, we struggle to acknowledge and appreciate others on our team because the goal isn't complete or isn't yet successful," Darcy told me. "But it's the right effort that gets the right results. Recognizing the steps your team takes toward those results can be very powerful and affirming—even if they haven't met their ultimate goal yet."

The Wedding Test

The best evidence of the value of meaningful thanks happens at weddings, not workplaces. Visualize two wedding toasts—one merely saying, "Phil and Alice make a great couple," the other telling a story about Phil and Alice's courtship that reveals their quirky personalities and illustrates their compatibility.

Which toast will be remembered and admired? The one that used details to convey a specific point of appreciation. Your "toast" should resonate with your team the same way.

How to Thank Everyone

If you're conveying general appreciation to many people at once—during a holiday event or organizational milestone,

for example—don't call out specific teams or people at the risk of neglecting others. The sting of being left out can cause more damage than what the glow of recognition can deliver.

At the same time, avoid very long, all-inclusive lists of appreciated people and departments that will just cause many in your audience to tune out. If you can't call out specific people or teams without omitting others equally deserving of recognition, speak of the *qualities* and *values* they share:

> *"Though many people and teams around the company contributed significantly to our success—too many to mention here—what unites all of you is a love for what we do and a relentless commitment to our goals. I appreciate and thank you all."*

✔ **QUICK TIP**

As you write expressions of appreciation, swap another team member's name for the one you're acknowledging and see if your remarks still apply. If they do, work harder to make your praise specific to the person you're recognizing and their particular achievement.

Making Your Story Matter

The importance of storytelling in communications is no secret. The concept is promoted frequently in books,

conferences, articles, seminars, and podcasts. We've come to the point where if you're not telling a story, you should reconsider speaking.

Storytelling is indeed a uniquely useful communication tool because humans are naturally attracted to narratives—whether it's an intriguing novel or an illuminating moment—so leaders always benefit from including stories and case studies in their communications.

Rod Thorn, a former communications executive at PepsiCo, Kodak, and IBM who has advised hundreds of Fortune 500 leaders, says successful CEOs should treat storytelling with the same reverence they give to a balance sheet.

"People don't follow you because you give them information, statistics, or charts, or even because you make evidence-based cases that appeal to reason," Rod told me. "They follow you because you make them feel like they're part of something bigger than their day-to-day job and give them hope you will do what it takes to ease their pain. The best way to accomplish that is through strategic and purposeful storytelling."

End of story? Not yet, because, in the language of leadership, the story is *not* the most important part of the story. That's not a typo.

The Most Important Part of a Story

In the context of presentations, a story doesn't justify its own existence. It optimally exists as *a vehicle through which a meaningful point travels*. And if leaders don't successfully

convey the important points their stories are illustrating, those stories may be riveting but not relevant. That's a severe handicap because leaders need to engage and inspire, not just entertain.

How a story connects to a point is not your audience's job to figure out; it's *your* job to understand and convey. That responsibility makes the inclusion of transition lines like these even more crucial than the story itself:

"This story illustrates why we must . . ."

"This case study exemplifies the importance of . . ."

"This moment was pivotal in launching my appreciation for . . ."

Without that explicit connection, your story will not serve a clear purpose.

Any true story can help propel a point—like the clever thing your six-year-old said, something from your personal history, or an incident you witnessed at a processing plant—but the key is connecting the interesting moment to an imperative message.

For example, Starbucks CEO Howard Schultz has been known to talk about an accident that left his father unable to work when Howard was a child *and how that drives his interest in caring for Starbucks employees*. Zappos CEO Tony Hsieh told stories about his early days at the company when he recognized *the value of building a corporate culture*.

Borrowing from Aristotle

Among communicators and speechwriters, the philosopher Aristotle may be best known for his three categories of persuasion—ethos, logos, and pathos. Boiled down, *ethos* is about making an appeal that relies on your credibility and character, *logos* is about making a logical appeal, and *pathos* is about creating an emotional appeal.

These concepts may be from the fourth century, but they're still remarkably useful in providing ideas to help you make a convincing point.

"Aristotle's ethos, logos, and pathos form the backbone of all persuasive arguments," author and executive communication coach Lauren Sergy told me. "Leaders who keep these techniques in mind while constructing their speeches,

talks, or arguments will be able to appeal directly to their audience's sensibilities."

Once armed with your point, but before you fully conceive your argument, utilize Aristotle's wisdom by asking yourself:

> ► Is there something about my personal or professional experience I can leverage to increase my credibility? (ethos)

Example:

"I was involved in competitive athletics for most of my childhood and college years, so I know a lot about bouncing back after loss and failure."

> ► Can I build a logical case with reasoning or data? (logos)

Example:

"Why should the richest country in the world have such high rates of poverty and food insecurity?"

> ► Is there an emotionally engaging story I can share that compels my team to think anew or take new action? (pathos)

Examples:

"Phillips' lifelong struggle with multiple sclerosis illustrates why we must fund this critical research today."

"Sally told me that the minute she stepped off the plane and [consumed our product], she finally felt she was home."

Bottom line: If you're making a case for or against an idea, adjectives may not help you much, but Aristotle may. And how could you go wrong borrowing the lessons of someone who tutored Alexander the Great?

Auditing Your Ands, Adjectives, and Apologies

Three major obstacles to effective communication conveniently begin with the letter A: Ands, Adjectives, and Apologies.

Alliteration aside, I'm carving out room for these three concepts because, at first blush, they seem innocent if not downright helpful. Who wouldn't want to add ideas, be more descriptive, and show contrition?

Let's do a closer inspection.

The Problem with Ands

The word *and* may seem like a useful way to add details to a single phrase or point—as you might add ornaments to a Christmas tree—but a Christmas tree falls under the weight of too many ornaments, and your points can be similarly sabotaged.

Look at this sentence:

> "This effective and efficient approach will alert and inspire our most important and relevant audiences to love and treasure our brand."

Now do an "and audit," kicking out less important or redundant descriptors:

> "This effective approach will inspire our most important audiences to treasure our brand."

I hope you agree that the sentence with fewer descriptors and less content is more effective. That may seem counterintuitive, but the problem with multiple ideas is that they fight each other for attention, ultimately diluting the impact of each. Ands are red flags for those little fights.

Earlier this year, I used an "and audit" with a CEO's keynote speech and found five places in her script where we could collapse two ideas into one. In most cases, the words we ejected were never missed because they were redundant or added little value and were unlikely to be remembered by her team. The process of elimination created not only a more direct point but also an easier line to say.

This guidance doesn't mean you must banish ands from your lexicon like carbs from your diet. Just see the ands as flags to assess each occurrence. Ask yourself how much you really need multiple descriptors in a single point or sentence, knowing that even one more word means more work for your audience.

I sometimes tell my clients: "Say many things, and your team may remember none. Say a few things, and they may remember some. Say one thing, and they will remember *all*."

The Problem with Adjectives

There are two reasons to give all adjectives a second look.

The first is a writing and journalism mantra: "Show, don't tell." Eliminating adjectives will force you to replace those words with more specific and meaningful descriptions that have 10 times the power of the banished adjective.

I was never a reporter, but when I was a writer for Nickelodeon Online in the pre-SpongeBob days, we were discouraged from using the word *fun*. We were encouraged instead to demonstrate fun through descriptive scenes, joyful details, and sidesplitting jokes. As a result, the work was always creatively compelling and brand-specific.

That advice is just as valuable for leaders as it is for writers: show, don't tell.

The second reason to scrutinize adjectives is that many of the most frequently used adjectives are so broad that they have little meaningful value.

Examples of pointless adjectives (I call these *badjectives*):

- ▶ Great
- ▶ Very good
- ▶ Awesome
- ▶ Terrific
- ▶ Excellent
- ▶ Fantastic
- ▶ Worthy

If you simply say a new project is "great," what are you saying, really? A nation can be great, an ice cream cone can

be great, and a floor mop can be great. Your job as a leader is to avoid the badjective and explain *why* it's great—what positive impact is the project designed to effect?

To fix badjectives, ask "Why?" of each one. Then replace the badjective with the answer to the question:

> **Original line:** "This is a great project."
>
> Why is it great?
>
> "It will increase our productivity by 30 percent."
>
> **New line:** "This project will increase our productivity by 30 percent."

Now you're making your point with a laser, not a firehose.

The Problem with Apologies

I tell my public speaking clients that public apologies are akin to placing a neon sign around your neck that reads, "I messed up." Yes, they are moments of honesty and authentic human nature, but they can do severe damage to the credibility you've built up to that point. Keep in mind that "sorry" is shorthand for "I beg for your forgiveness," which you would never say.

For leaders, the damage intensifies. Whether fair or not, much of a leader's credibility hinges on confidence and certainty, and even the best-intentioned apology can cripple that impression.

I'm not suggesting that leaders should strive for perfection (they shouldn't) or that sharing genuine feelings is a

handicap (it's not). But there are many ways to correct an error *and* convey authenticity without apologizing.

Examples of confident corrections:

> "This resulted in a 35 percent increase—correction, a 25 percent increase in sales."

> "Earlier, I said 40 teams were affected. I meant to say 60."

> "I don't know the answer to your question, but I'll get back to you on that."

Attention Magnets

One of the easiest and most effective ways to make ideas stand out is through the use of "attention magnets"—short phrases that instantly spotlight those points.

Here are examples of attention magnets:

- ► "Here's the thing . . ."
- ► "To be clear . . ."
- ► "My point is this . . ."
- ► "This is what you need to remember . . ."
- ► "Keep this in mind . . ."
- ► "If you take away one idea from this presentation, it's this . . ."
- ► "Here's what I recommend . . ."
- ► "Here's why this matters . . ."

These attention magnets force you to make a precise point, which is always a good thing, and can quickly bring you back to your key point if you've started to ramble and find yourself far from the topic:

> "I know we started talking about benefits, and now we're talking about dream vacations, but here's the thing/keep this in mind/my point is this . . ."

In Michelle Obama's speech for the virtual 2020 Democratic National Convention, she used no fewer than three attention magnets masterfully:

- ► "And let me once again tell you this . . ."

- ► "Let me be as honest and clear as I possibly can . . ."

- ► "If you take one thing from my words tonight, it is this . . ."

Aren't you already on the edge of your seat?

One caution: Attention magnets are powerful devices, but if you overuse them, their strength will wane. Reserve that engagement firepower for your most important lines and points.

✔ **QUICK TIP**

Say each attention magnet out loud and pick the ones that feel most natural to your style and vocabulary.

The Rule of Three

There's something instantly engaging about communicating in patterns of three, commonly called the *rule of three*. This tactic is also called a *tricolon*, and my inner linguistic nerd urges me to stick to that.

Tricolons mirror the engaging rhythm of a song or poem, and many leaders have used them with resonating effect.

You saw one earlier in Justin Trudeau's commencement address:

Because in our aspiration to relevance, in our love for our families, in our desire to contribute . . .

Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address alone contains two tricolons (one shy of a tricolon triple crown):

. . . We cannot dedicate, we cannot consecrate, we cannot hallow this ground.

. . . Government of the people, by the people, for the people.

You want CEOs? I've got CEOs. Here's General Motors chairman and CEO Mary Barra, in 2017:

GM's vision is a world with zero crashes, zero emissions, and zero congestion.

Here's Facebook founder and CEO Mark Zuckerberg that same year:

Anyone working on a big vision will get called crazy, even if you end up right. Anyone working on a complex problem will get blamed for not fully

understanding the challenge, even though it's impossible to know every-thing upfront. Anyone taking initiative will get criticized for moving too fast, because there's always someone who wants to slow you down.

Tricolons are not just for Tweet-worthy public speeches. Here are hypothetical examples of tricolons that leaders might say to their teams, probably at the start or close of their remarks due to their dramatic impact.

► *"We succeed because we have strength: Strength in the integrity of our mission, strength in the hard work of our staff, and strength in our shared commitment to make the world a better place."*

► *"A worker sees a task. A manager sees responsibility. A leader sees opportunity. We can all be leaders in our work."*

► *"We created this campaign because it best represents what we do, how we work, and who we are."*

As you can sense in these examples, the rule of three isn't just a flowery rhetorical device—it effectively draws people in.

✔ QUICK TIP

Build upward with each of the three elements. Start with the least relevant one and end with the most relevant one because your tricolon's last compo-nent will be the natural climax as well as the ele-ment most remembered by your team.

Strong Starts and Solid Finishes

Presentation openings and closings are pivotal moments in any workplace communication.

"People tend to remember the first and the last thing they read or hear," says BigBlueGumball CEO Todd Cherches, who told me he counsels his clients to "open in a way that immediately grabs people's attention and finish with a close that will reinforce your most valuable ideas."

That's what you want to effect, but how do you use specific communication tactics to accomplish it?

Starting Strong

An effective introduction answers the audience's question: "Will this presentation be relevant or irrelevant to me?"

You can never go wrong by starting with a point-infused story. The more personal your story is, the more engaged your audience will be. But after the story, immediately establish who you are (if necessary), what your point is, and why that point is relevant.

It also helps to know the very first word you're going to say in your remarks. That word may be "Good" ("Good morning . . ."), "I" ("I want to share with you the results . . ."), or even "Thanks" ("Thanks for that introduction, Laura"). Knowing your first word enables you to start your communication with power, purpose, and precision.

Sticking the Landing

An effective conclusion answers the audience's question: "What ideas should I take away from this?"

You want to do more than just finish your speech; you want to reinforce your most important ideas. So, don't end with the last piece of data or some variation of "Well, that's all I got." End by reinforcing your point to your team. This moment is their last—and possibly best—chance to receive it.

Also, make sure to put a silent chapter break between your very last word and subsequent meeting business, such as a Q&A or bringing up the next agenda item. Rushing from your concluding point to something far less critical robs your audience of the critical time they need to hear, digest, and consider your big idea.

✔ QUICK TIP

Memorize the first 20 seconds of any speech or remarks to your team. This security measure enables you to introduce yourself and your point with optimal clarity, word economy, and confidence, with your eyes on your team, not in your notes.

The Language of Listening

Admired executives are typically strong listeners because they recognize that their teams want to both *listen to* and *be heard by* their leaders. But there's a big difference between

passively hearing your team and actively listening to them, and since communications is very often a two-way street, listening to your team is a crucial component of the language of leadership.

"Building positive relations is an important part of leadership, and listening is a critical part of building good relationships," said Dr. Rick Fulwiler, president of Transformational Leadership Associates and an instructor at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, in a January 2018 article on the school's website. "Actively listening to others lets them know that you are interested in their needs, as well as what they're trying to say. When people feel that you care about them, it will make them more likely to follow your leadership."

It's not hard to find active listening tips on the Internet, but I consider these recommendations most practical:

▶ Always face speakers and maintain eye contact. In a virtual meeting, that means looking into the camera's cold eye, not into a warm digital face.

▶ Demonstrate you're listening by nodding. Nodding is the most effective way to show support (even more so than smiling) because it says, "I'm buying what you're selling." Remember, a speaker's goal is not to delight but to deliver.

▶ Don't use listening time as an opportunity to plan what you're going to say next. Misunderstanding a question or request because you didn't effectively listen to it can damage credibility and trust.

- ▶ Avoid interrupting members of your team or finishing their sentences. That's not a leadership prerogative, and it is universally rude. Sometimes we think we're affirming someone else's point by finishing their sentences for them, but even if that's technically true, we're still trampling on their perspective. (Yes, my wife taught me that one.)

- ▶ Reflect questions and concerns back to the speaker before offering your perspective or proposing a solution. For example, "I want to make sure I hear you correctly. You're saying we have too many meetings, especially on Fridays. Is that correct?" Even before you address the concern, this powerful conveyance of acknowledgment elevates trust and demonstrates empathy.

- ▶ Finally, keep an open mind and resist the urge to defend. Speaking and listening is a dialogue, not a debate, so focus on considering your team's perspective, not making counterarguments.

"When employees say they want their voices to be heard, they are really saying they want leaders who will not just hear them, but really listen to them," writes Glenn Llopis, business coach and author of *Leadership in the Age of Personalization*, in Forbes Online. "Leaders who listen create trustworthy relationships that are transparent and breed loyalty."

Let Me Ask You a Question

In the dialogues between leaders and their teams, productive listening (and learning) can be boosted when a

leader asks probing questions. The question represents a curiosity—as all well-intended questions do—but it's also an opportunity for a leader to demonstrate admirable qualities including concern, awareness, and eagerness to learn.

In a January 2017 *Harvard Business Review* article entitled "Being a Strategic Leader Is About Asking the Right Questions," executive coach Lisa Lai contends that asking strategic questions like "Why are you doing the work you're doing?" and "What does success look like for our team?" can help leaders encourage their teams to think more strategically. Lisa recommends starting that journey with a very basic question: "What are we doing today?"

"Asking this question almost always brings to light significant work that managers aren't aware is being done or that's taking more time than it should," Lisa writes. "You can't move your team forward strategically without knowing the answer to this question with total clarity."

Here are a variety of question types that serve the double purpose of gathering useful information from your team and reflecting your appreciation of their perspective. Notice how they are all open-ended questions. This is no coincidence—open-ended questions generate more valuable and actionable responses.

Strategic questions:

► "What do you aim to achieve?"

► "How can we apply that approach throughout the company?"

Recognition questions:

► "Who helped you with this project?"

► "How did you come up with the idea?"

Helpful questions:

► "What can I do to help?"

► "What do you need to take your project to the next level?"

Try to avoid asking questions in public that are challenging, are potentially shaming, or reveal pessimism. Because you're their leader and not their colleague, your skepticism—and its impact—carries extra weight. Examples of potentially shaming questions:

► "How much will this cost?"

► "But what happens if . . .?"

► "Why didn't you consider . . .?"

If they're vital concerns, you can always discuss them privately later.

✔ **QUICK TIP**

Always conceive your questions with an intention of supporting your team and their endeavors. That support will not go unnoticed.

We Need to Start Meeting Like This

Productive work meetings are motivating. Wasteful work meetings are dispiriting and costly. You already know that, but the biggest difference between productive meetings and wasteful meetings—whether virtual or in-person—often boils down to communication.

Since leaders are often running meetings (or at least starting them), it's essential to explore ways executives can raise their communication game as they lead and participate.

Raise Points, Not Topics

As I mentioned earlier in this book, when you make points, you're suggesting drivers of elevation and impact with a clear point of view. When you only cover topics, you're merely throwing out ideas and hoping for the best. An efficient meeting may have topics on the agenda, but leaders should come prepared to make points.

▶ A meeting topic: Employee use of social media

A leader's meeting point: *"I think we should review and update our internal social media policy."*

▶ A meeting topic: Vendor policy

A leader's meeting point: *"I'm concerned we might not be using vendors efficiently. Let's review who we need and why."*

▶ A meeting topic: Website traffic

A leader's meeting point: *"Let's brainstorm new digital features that can drive traffic to the website."*

Before the meeting, conceive three to four brief but valuable points or proposals and convey them at the start or end of the event or when related topics come up on the agenda.

You may not get to all of your points, but you reinforce your role as a leader when you focus on "What am I contending or recommending?" versus simply "What should we talk about?"

By making points and proposals, you also help ensure meetings focus on action, not just discussion.

Preview Your Points

If you have several important points to make at the start of a meeting, use internal previews ("I'm going to cover three areas: X, Y, and Z"), transitions ("The second thing I want to suggest is Y"), and reviews ("I believe X, Y, and Z are critical to our success").

These previews, transitions, and reviews will help your team follow you as you express your points, making those points easier to process and consider.

Know When You're Done

Some speakers have a voice in their heads that says, "They don't understand it yet—keep talking!" Don't trust that voice because it's disconnected from reality. If you feel you've made your case, stop and move on. Adding unnecessary or redundant words and ideas will only dilute your point and could easily lead to rambling.

Make Detours Brief

At times, you may be tempted to leave your train of thought to discuss something unrelated, whether the idea suddenly pops into your head or is raised by someone else in the room. (One second, you're talking about leveraging social media; the next, you're talking about your kid's Instagram page.) If you entertain a new idea, get into and out of it quickly to return to the points you came to make.

Give Credit Meaningfully and Concisely

Meetings are opportune moments for leaders to share meaningful points of praise, support, and encouragement with their teams. Here is a good template for giving credit:

- ► Who did it?

- ► What did she/he/they do?

- ► What impact does that person's or team's act or competency have on organizational objectives?

Note there's no bullet for "What adjectives would you use to describe the achievement?" because you know by now that adjectives alone are cheap. That doesn't mean you can't use them; just don't rely on them.

Finally, know that nothing kills a good toast more than rambling, so keep your acknowledgment structured and contained to two minutes or less. There's no such thing as a toast that runs too short but plenty of examples of toasts that run too long.

> **✔ QUICK TIP**
>
> Do you ever have trouble getting your team's attention at a meeting or event? Don't beg them for it ("Please everyone, I'd like to get started . . .") or try to talk over their voices, which runs the risk of them missing out on important information. Instead, express a polite sentiment repeatedly ("Good morning . . . Good morning . . . Good morning . . .").
>
> The repetition will capture their attention in a positive, not scolding, way, and soon they will be ready to receive.

What *Not* to Worry About

There's a lot to know and learn about leadership communication, and by now you've hopefully picked up some helpful tips, which is good because not every piece of advice on the Internet has merit. (I know, you're shocked.) I often meet clients who've wasted valuable time focusing on ineffective communication advice or irrelevant concerns.

They likely learned these weak ideas from watching other speakers, reading ill-conceived articles, or listening to uninformed colleagues. So, for them—and for many of you—here are some of the *least* important leadership communication considerations.

Your Appearance

Although you should never dress inappropriately or slop-pily for a speaking or leadership event, the color of your shirt, scarf, or teeth has little impact on your ability to make your point. This is why I discourage leaders from practicing in front of mirrors. We're trained to look into mirrors and instantly assess our appearance, but who looks into a mir-ror and wonders, "Am I making my point effectively?" Yet that question is the most important communication consid-eration of all. No one on your team sees your presentation as a fashion show, and you shouldn't either.

How Entertaining You Are

Making your team laugh or smile certainly engages them, but that effect has little to do with inspiring them, and you're aiming for both engagement and inspiration. So, don't work too hard on being entertaining—and certainly don't attempt to be funny if you're not a natu-rally funny person. Instead, focus your communications around the purpose of your point and the power of your presence.

If your goal is to "break the ice" or humanize yourself, a per-sonal story can be even more effective than a joke because, in addition to being instantly engaging, personal stories enable you to illustrate your point with real-life examples. A joke simply comes and goes.

Vocal Variety

Some public speaking trainers coach their clients to expand their "vocal variety," and yes, it's nice to hear speakers vary their pace and tone from time to time, but most speakers already have distinctive speech styles and tones that make them unique and authentic. Deliberately changing your speaking style can also sound very unnatural . . . because it is. When you consider your job is to engage and inspire, not to perform, vocal variety is a nice-to-have but far from a need-to-have.

Perfection

Communication is a job, not a competition. No judges are waiting to deduct technical points from you for coughing, sneezing, fumbling with a word, or saying "ah" or "um" a few times, so—as I mentioned earlier in this book—put aside any notion that perfection is a goal or even a benefit. Instead, embrace the imperative of your actual job as a leader: effectively delivering your point to your team—even if you do it imperfectly.

The Part You Forgot to Say

It's pretty typical for leaders—or any presenters, for that matter—to forget details or sections of their presentations. I know many leaders who even beat themselves up about it. But put down your fists. Your team won't mind because they never knew those details existed in your presentation in the first place, and anything forgettable to you is likely forgettable to them as well.

Keep in mind that your team will not remember everything you say anyway, so your big responsibility is to know the ideas they must take with them—and make sure they do.

Communicate like you've never communicated before to your people … Every action you take must be understood by every employee in the place.

—Jack Welch

3

Plug In: Leveraging Your Tech Tools

Ew technology has dramatically changed how we communicate at work, especially with indispensable tools like email, PowerPoint, digital video, and virtual meeting platforms.

By now, most of us feel pretty comfortable sending emails, throwing together PowerPoint slides, shooting videos with our phones, and even hopping on Zoom calls. Yet, I still encounter leaders underutilizing—and in some cases misusing—these technologies in ways that ultimately undermine their ability to engage and inspire their teams.

Let's take a closer look at how to leverage these communication tools in the best interest of strengthening points, engagement, and executive presence.

Know Thy Platforms

Not too long ago, business leaders communicated with their teams in primarily two ways: loud and louder. But modern leaders now have a variety of in-person, distanced, and virtual platforms to choose from as a result of more of their staff working from home.

Here's a sampling of formal leadership communication opportunities to get us all on the same page:

- ► Live, in-person meetings and conferences

- ► Video meetings (examples: Zoom, Webex, Skype, GoToMeeting)

- ► Video messages

- ► All-staff, department, or team emails

- ► Internal podcasts

- ► Internal newsletter articles

- ► Intranet/internal community platform posts (examples: MS Teams, Workplace by Facebook, Slack)

- ► Instant messaging (examples: MS Teams, Jabber, Skype, Ryver, Fleep, Shazbot, and Bleam)

(All right, the last two are not instant messaging apps but Orkan phrases from *Mork & Mindy*. I couldn't help myself.)

Many leaders will choose a platform based on how comfortable they feel in one format versus another. That's the wrong approach for two reasons: First, it ignores each platform's leverageable advantages and disadvantages. Second—frankly—if you're unwilling to try uncomfortable things that best serve your organization, you probably shouldn't be a leader.

These tools and platforms are not interchangeable, and choosing the right one depends primarily on two questions:

1. What is my purpose and level of urgency?

2. Does the function, timing, and tone of the medium best serve this purpose and urgency?

The following are some recommendations for choosing the right platform using these criteria:

Email and Instant Messaging

If you need to share information urgently, you can rely on email and instant messaging, but realize they're not well-suited for extensive detail or context because your team expects the information on these platforms in short bursts. Communications on quicker-turnaround platforms like these are also typically more spontaneous and informal, so think twice before using them for very serious or essential messaging.

Staff Emails, Articles, and Social Platform Posts

You have more room for detail in a staff email, internal newsletter article, or intranet/community platform

post, but make sure to break paragraphs frequently and keep your message concise for easy audience processing. These are suitable platforms for multipart or more detailed messaging because audiences can take their time reading and processing your points.

Video Messages

If you choose to communicate with a video message, the most effective time range in terms of audience engagement is one to two minutes, so plan in advance the two or three points you want to make and practice your delivery a few times first (don't wing it). A personal video is not an effective medium for conveying complicated details because audiences must hear it at *your* pace versus *their* pace. Because of that audience handicap, reserve personal videos for needs that are light on complicated and detailed information and heavy on expressions of inspiration or recognition.

A major drawback of personal videos is that you're very limited in terms of notes. Videos rely on authenticity, and you weaken your authenticity if audiences think you're reading from a script or if they see you often referring to notes. Know—as a general rule—that it's better to come across as *im*perfect than *too* perfect.

If you have a teleprompter and can look natural using it, you have an advantage. But many executives do not

have teleprompter technology or can't read in a way that looks spontaneous. This is why your points on video need to be few and brief—because you're relying on your knowledge and your memory.

Meeting Presentations and Discussions

If you need to do an even deeper dive, meeting presentations and discussions are usually best because your audience is typically prepared to set tasks aside and devote more time and attention to them. Just realize that these events require the most scheduling and preparation, so although formal presentations and meetings are appropriate for exploring issues thoroughly, they're not a wise choice for getting out urgent information quickly.

Write It or Record It?

A simpler way of looking at the same platform question is asking: Do I *write* this (email, blog post, instant message, internal social post), or do I *record* it (video message, podcast)?

Choosing wisely between "record it" and "write it" requires understanding each approach's specific advantages and disadvantages (see those elements and other recommendations in Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1: Video Communication (Live or Pretaped)

Advantages	Disadvantages	What This Means for Leaders
You have a greater ability to convey passion, authenticity, and commitment through your voice and facial expressions.	A video forces your team to comprehend the message on *your* time, not on their time. While video playback can be paused, few people pause a video simply to consider what they've just seen, putting the burden on you to ensure your message is instantly understandable.	Choose a video format when inspiration, encouragement, and recognition—versus information, explanation, and details—are your primary communication goals.
You can add dynamic images and existing video footage to help the audience visualize your points. These images can also "cover" any visual edits that need to be made.	It's more difficult to produce precise messaging or have that messaging reviewed by others in advance.	Incorporate no more than one or two pieces of supportive information or illustrative examples.
	Looking into the camera, you are relying heavily on your knowledge and memory.	Know that a one-to-two-minute video is roughly 250–300 words.

Advantages	Disadvantages	What This Means for Leaders
	Changes are more difficult to make following the shoot.	

Table 2: Written Communication

Advantages	Disadvantages	What This Means for Leaders
Your team experiences written communications on *their* time. They can pause, slow down, reread, ponder, and highlight the material more easily and comfortably than they can with video.	Having no reinforcing voice or facial expression cues can result in misunderstandings, especially if humor or colloquialisms are used.	Choose a written format when your message relies on a detailed explanation.
Writing provides greater opportunities for message precision.	Stories read are less compelling than stories told.	An internal executive memo can be as short as roughly 250 words and as long as approximately 700 words and can include reader aids like subheads and bullets.*

Advantages	Disadvantages	What This Means for Leaders
The material can be comprehensively reviewed ahead of time by other stakeholders, and changes can be made easily in multiple stages of production.	Without the assistance of facial expressions and verbal intonations, passion, intensity, and authenticity are difficult to convey convincingly.	

*Bullets and subheads make written communications come across as more official and less personal, so use those aids only to break up long and complicated written pieces, such as introductions of new policies or reorganization announcements. Don't use them in sentiments of appreciation or encouragement.

There are certainly more advantages and disadvantages to consider when choosing one communication platform over another—many of which relate to your particular resources, technology, and staff—so consult with your internal communications or HR team for their recommendations.

Zoom In: Making Actual Impact in Virtual Meetings

Virtual meetings moved from a useful tool to an absolute necessity when the COVID-19 pandemic sent millions of office workers home in 2020. Tech players profitably filling the gap included Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex, Skype, GoToMeeting, and Google Meet.

But while this amazing video technology was seamlessly integrated and often gleefully adopted ("Check out my virtual background of Smurfs climbing Mount Kilimanjaro!"), many communicators do not realize that what worked in rooms doesn't always work in Zooms.

Zoom Fatigue

So-called *Zoom fatigue* is a real phenomenon, marked by difficulty reconciling "work mode" and "home mode," being bombarded by multiple visual cues simultaneously, and holding a "constant gaze" on a computer screen, which can stress your eyes. Just reading that list feels exhausting.

Leaders, in particular, limit their communication impact when they don't recognize and adapt to the specific technological and visual standards of modern video conferencing platforms.

The good news is, it's not too late to learn. You can avoid most virtual meeting pitfalls if you know where to look . . . in some cases, literally.

Give Eye Contact

Eye contact is a critical communication practice, but in a video conference, looking into someone's eyes means looking into the tiny black dot of your computer's internal or external camera, not looking at the faces of your colleagues on the screen. Doing this feels awkward because it confuses our senses—we've spent our whole lives looking into the faces of people to whom we're talking. In Zoom world, that's no longer true.

It's also awkward because the camera—whether built-in or external—is above your eye level, forcing you to look up at it. To counter this, lower your monitor slightly so that you're looking directly into the camera (and down a bit to see the screen), versus looking directly at the screen and up a bit to look into the camera.

Although it's not necessary to spend an entire meeting looking into the camera, these are the moments when camera contact—making direct eye contact with your team—is most important:

- ► Delivering a major presentation

- ► Responding directly to an individual

- ► Making your most important point

Practice looking into your camera during virtual meetings. The more you do it, the more comfortable that behavior will become.

Frame Yourself Wisely

During an in-person conference, your only contribution to the visual environment is your body, but in a virtual meeting, you contribute substantially to the environmental experience, including your background, your framing, and, sometimes, your family and pets. I'm always surprised when people don't look at themselves in a virtual meeting. If they did, they might notice they're too close or too far away, their heads are cut off, they're entirely in shadow, or they have a very distracting background behind them.

I recommend filling the frame as much as possible with your head and shoulders and keeping the camera at eye level or just above eye level. You, not your room, should dominate the screen.

Be very mindful of your background. Cluttered rooms may make you seem disorganized, and unique toys, objects, and posters—while adding character—may distract people from the points you're making. Choose environments with simple backgrounds that reflect your expertise or professionalism, and remember: anything in the frame not *supporting* your point is *stealing* from your point.

Virtual backgrounds in particular not only create distraction, but also insert glaringly artificial elements into an experience that should feel natural and real. Those sensory mismatches can injure your authenticity, pull attention from your message, and further contribute to Zoom fatigue.

Finally, your team is probably very forgiving about children and pets "crashing" the meeting. These distractions are part of life and fine if you're muted and not actively presenting. But this is where I draw the line: if you're delivering a formal presentation or sharing critical information, realize that children and loud ambient sounds are not only distractions to your audience; they're also distractions to you. In those important scheduled moments—when effective communication is crucial—make plans to keep children busy with an activity or caregiver in another room. I promise you they won't remember this moment of abandonment when they write their memoirs.

Stay Focused and Present

In a virtual meeting, it's easy to forget you're being watched, even though meeting participants are more often watched in a video conference than in a live meeting. It's also easier to distract yourself during a virtual meeting, whether with your smartphone, your email, or just your proximity to your coffeemaker.

Manage these pitfalls by being extra mindful. Turn off your email, put away your phone, and eliminate other distractions. Remember also that you're always "on camera" and that everything you do—from how closely you pay attention to whether you eat or drink—reflects on your leadership.

My tip: Don't consider yourself at home. Consider yourself at work. That may trigger more conscientious and responsible instincts.

Maintain a Strong Voice

Just because there's a microphone doesn't mean you should relax your voice or speak in a conversational volume. As I emphasize in *Get to the Point!* louder voices are not just more audible; they also convey authority, credibility, confidence, competence, and subject matter expertise—all of which are essential leadership qualities.

When you're speaking in a virtual meeting, use the same powerful voice you would and should use at a live conference to project those important qualities as well.

Keep Your Notes Close

To maintain as much eye and face contact as possible, keep your speaking notes close to the camera. I typically stick Post-it Notes around the perimeter of my screen or have digital notes or documents open on-screen as close to the camera as possible.

My rule of thumb: Your notes should be close enough to the camera that you can reference them by only moving your eyes, not moving your head or neck. This tactic will keep your face front and center, maximizing eye contact.

Use the Tools

Modern Zoom audiences appreciate presenters interacting with them—some even expect it. That doesn't mean you have to learn how to operate Zoom's fancy polls, whiteboards, or breakout rooms. The easiest interactive tool is also the most communicative one: the Zoom chat box. Use it sporadically to ask specific questions and solicit quick ideas from your team. Your request can be as serious as their suggestions to improve flagging sales or as light as their proudest moments of the month.

Using chat strategically demonstrates that you value team presence, team input, and team collaboration. One rule of thumb: *seven seconds*. That's the amount of time you should wait for a response before asking a new question or moving on. I heard this tip at a conference, and, indeed, it's enough time to ensure everyone who wants to contribute has the opportunity, but not so long that the silence becomes excruciatingly awkward.

✔ QUICK TIP

Where I work, we now use Zoom meetings—versus smartphones—to record short (one-to-two minute) executive-to-staff videos. These meetings are scheduled for the sole purpose of recording an executive video.

Advantage 1: Executives are already accustomed to presenting in a Zoom environment—there's no comfort curve.

Advantage 2: One or more people from any location can virtually attend to coach the speaker or give feedback on takes.

Advantage 3: A meeting participant can create a virtual background that contains speaker notes, then duck out of the way. Now, the executive sees only the camera and the notes. (If the speaking notes can't fit in a participant's virtual background, they're probably too complicated. Boil them down.)

If you take this approach, make sure everyone but the speaker is muted and that the person recording the session (the "host") uses Speaker View to enlarge the speaker image.

Writing More Effective Email

Many of my clients follow my encouragement about making strong points in their speeches and writing, but it all

goes out the window in their emails, which is ironically where leaders—and the rest of us—do most of our workplace communicating. Raising your email game starts at the very first line.

Subject Line Awareness

The subject line is the first impression your point makes on a recipient, so instant clarity is essential. Yet, many emails have subject lines that are so general that they've become virtually meaningless.

As I write this, some of the subject lines in my inbox include these:

- ► "Wednesday"
- ► "Re: Feedback"
- ► "2.7K views"
- ► "Meeting"
- ► "Your email"
- ► "Re: Re: Today"

Can you tell me what the points of these emails are? Neither can I.

Because I was curious, I ran a search for "Today" in my email and found dozens of emails with that generic subject line going back years, each one about an entirely different matter.

Now imagine a critically important executive directive or idea buried within a thread under the subject line "Re: Re: Re: Re: Re: Q4." Some recipients may never even open it if they've decided the thread is no longer relevant to them or otherwise obsolete.

Here are some examples of more intuitive subject lines:

- ▶ "Inventory Report Analysis"
- ▶ "Apple Partnership Notes"
- ▶ "Celebrity Video Idea"

It's also good practice to use all-capital subject line tags to indicate very urgent needs or imperatives like so:

- ▶ "URGENT: Xxx"
- ▶ "POLICY CHANGE: Xxx"
- ▶ "ACTION REQUESTED: Xxx"
- ▶ "MEETING CHANGE: Xxx"

I occasionally receive pushback on this recommendation arguing that all-caps is always a no-no because you're virtually screaming. But I've never received that feedback from the recipient of one of these emails, and the whole intention is making an urgent email stick out from the rest. To be clear, only the words before the colon are in all-caps; the rest are not. That's not screaming—it's signaling.

Finally, don't be afraid to modify a subject line within an existing thread to ensure the right people see your email. Subject line clarity is more important than subject line

consistency, and—trust me—there is no "thread police" lying in wait.

Body Work

In the email body, always start with a salutation like "Hi, Susan" or "Good morning, Jack."

This may seem like a minor matter, but it comes across as warm and collegial, humanizing you. Without the salutation, emails can seem rushed and abrupt, even angry.

If you're emailing multiple people, consider "Hi, team" or "Hi, everyone" (*never* "Hi, guys," which communicates male privilege, even if unintentionally).

As for the email content, cut wasteful words, use bullets or numbers when you have groups of three ideas or more, and break paragraphs frequently.

I recommend keeping all email paragraphs under four sentences—the fewer, the better. An email paragraph longer than four sentences is an excessive burden for your readers, who should be able to scan your email quickly if they don't have time to read it carefully.

If your email is sharing appreciation, remember to make that recognition meaningful by detailing the "why."

Ending with Action

As you conclude the email, end with a specific recommendation or next step, such as delegating a responsibility, suggesting a next meeting date, proposing the formation

of a committee, or volunteering to take action yourself. This action step gives the email momentum and induces a response.

Reading with Intention

Leadership email responsibility includes not only how you write an email but also how you *read* one. A smart rule: Don't reply to an email before reading it entirely because it may include multiple requests and several points of critical information. Incomplete replies from you are frustrating for the sender and may trigger yet another email to you for clarification.

✔ QUICK TIP

Before you hit Send on your email, ask yourself these questions:

► What's my point?

► Is my subject line doing its job?

► Did I make my point clear and concise in the body?

► Did I include an action step?

► Am I making too many requests at once?

► Did I take the easy step of checking for spelling errors? (If you want to do a very thorough proofread, read it aloud.)

Putting the Power in PowerPoint

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I realize there are many alternatives to Power-Point, including Prezi, Keynote, Canva, Google Slides, and Visme, but given the ubiquity of PowerPoint, I'm going to stick with the granddaddy of them all. Many of the following recommendations apply to those platforms anyway. (If you use Prezi, I also recommend passing out Dramamine.)*

In my professional experience, many of the biggest controversies in executive communications are about using PowerPoint. Some declare the tool "dead" or "evil," while others cling to it but give no thought to updating their dreary circa 2002 slides. Many design specialists prefer vibrant visuals with few or no words, whereas many content specialists consider titles, bullets, and text integral elements of a PowerPoint slide.

I'm a proponent of PowerPoint—with titles, bullets, and text—because it serves the vital purpose of reinforcing points. This is especially important if you're a strong visual learner and a relatively weak auditory learner (like I am). We need those reinforcing visuals.

Also, remember that your goal is not to have the audience say "ooh!" to a beautiful slide but to have them say "oh!" to a brilliant point. Double down on that point with every tool and tactic at your disposal.

Here are some specific recommendations to build engagement and reinforce purpose using PowerPoint:

> ► On slides, eliminate complete sentences and break up compound sentences. An abundance of words

makes it hard for the audience to process the content efficiently.

► Use bullets to separate ideas and thoughts. Some coaches recommend a 5×5 or 6×6 approach (number of bullets × number of words per bullet), but I advise you just to heed the big idea: use only as many bullets and words per bullet as you need to convey the point.

► Every slide should ideally represent one specific point. Know what that point is, and convey it explicitly in your remarks:

"These findings demonstrate why . . ."

"The approaches enable us to . . ."

"These partnerships are critical to our . . ."

Note that these examples don't merely share or define the content ("Here are some approaches"); they express the purpose and impact of that content ("These approaches enable us to reach our target customers").

► If your audience can't instantly read your charts, only show sections they can read, or bullet your findings instead. Unreadable material in your slides reflects that you're not considering your audience.

► Recognize that the Title space at the top of each slide is prime real estate. It's the content your audience will read first and the only element they'll look to for clues of the slide's central point. But

that space is squandered when presenters fill it with generic words and simple categories like "Background," "Data," "Consumer Trends," "Our Partnerships," "Industry Analysis," and "Why This Matters."

Utilize this area more effectively to introduce and reinforce the primary messages of your slides with point-powered titles like these:

- ► "Food Consumers Are Responding to Social Ads"

- ► "Leading the Industry"

- ► "Partnerships Extend Our Impact"

- ► "Our New Product Lines"

Digital Video

Now that taking a video is as easy as holding up a smartphone, the ability to create executive videos (either with a colleague's help or selfie-style) couldn't be simpler. But there's a world of difference between simple and effective.

The essential guidelines of shooting compelling executive videos: Keep them brief, authentic, and inspirational.

Brief means restricting yourself to one specific point, not a list of several topics. Elaborate just enough to make your expression substantial but not so much that you'll need a script or notes nearby to remember it. Then add the always-important line or two of thanks and appreciation.

Here's a basic and easily remembered video content outline:

1. Hello! (Avoid gendered references like "Hey, guys" or "Good morning, ladies" or "he/him/his" as default pronouns.)

2. Point

3. Implications for the team

4. Thank you!

Authentic means being spontaneous, not scripted. I've experimented with cue cards, a teleprompter, full scripts, and complete spontaneity, and spontaneity wins every time. What you lose in precision, you gain in engagement and trust.

Remember to keep your actual notes so lean that the items serve as prompts, not lines. Here is an example of a set of boiled-down video speaking notes:

1. Hello!

2. Thanks for your dedication.

3. New Detroit call center

4. Welcome new VP Sales— Keisha Bryan

5. "Improving customer experience"

6. Thank you!

This outline can be on a sticky note or in digital notes, but keep it as close to the camera as possible to maximize camera eye contact.

Inspirational means giving your team a reason to be hopeful. Because of its brevity, a short executive video should be more sentiment than speech, but let the lack of detail and structure liberate you to look directly into the camera and say something honest, meaningful, and encouraging. And be excited because that excitement will be infectious.

Given audience attention spans, an executive video should fall between one and three minutes. And because they're so easy to produce, I recommend doing between three and five practice takes. In my experience, the best takes are typically the third or fourth, when the leader feels most familiar with the ideas they're expressing.

✔ QUICK TIP

Feel free to edit in compelling images or supplemental video footage ("B-roll"), but only if that imagery is relevant, not just window dressing. The more produced an executive video seems, the less authentic it will be perceived as, and the goal is to engage honestly with your team, not to win a selfie award. Prioritize authenticity over artistry.

It's important to make sure that we're talking with each other in a way that heals, not in a way that wounds.

—Barack Obama

4

Scenario Studies: Targeted Tactics for Specific Events

Most internal leadership communications fall into four categories—communicating bad news, celebrating a milestone, honoring a person, and unveiling a new policy or strategic direction. Each requires a specific language approach as well as unique customizations and must-haves to maximize engagement and inspiration.

You'll notice earlier-covered themes here, including empathy, authenticity, and purpose, but I'm contextualizing them in real-world scenarios for easy reference when these moments arise in your leadership responsibilities.

Relaying Bad News

Sharing bad news with your team—like layoffs, department shutdowns, and terminations—is among the most difficult and stressful communications you can make. But the fundamental guidance for delivering unwelcome information is the same for leaders and their teams as it is for doctors and their patients: be honest, direct, and concise.

Here are some specific recommendations:

► Avoid ambiguity as much as possible. Employees need and deserve facts from their leaders, not speculation. Ambiguity also projects indecision and breeds fear instead of understanding.

► Be careful not to overpromise. Unfulfilled assurances and possibilities can ultimately injure your credibility.

► Consider if you might be softening a message or making it more equivocal to make yourself—the communicator—feel more comfortable. Ask: Who is benefiting most from me softening a blow?

► Use simple and natural language, not a script, to ensure you sound authentic and not like a press release. This is a critical time to be human.

► Avoid overselling positive spins and referring to shallow silver linings. Trying these tactics may demonstrate that you can't or don't want to fully acknowledge your team's distress. "The worst mistake a leader can make is to obfuscate reality or try to sugarcoat a bad situation to 'reduce panic,'" Eric

Yaverbaum told me. "People feel more secure and calm when they know they can trust their leaders and are fully informed. Obfuscating facts undermines trust and creates yet another crisis to deal with when the truth eventually comes out."

► Acknowledge that the news is difficult to hear, but reinforce why the decision was best and/or necessary for the company and its workforce.

► Show appreciation for your team ("I want to thank you for your cooperation and understanding") and avoid talking at length about how difficult the decision was to make. Referencing yourself this way may feel soothing, but it transforms a moment of empathy for the staff into sympathy for the leader. Your job is to support your team, not to have your team support you.

► Remind your team of available counseling and feedback opportunities and reinforce your constant commitment to honest communications and transparency. Sometimes no news is worse than bad news.

Communicating during a Crisis

During a crisis, teams want to hear from leadership even more so than from official or credible organizations working on the issue. In a March 2020 Edelman Trust Barometer Special Report called "Trust and the Coronavirus," 63 percent of workers said they would believe employer communications in a crisis, versus 58 percent who would trust a government website and 51 percent who would trust traditional media.

Your team puts its trust in you, so certainly educate yourself about the crisis, but don't feel you need to supplement or replace your communications with communications from other sources of news and information.

In the early stages of the event, it's critical for a leader to provide timely information (especially about staff safety and operational changes), to encourage calm, and to inspire resilience and realistic optimism.

Note the relevant guidance in the previous section about sharing bad news, but also consider the following suggestions:

- ▶ Keep messages in an advancing versus a suspending perspective, which means "do" over "don't" and "we will" over "we won't." This positive approach conveys a commitment to overcoming, not just avoiding, a challenge.

- ▶ Decide if the communication is best shared by the CEO or by a subject matter or department specialist.

- ▶ Make clear the difference between what is known and unknown. As with sharing bad news, don't sugar coat the facts or speculate on what might or is even likely to happen. As a leader, your public communication always goes on the record.

- ▶ Share positive and uplifting stories of resilience and ingenuity across the organization as much as possible. Your team may be inspired by you but will model the behavior and the spirit of their colleagues. Make sure to share your appreciation with a strong "why."

Handling crises is usually the job of a few senior executives, but try to preserve your point-making role as the provider of headlines and hope, not details and description.

Celebrating a Milestone

Organizational milestones represent the accomplishment of an objective, but they also typically represent significant advancement toward an even larger goal. (The very definition of a milestone indicates there's still further to go.)

So, although it's certainly appropriate to treat a milestone as an occasion for celebration and recognition, a wise leader also uses the moment to articulate the *implications* of that achievement and how it connects to the organization's vision.

For example, did it catalyze new opportunities? Does it serve as a proof of concept for increasing a project's scope? Can the work that went into the accomplishment serve as a positive model for future work?

Consider these additional suggestions as you communicate a milestone:

- ► Include data that reinforces the milestone's significance. This evidence will be *confirming*.

- ► Acknowledge and thank by name the people and teams whose work delivered the accomplishment. This appreciation will demonstrate *caring*.

- ► Include a client or customer story that illustrates the impact of the achievement in human terms. This humanization will be *compelling*.

Honoring a Person

For a leader, honoring an individual involves more than simply ticking off a list of laudable accomplishments. It requires sharing the honoree's legacy—the continuing impact of their contribution to the brand, the work, the workplace, the field, or the industry.

The following are other important actions and communications leaders should consider:

▶ Curating the honoree's accomplishments ahead of time and picking only the most relevant and specific achievements. You're not there to tell the honoree's life story, only to explain the impact of their contribution to the company or cause.

▶ Calling out the honoree's personal qualities or competencies that played a significant role in producing those outcomes.

▶ Sharing personal stories or experiences you had with the person, even if minor. If you don't have direct personal experience, share someone else's experience as told to you.

▶ Delivering your comments directly to the honoree using second-person language ("you") versus third-person language ("he/she/they").

▶ Using concise notes in the form of prompts versus complete sentences. Brief notes will help sustain your authenticity and your eye contact.

Unveiling a New Policy or Strategic Direction

Sharing a new policy or strategic direction with the team may seem straightforward, but remember: your primary communication responsibility as a leader is not merely to inform them—which could probably be handled by various managers—but also to *inspire* them.

These inclusions will enhance that inspiration:

► The big picture view: What are the changes, who is affected, and when will they take effect?

► The "why": Why was this strategic decision made?

► Why you're excited and hopeful about this new direction and why the team should be too.

► Appreciation for the team's commitment and hard work.

► How and where the team can share feedback or ask questions about the new policy.

As you construct talking points, keep in mind that your team may prioritize the information differently than you do. If you're sharing a reorganization strategy, for example, they'll be more interested in the impact on their jobs than on the detailed business case for the change. Address those critical points early, and make sure to end with sentiments of hope and appreciation.

Communication is the most important skill
any leader can possess.

—Richard Branson

Conclusion: The Last Lesson

Leadership is an ongoing developmental journey, and so is leadership communication. Given the importance of personal improvement—and the constant room for it—my final piece of wisdom is this: learn.

Watch leaders you admire, and consider the decisions they're making in their communications that engage and inspire you. Write them down. Try them on.

Even better: After you deliver executive communications of any kind, convene a small meeting of trusted colleagues who received the message and ask them these questions:

- ► What big ideas did you take away?

- ► How relevant are those ideas to ongoing work or strategic planning?

- ► What impressions did I convey (like authority, genuineness, and confidence)?

► What did I do as a communicator to enhance or impede those impressions?

► Did I seem authentic or artificial? Where?

► Did you feel understood and appreciated?

The answers to these questions, used in conjunction with the recommendations in this book, should point you in the right direction and enable you to make necessary course corrections as you progress.

Remember: The Language of Leadership is your personal arsenal. Use it to *engage* your team, not educate them; to *inspire* your team, not impress them.

Use your language wisely, and it will enable you to lead with power and purpose every time you put pen to paper, finger to key, or voice to thought.

That's just what leaders do.

Recommended Reading

Becoming
By Michelle Obama
(Crown, 9781524763145, 2021)

Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us
By Daniel H. Pink
(Riverhead Books, 9781594484803, 2011)

*An Effort to Understand: Hearing One Another (And Ourselves)
in a Nation Cracked in Half*
By David Murray
(Disruption Books, 9781633310483, 2021)

The Elements of Style
By William Strunk Jr. and E. B. White
(Auroch Press, 9781989862001, 2020)

Flux: Superpowers for Thriving in Constant Change
By April Rinne
(Berrett-Koehler, 9781523093595, 2021)

Garner's Modern English Usage
By Bryan A. Garner
(Oxford University Press, 9780190491482, 2016)

Get to the Point! Sharpen Your Message and Make Your Words Matter
By Joel Schwartzberg
(Berrett-Koehler, 9781523094110, 2017)

Lean In: Women, Work, and the Will to Lead
By Sheryl Sandberg
(Knopf, 9780385349949, 2013)

Mindset: The New Psychology of Success
By Carol S. Dweck
(Ballantine Books, 9780345472328, 2007)

The Secret: What Great Leaders Know and Do
By Ken Blanchard and Mark Miller
(Berrett-Koehler, 9781576754030, 2007)

Speak with Impact: How to Command the Room and Influence Others
By Allison Shapira
(Amacom, 9780814439715, 2018)

Start with Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone to Take Action
By Simon Sinek
(Portfolio, 9781591846444, 2011)

Velocities: New and Selected Poems 1966–1992
By Stephen Dobyns
(Penguin Books, 9780140586510, 1994)

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Joel Schwartzberg teaches effective presentation and messaging techniques to corporate, group, and individual clients and is the author of the award-winning book *Get to the Point! Sharpen Your Message and Make Your Words Matter*. His broad range of clients includes American Express, Blue Cross Blue Shield, Blue Apron, Comedy Central, the American Jewish Committee, the Brennan Center for Justice, North Point Ministries, and the San Diego County Bar Association.

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Joel's articles on effective point-making appear in *Harvard Business Review*, *Fast Company*, *Toastmaster Magazine*, and Huff-Post, and his personal essays have been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *New York Daily News*, *New*

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As a public speaking collegiate competitor, Joel won the 1990 United States Championship in After-Dinner Speaking and the 1990 Massachusetts State Championship in Persuasive Speaking, and that year, he was ranked among the 10 top public speakers in the country. After coaching public speaking teams at colleges including the University of Pennsylvania and Seton Hall University, Joel was inducted into the National Forensic Association Hall of Fame.

A father of three, Joel lives in New Jersey with his wife and more rescued cats than you think.

Also by Joel Schwartzberg

Get to the Point!

Sharpen Your Message and Make Your Words Matter
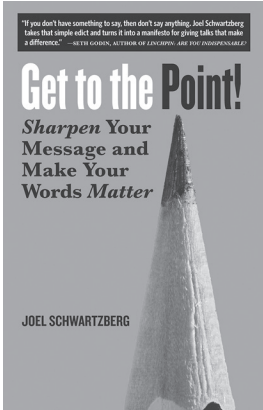
Every time you communicate, you're trying to do something, change something, or move someone to action. You're trying to make a point. But the only way to make a point is to have a point. Communications expert Joel Schwartzberg says a point is not just a topic, an idea, or a theme. A real point is a proposition of value. It's a contention you can propose, argue, illustrate, and prove. In this concise and practical book, you'll learn to identify your point, strengthen it, stick to it, and sell it. Whether you want to improve your impact in speeches, staff meetings, pitches, emails, PowerPoint presentations, or any other communication setting, Schwartzberg's novel approach teaches you how to go from simply sharing a thought to making a difference.

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Our publications span many formats, including print, digital, audio, and video. We also offer online resources, training, and gatherings. And we will continue expanding our products and services to advance our mission.

We believe that the solutions to the world's problems will come from all of us, working at all levels: in our society, in our organizations, and in our own lives. Our publications and resources offer pathways to creating a more just, equitable, and sustainable society. They help people make their organizations more humane, democratic, diverse, and effective (and we don't think there's any contradiction there). And they guide people in creating positive change in their own lives and aligning their personal practices with their aspirations for a better world.

And we strive to practice what we preach through what we call "The BK Way." At the core of this approach is *stewardship,* a deep sense of responsibility to administer the company for the benefit of all of our stakeholder groups, including authors, customers, employees, investors, service providers, sales partners, and the communities and environment around us. Everything we do is built around stewardship and our other core values of *quality, partnership, inclusion,* and *sustainability.*

This is why Berrett-Koehler is the first book publishing company to be both a B Corporation (a rigorous certification) and a benefit corporation (a for-profit legal status), which together require us to adhere to the highest standards for corporate, social, and environmental performance. And it is why we have instituted many pioneering practices (which you can learn about at www.bkconnection.com), including the Berrett-Koehler Constitution, the Bill of Rights and Responsibilities for BK Authors, and our unique Author Days.

We are grateful to our readers, authors, and other friends who are supporting our mission. We ask you to share with us examples of how BK publications and resources are making a difference in your lives, organizations, and communities at www.bkconnection.com/impact.

Dear reader,

Thank you for picking up this book and welcome to the worldwide BK community! You're joining a special group of people who have come together to create positive change in their lives, organizations, and communities.

What's BK all about?

Our mission is to connect people and ideas to create a world that works for all.

Why? Our communities, organizations, and lives get bogged down by old paradigms of self-interest, exclusion, hierarchy, and privilege. But we believe that can change. That's why we seek the leading experts on these challenges—and share their actionable ideas with you.

A welcome gift

To help you get started, we'd like to offer you a **free copy** of one of our bestselling ebooks:

www.bkconnection.com/welcome

When you claim your **free ebook**, you'll also be subscribed to our blog.

Our freshest insights

Access the best new tools and ideas for leaders at all levels on our blog at ideas.bkconnection.com.

Sincerely,

Your friends at Berrett-Koehler