**Communication APTitude for Leadership Success**

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**Historical Perspective**

A benefit of revisiting the field of organizational communication every two decades is that sufficient time has passed to permit a reasonable assessment of our impact on practice. Ideas take time to develop, and more time to make it into the public sphere, if they ever do. But against a backdrop of accelerating social change and changes to organizational life in general, two decades seems like more than a fair period for assessment.

The last twenty years have seen an explosion in publications, and new journals (including electronic and open access) and new handbooks have taken their place alongside older ones. Scholars have published increasingly sophisticated theories and conducted increasingly rigorous studies of organizational communication. On the plus side, tiresome academic debates that plagued the late twentieth century (e.g., communication vs. rhetoric; theory vs. application; quantitative vs, qualitative methods) have been either resolved or set aside in favor of a more inclusive approach that brings academics closer to practitioners and is welcoming to a broad range of theories and methods. And there is no denying that *individual* communication scholars have, through targeted outreach to practitioners, had a significant positive impact on a diverse range of organizations.

What is less clear to us is whether we have as an academic field had much sustained impact on organizational communication practice as a whole, or on organizational actors more generally. While we very much *wish* it were so, our experience suggests otherwise. On a regular basis we encounter bright, sometimes even brilliant leaders and employees who struggle to practice what we teach in even our most basic communication courses. We observe senior executives who assign complex communication challenges to individuals with no formal training in the field, reinforcing the notion that unlike Marketing or Accounting, for example, Communication is not a legitimate profession or field of study. Finally, and more broadly, we are deeply distressed at how far our country’s public discourse has slipped from anything our discipline might authorize or encourage. All in all, it seems that while we researchers may have indeed *learned* more about the nature of communication, its actual practice in the world has, at the same time, often gotten much worse.

We are hardly the first people to make this observation; there have been regular and consistent calls for communication research that is more responsive to grand social challenges. Over three decades ago, one of our most prominent scholars (G. R. Miller) made an impassioned plea for someone in the field to come up with a way to end the Iranian hostage crisis. We could make the same sort of appeal today: How can what we know make a difference in how people think and speak about human difference, potentially forestalling further violence and genocide? If our work is so powerful and consequential, why isn’t it regularly used in the public sphere? If the discipline of organizational communication had obvious value, the way the disciplines of medicine, engineering, and chemistry do, people interested in improving their organizations would have us on “speed dial” and people interested in (for example) strategically creating options for dismantling hate-based organizations would want and need our assistance. Why don’t they?

The argument that we make in this essay is that our efforts to translate and apply what we know about organizational communication have *focused disproportionately on advanced skills and neglected the fundamentals*. In so doing, we appear to be sending a message that the practitioners with whom we engage already have these basic skills, but all too often they do not. We believe that a return to these fundamentals will dramatically improve our ability to have a real positive impact on organizational communication practice.

**Otherwise intelligent people can be poor communicators**

One way to explain this gap between knowledge and practice begins with the observation that while humans are highly skillful in many domains, communication is not generally one of them; and that regardless of intelligence or experience we are *all* mostly beginners at human relationships.  If you need convincing on this point, pick up any biography of any accomplished leader to witness the relational carnage that typically accompanies their technical success. This gets especially frustrating for people who are bright and accustomed to figuring things out who find they do not have the same level of success in relating to others.

While intelligent people sense they *ought* to know how to communicate well, they struggle with it most of the time. In this respect, knowledge of “how to communicate effectively” falls into a unique category, more like nutrition or spiritual practice than grammar or math; success has less to do with conceptual understanding and more to do with committed, repeated practice. In this way, learning about communication is a little like learning about death; while we know it is inevitable, most of us resist learning too much about it and would prefer to just let it happen to us. Moreover, many organizations are all too willing to forgive and even enable poor communicators whom they perceive as contributing in other important ways.

We quite often observe poor communicators who at the same time feel confident and proud of their communication skills: An easy conclusion to reach when one has little interest in examining one’s impact on others. Circular reasoning and self-sealing rationalization can easily trump any effort to validate one’s skills. “I am always right because I believe I am always right. Any problems I have must therefore be other people’s fault.” We will make use of an extended real life example to illustrate the various points of our essay. Meet Dr. A:

*Dr. A is a well-regarded, board certified, and respected as an expert in his field of surgery. When he became frustrated during some of his operations he actually threw instruments across the room. He swore at his colleagues for not anticipating his every need, even if he had never worked with them before. Staffing his operating rooms proved increasingly difficult, since people were intimidated and afraid to work with him. Virtually anything that went wrong--from supplies, to anesthesia, to patient preparation, to test results--was always someone else’s fault. He entertained the belief that he was somehow perfect, and that no one was as smart as he. He believed that when he spoke, his words and meaning were clear. His technical knowledge and skill were extraordinary. Unfortunately, the sophistication of his communication skills remained at the level of a grammar school bully.*

*He was regularly frustrated that he had to suffer so many “incompetent fools” every day in order to do his work. His colleagues became so exasperated that many abandoned him. Nurses went home crying, professionals called out sick rather than work with him. Assembling a consistent operating room team for him became near impossible, which carried with it an increased risk of harm to patients. For the administration this was the last straw, and they ordered him to improve his communication skills. If he declined, he was told that he would be fired. He showed up for “help” kicking and screaming. After all, he had reasoned that the problem was not his, but everyone else’s. Up to that point, his extraordinary intelligence, status, and lack of self-knowledge enabled him to sleep well at night and to blame others for anything and everything that went wrong in his world.*

**Effective communication is a learned skill that is difficult to master**

Human communication is difficult.  But there are many different ways in which a thing can be difficult; hence we ought to be cautious about what we mean when we say this.  Something can be difficult to understand conceptually, or it can be hard to put into practice, or it can be challenging to sustain.  Like any other learned skill—like playing a musical instrument, scuba diving, cooking or mastering a sport like tennis—we may struggle in any or *all* of these ways.  Unfortunately, one of the greatest challenges to helping others improve their communication is their steadfast (and mistaken) belief that it is not a skill at all, but an innate ability.

For those who *are* willing to see communication as something to be learned, the improvement process is long and difficult and takes discipline and vigilance, not unlike weight loss or healthy eating.  Effective communication is hard, and part of what makes it especially hard is the fact that many people expect it to be easy. Returning to our case example:

*A common approach to helping Dr. A change his ways is to implement some kind of sophisticated feedback system, either based on temperament (like Myers-Briggs) or structured opportunities for input (e.g., 360 degree reviews). While the motivation in using these approaches is sound, their insistence on getting the challenged individual to learn a new vocabulary can be a problem. By not going at the problem directly, such interventions can add new language to the analysis, introduce previously unimagined variables in the physician’s performance, and substantially delay the benefits of a more timely intervention focused directly on the presenting behaviors. But in the end, it is our belief that these approaches ultimately fall short because they are too intellectual and abstract—they aim too high.*

We have come to the conclusion that we are aiming too high only after decades of communication consultation. For years we did what everyone else did, sharing sophisticated and complex insights, certain that others would appreciate them and be as impressed with our thinking as we were.  Yet time and again, we had the feeling that we had somehow confused intelligence with communication skill.  In reality, we find them to be only weakly correlated.

An experience teaching communication to medical students further reinforced this revelation. What determines their effectiveness as communicators is not any number of complex subjects such as sharing bad news or decision-making in teams. What really matters is the most basic of communication skills: When you meet a patient, do you look them in the eye and greet them, saying your name and role? Do you minimize physical and psychological distractions to allow yourself to become fully present, so that the patient could feel fully listened to? Instead of insisting on these fundamentals, we routinely collude with our intelligent students and clients by assuming that they have already mastered them. We turn our attention to more complex, interesting challenges, which while fascinating are no substitute for regularly performing the basics.

Eventually we concluded that a better approach would be to identify the most basic and simple distinctions possible, and to begin there.  In culinary school, the first course is focused wholly on how to hold the knife; until this skill is learned, a student is not permitted to progress in the curriculum.  The Suzuki method for learning the violin is similar in that until the student learns how to hold the instrument, nothing else can be taught. A renewed focus on the fundamentals in the practice of organizational development and in the teaching of organizational communication would very much strengthen the effectiveness of the field in shaping practice.

What makes matters even *more* challenging is that without direct exposure to best practice instruction, smart people will develop their own repertoire of what they believe will work for them. Golf and tennis pros experience this regularly, where the first priority is to help the student first understand and then unlearn all of their bad habits. In the realm of communication people at times *defend* their bad habits as if they were best practices, possibly because these behaviors are less visible. Deference is not typically accorded to communication “pros” even when an individual’s current behaviors are counter-productive or dangerous. A chef on a submarine once explained that his first responsibility was to teach his cooks to suppress their life-long reflex to catch something that falls off a counter. The chef said he had to teach his cooks to let the sharp knife fall to the floor—do not try to catch it if it slides off a counter. The results are never good.

Both of us spend a lot of time working with extremely intelligent, highly successful professionals. Both of us have spent time in conversation about complex communication dilemmas with these brilliant individuals, and it has been very stimulating for all parties.  *But in the end it doesn't help much because smart people talk a good game*.  Just as the key to infection control decades ago (and still today) was something as straightforward as hand washing, there is an analogous skill set in human communication.

**Revisiting the fundamentals**

Our frustration with leaders who were lacking basic communication skills led us to a renewed focus on the fundamentals, on creating a more solid foundation on which to build more advanced communication skills and practices. We have organized these foundational skills into three sets of behavior represented by the letters A, P and T. Successful leaders regularly do the following:

* **Ask** themselves honestly how they are already communicating
* **Pause** and consider their goals before communicating
* **Take steps** to solicit honest feedback about how their communication is perceived

In the remainder of this essay, we describe what each of these behaviors looks like in practice, explain why they are the fundamental building blocks of effective communication and leadership, show how a failure to do any of the three can be devastating for an individual and an organization, and propose that without close attention to these principles the organizational communication interventions around teams, culture, and organizational change are far less likely to succeed.

**Successful leaders honestly ask themselves how they are already communicating**

There is an ancient Greek aphorism—sometimes attributed to Plato—that maintains that all knowledge of the world begins with the ability for a person to “Know thyself.” Our efforts to identify the analogous basic “knife skills” lead us to this point. We confess that by not attending to whether and how people were taking an honest look at how they already communicate, we were seeking to build an elaborate penthouse apartment on a very shaky foundation.

Unfortunately, most communication theory, teaching, consulting and training assumes that its recipients both: (1) already understand the importance of communication to leadership success; and (2) have a clear picture of their own interpersonal strengths and weaknesses, talents and blind spots. N*othing could be farther from the truth*. In working with leaders, we often remind them that *if they are unaware of their weaknesses, they are likely the only ones who are.* The key to beginning the leadership journey is to conduct an honest self-assessment of one’s approach to communication and relationships, the goal of which is to gather information about what we don’t know about ourselves. By contrast, every exceptional leader is keenly aware of what they do poorly or don’t know; moreover, they purposefully surround themselves with others who do have that knowledge or perspective.

A willingness to get to know oneself better is the first and arguably the most important step on the leadership journey. Put differently, in order to grow, leaders must learn to empty their cup. "Empty your cup" is an old Chinese [Chan (Zen)](http://buddhism.about.com/od/chanandzenbuddhism/a/zen101.htm) saying that is occasionally featured up in western popular media. It is often attributed to a conversation between the scholar Tokusan (also called Te-shan Hsuan-chien, 782-865) and Zen Master [Ryutan](http://buddhism.about.com/b/2010/10/06/ryutan-blows-out-the-candle.htm) (Lung-t'an Ch'ung-hsin or Longtan Chongxin, 760-840).

*Scholar Tokusan, who was full of knowledge and opinions about the* [*dharma*](http://buddhism.about.com/od/basicbuddhistteachings/a/What-Is-Dharma-In-Buddhism.htm)*, came to Ryutan and asked about Zen. At one point Ryutan re-filled his guest's teacup, but did not stop pouring when the cup was full. Tea spilled out and ran over the table. "Stop! The cup is full!" said Tokusan.*

*"Exactly," said Master Ryutan. "You are like this cup; you are full of ideas. You come and ask for teaching, but your cup is full; I can't put anything in. Before I can teach you, you'll have to empty your cup."*

Emptying one’s cup is difficult, especially for people raised and educated in the Western Hemisphere, where individuality and rationality are favored over empathy and emotion. From a young age, children are taught to “stand up for” what they believe, so much so that Americans in particular almost inevitably translate any difference in perspective into a kind of opposition (i.e., I’m right, so you must be wrong). Even the word “discussion” comes from the same Latin root as “concussion” and political discourse today certainly lives up to that etymology. We live in what sociolinguist Deborah Tannen called an “argument culture” where constructive dialogue is rarely encouraged.

There is a deep reluctance on the part of most adults to look critically at their own worldview or to make themselves vulnerable to others’ perspectives. This difficulty is important because *self-knowledge and* *the ability to appreciate others’ points of view is the key leadership capability*. While a leader may be strong in every other way, if they struggle with understanding the perspectives of their peers, employees, or various stakeholders they will eventually fail. Getting out of and over oneself begins, however, with getting into oneself, by developing *a detailed understanding of one’s own perspective and world view.*

Emptying one’s cup means taking responsibility for the role *we* play in shaping all of our relationships. It requires us to do something that may at first seem difficult—to imagine how we appear to the other people in our life. How do the people closest to you describe you when you are not around? What do people feel are your greatest strengths, and where do they find you to be limited or just plain annoying? Chances are that you have rarely if ever asked yourself these kinds of questions, and with good reason—you may be scared of the answers. Ironically, however, while this kind of feedback can indeed be hard to hear, it is the key to growing and developing as a leader. Let us explain why this is so.

Human awareness is a complex thing. We are called upon to do so many different things each day that much of what we know gets placed into what has been called “practical” or “tacit” knowledge, information that allows us to behave competently without conscious awareness of how we are doing so. It is easy to see how this works with regards to breathing or circulating our blood; but it also applies to our morning routines and driving our cars; and can creep into many of our daily work activities (have you ever driven somewhere and upon arrival realize that you don’t remember anything about the trip?). According to psychologist Ellen Langer, much of the time we behave “mindlessly” in accordance with long-established patterns and tacit, unspoken knowledge. This is generally a good thing because it allows us to have rich, varied and complex lives that are not limited by our capacity for conscious self-awareness or choice.

Sometimes, however, practical knowledge can keep us stuck in patterns that are highly destructive or limiting. This happens because *unless and until* you bring a pattern into consciousness—i.e., translate it into what is sometimes called “discursive knowledge”—*you cannot change it*. This is why coming to know how you appear to others is so important; it takes knowledge about your behavior from the practical to the discursive realm, making it open to scrutiny and to change. This is similar to what we all appreciate to be true about family secrets, “sacred cows” or “elephants in the room;” so long as their existence remains unspoken, they retain their power and are likely to persist. Once seen and identified, the possibility for change appears.

One of the criticisms typically leveled at communication and other training programs is that while they do a good job of teaching new skills, they are not especially successful at helping participants transfer their newly acquired knowledge into their daily work environment. Our critique is not that the skills taught were not well transferred, but that the teaching itself actually focused on the *wrong things*, by failing to focus on *current patterns of interaction* and by tending towards focusing on more advanced skills. In summary, our first stop in improving organizational communication is to encourage people to take an honest look at how they already communicate. Real improvement requires that we enable the person(s) we are speaking with to become more honestly aware of how they are communicating. Self-awareness is a prerequisite for change and learning.

 Renowned family therapist John Bradshaw reveals a similar insight in his description of an angry Houston driver looking for a parking space at a shopping mall during the holidays. This driver became frustrated and belittled another driver he saw who was relaxed, smiling at other cars, and waving people ahead of her. Meanwhile, he became increasingly angry at all of the other drivers who would not stop to make a space for him. But it never occurred to him that by scowling and cursing he was in fact *creating* the very negative reactions that he was so quick to attribute to others’ ill intent.

A second case example experienced by one of us (Sean) further illustrates how unaware otherwise brilliant individuals can be of their communication. A senior executive in a large engineering company was sent to me to help assess and address communication problems. His organization’s Board informed his boss that they did not wish to renew his contract at the end of the year. Seeking to get to know him better, I began by asking him to talk about what he enjoys about his work—the easy parts and the hard parts. I invited him to ask questions about how we conduct our work. I explained that I had no interest in second hand stories or his speculation about what may have caused his perceived problems with the board or employees—I only wanted to get to know him. This was our focus for about 30 minutes.

After this time, I had a list of observations about how he communicated with me, the most glaring of which were finger pointing and locking eye contact—he never looked away during the first half hour of our meeting. He replied that he was unaware of his finger pointing but fully aware of his focused eye contact. I asked how he learned to focus so intently at other people’s eyes. He, a 54 year old civil engineer, said “When I was young my parents taught me that it was rude to not make eye contact when speaking to others.” While he was aware of his focused eye contact I speculated he was unaware of the impact of this behavior on others. For the next 15 minutes I looked right into his eyes, never breaking eye contact, almost never blinking. Essentially, I mirrored his behavior in order to increase his awareness. After this exercise he described me as being intimidating, aggressive, and even hostile, even though he knew I was just experimenting by showing him what he had been doing to me. He cried. He reported feelings of embarrassment, guilt, and regret. He expressed anxiety about other things he said his parents had taught him. To raise the bar on the personal pain he felt I provided him with information about the effects of eye contact on people from cultures different from his. He had spent most of his life practicing an offensive interpersonal behavior believing he was a great communicator. He similarly became self-aware of his finger pointing.

During our second meeting he practiced softening his glance, looking away to give people some space, varying the intensity of his eye contact, and learning to use words in his conversation that were more provisional, curious, and respectful. We literally practiced modulating his eye contact and gestures for one hour. This was our last meeting. Five months later he contacted me to let me know that the board unanimously extended his contract another two years. In this and countless other examples, taking an honest look at how someone is communicating is the best place to start.

There are two questions that we routinely ask of leaders when they first request our help in promoting positive change in their organizations. The first has to do with changing a dysfunctional corporate culture. When asked how we might help to create a more positive culture, we turn the question around and offer this observation: It appears that you and your employees come to work every day and continue to re-create the dysfunctional culture. This prompts people to look more closely at the role they play in creating and sustaining the status quo (whether they claim to like it or not).

The second question has to do with how leaders listen. Building on the work of Landmark Education, we challenge leaders to answer the question “How are you already always listening?” which at first seems like an odd turn of a phrase. What we are trying to do here is get at leader’s listening stance before they even know who is speaking or what that person is planning to speak about! After some confusion and resistance (typically in the form of “I listen differently in every situation,” which is rarely true) there is often a growing awareness of personal listening patterns such as “I listen to solve problems” or “I listen to protect myself politically.” Once again, simply becoming aware of one’s typical listening stance brings it into the discursive realm, making it available for change.

When people are selected for leadership roles, it is because they have been successful in some aspect of their work. They are understandably motivated to repeat this success as a leader, which often leads to defensiveness and tunnel vision, plus a tendency to see all challenges as external to themselves. In struggling to implement a new project, they may fault others for being uncooperative. In receiving decreased investments from their companies or agencies, they may fault more senior leadership for not understanding and/or supporting the value of what they bring to the table. While both of these things could certainly be true, they are also easier to entertain, and tend to crowd out a very different kind of question: “What am *I* doing to contribute to the current predicament, and what might I do differently?”

The bias toward not taking responsibility for one’s communication as a leader is widespread. Some time ago we worked with a former engineer who had risen to the top job at a major defense contractor. In recent months they had received increased complaints from customers about quality; his response was to develop a quality communication campaign complete with a new slogan, posters, buttons, and the Blue Angels flying over the plant dropping leaflets that said “Satisfy the customer with first time quality.” Weeks later, the quality situation had not improved, and the general manager was perplexed—he had told the employees what to do, why hadn’t they listened? What did not enter his mind was the question: “Was this the best way to engage my employees in delivering quality? Might I have taken a different approach that could have been more effective?”

Contrast this reaction with the approach taken recently by a VP of Strategy in a large health system. In a particularly emotional meeting, a number of people on the team were expressing their concerns about members saying negative things about colleagues on the team to others in the organization. This VP sat quietly and listened for a long time, until finally the CEO asked her what she was thinking. She said that she was listening very hard as a means for reflecting on her own behavior outside of meetings, to determine whether any of her communicative choices could have been seen as undermining to her teammates. She added further that she *had* said some things to her direct reports in the spirit of open communication that may have been inappropriate, and pledged to correct these practices in the future.

This type of response is the gold standard of communication, but it is exceedingly rare. More often, we see executives who blame their employees for not performing, when the real problem is that they themselves did not set clear direction and expectations, or did not hold people accountable for their performance. Similarly, when a business leader tells her directors and managers what they need to do and later discover that the employees are not following their direction, they often send their leaders to leadership development programs to learn to listen better; order their directors to create more accountability in their respective areas; and complain that the recruitment department is failing to hire capable employees. Rarely do we hear the leader say, “I wonder if there is something in the way that I am communicating my priorities that is making my communication less effective than it could be.” In his powerful book “The flight of the buffalo: Confessions of a recovering autocrat,” James D’Alessandro traces his personal transformation as a leader to one powerful insight—that by telling people what to do, he was depriving his employees of the opportunity to learn and to grow. With that recognition in mind, it became obvious to him both why and how he needed to change his communication as a leader.

**Successful leaders pause and consider their goals before communicating**

While both of us are familiar with the dangers of what used to be called “flaming” on less rich media such as email, we were not prepared for how the explosion of social media would reveal a widespread inability to simply pause before we communicate. Just as self-awareness can lead a communicator to reflect on their motives for acting in a particular way, a willingness to stop and consider what one can reasonably expect to happen as a result of one’s communicative choices can be revelatory. In the academic world, we are often surprised at otherwise brilliant scholars who send devastating emails (or make devastating comments in public meetings) who are seemingly unaware of the potential consequences of their speech. In working with Department Chairs, one of your authors (Eric) often responds to a plan to send a strong email with the question: “What do you expect to happen as a result?” What is most surprising about the responses he gets to that question is that the majority had *never even thought about it*.

Successful leaders are not impulsive but instead strategic in their communication; it is a sign of greater emotional intelligence to not react from one’s amygdala response but instead to pause and consider what one is trying to accomplish with the communication and how it will likely be received. Once again, this seems very basic to rhetoric and communication scholars, but the fact of the matter is that it is not common practice in organizations. It is perhaps no accident that the first chapter in Steven Sample’s excellent book about the college presidency is entitled “Do Nothing.” Once one becomes aware of the possible impact of one’s communication, remaining silent is very often the best choice.

At times the ability to pause and consider one’s goals is mainly a matter of timing. We worked with the regional president of an insurance company who was extremely bright (he had risen quickly in the company because he was known to be a “quick study.”) Whenever his senior team was discussing a problem, he was always among the first to come up with a plausible solution. When he offered his opinion too quickly, however, it shut down interaction and fostered a culture of compliance. Working together, he developed the discipline to “wait 10 minutes” to weigh in (since one of his goals was to get more interaction and to develop his direct report’s problem-solving ability). The results shocked and pleased him—almost every bright idea he had come up with individually was eventually raised by someone else in the group, and having been raised by someone other than the President fostered greater ownership and engagement.

To continue with our physician example:

*The intervention used for Dr. A involved an initial interview during which higher level abstractions and generalizations were discouraged. “I am an effective communicator.” was identified as unacceptable speech by the coach. Acceptable speech was concrete, behaviorally descriptive, and verifiable statements such as: “When I ask the nurse for a specific instrument during a surgical procedure and she does not give it to me immediately I raise my voice and shout that she is incompetent and demand she be replaced. I continue yelling about her stupidity until she is relieved.”*

*Once this surgeon became able to be descriptive, we pointed out that communication was a means to an ends, a vehicle for accomplishing goals. For this specific physician, a breakthrough came when the coach pointed out that the physician had a choice—his goal can be to provide the best care for the patient (in which case he needs everyone on the team) or his goal can be to get rid of the nurse who, incidentally, could not provide him with an instrument that he had not initially requested be part of his set up equipment/supplies—it was not even there.*

*As Dr. A began to conceptually understand the value of improved communication the coach’s third strategy was to use a mirror technique to clearly show him his own contributions to problems on which he had previously blamed others. Accepting his contributions to poor communication outcomes motivated him to learn other ways of expressing himself. Specifically, rather than scream at nurses for being idiots he realized the value of stating “I need an abc tool.” To which the nurse replied “there is none in the supplies, I can get you one in 3-4 minutes.”*

*In approximately two hours of work, this surgeon realized his words had an impact on others that compromised his own ability to be successful in the operating room. He learned he had to change his behavior, and he did—with his colleagues, his wife, and his children. Dr. A. had never been given the opportunity to study communication. He was not a disruptive physician, a hostile leader, an arrogant surgeon, a condescending fool, or emotionally immature. He was simply a highly skilled professional who was highly unskilled in the most basic of interpersonal communication principles.*

**Successful leaders take steps to solicit honest feedback about how their communication is perceived**

While feedback has been described by Ken Blanchard as the “breakfast of champions,” it seems to us that many leaders these days are skipping their morning meal. We admit that in our own work, as young professionals we were more enthusiastic about soliciting honest feedback about how we were doing than we are today; over time the demands of work and the time and discipline it takes to seek honest feedback can be daunting. That said, *great leaders take the time to do it*. They work with their calendars to create regular, structured opportunities for open, unguarded, unscripted talk with a wide range of employees. It is highly predictable that employees know the difference between a conversation and a photo-op, and they will be most hesitant to tell anything close to the truth unless they sense a caring commitment and a genuine willingness to listen.

The reason that feedback is so important to leadership is that it is the best way for a leader to learn about the organization and about how his or her actions are affecting others. Many leaders are afraid to hear the truth and create multiple barriers to feedback. Many who wish to give the appearance of openness are simply going through the motions; we remember the General Manager of a utility in California who declared that he had an “open door policy” then immediately followed up with “but you had better have a darn good reason if you come to see me.” Employees are brilliant and separating the empty managerial rhetoric from the real attitudes and feelings held by their leaders.

It is critical to get as close to an honest conversation as possible. Employee feedback, when observed and validated via perception checking/paraphrasing, constitutes useful information to gauge one’s success in accomplishing communicative goals. When not observed and validated, the speaker, like the surgeon in our first example, can choose to interpret others’ responses as a confirmation of his effectiveness. A supervisor, as another example, can believe she is coming across as challenging an employee to pursue higher standards, better budget performance, or superior quality. The way this is being done could stimulate the employee to feel challenged. It is also possible that rather than feeling challenged the employee might feel reprimanded, criticized, and insulted. The result of such a conversation could stimulate a very good employee to feel devalued and begin looking for a better job elsewhere. In this way, failing to be attentive to feedback in the moment is like consistently cutting through a bagel all the way through in your hand. Eventually and invariably, the bagel cutter will end up in the ER seeking medical attention for a cut hand. Even then, they may blame a dull knife or a hundred other factors rather than examine the role of their own behavior in causing the injury.

A director of a business unit with 45 employees was experiencing problems getting her own work done—when promoted she was told she needed to have an open door policy with her employees. For this director it was not working. When someone knocked on her door, she always placed that person’s needs above her own. There were many people with many needs. When invited to consult to her to help her be more assertive we learned about this open door policy and suggested she be honest when employees interrupted her, we suggested she let them know that she was working on a high priority assignment and regretted she could not be interrupted. The technique was so successful, this became her response to every interruption. In this specific example, we failed to appreciate that she would be unable to modulate her responses based upon her situation, or the people interrupting her. By following our recommendation as a rigid script rather than as a guideline she revealed she had not yet figured out how to observe others’ responses and incorporate those responses in every interaction to maximize overall effectiveness. In a subsequent coaching session, we asked her specifically if she noticed others reactions to her when she said she was too busy. When she observed that she had not done so, we suggested that she begin asking each interrupting employee for the reasons for their request. As a leader, this gave her the opportunity to gauge the priority of their needs relative to hers. Once she had this information, she found herself able to develop a more conscious, deliberate, and differentiated communicative response strategy to employee interruptions.

Our call to focus on the basics echoes a wide range of voices across organizational studies theory and practice. Writers as diverse as Bennis, Blanchard, Covey and Senge have all suggested that leadership development starts with an awareness of one’s own patterns of thought and action, and continues along a journey of self-mastery. It makes good sense that leaders’ communication practices could also improve by following the same trajectory.

We believe that the discipline of organizational communication com is poised to benefit from the opportunity to give more attention to these three fundamentals. When the fundamentals are not present the sustainability of our work is significantly comprised. This focus on fundamentals if adopted and further researched in our discipline will make our work more real, viable and impactful in the world.