

# How Managers and Leaders Can Improve Communication Skills

**O**rganizations depend on competent leadership to grow, prosper and survive. Typically, communication in the workplace will mimic and follow the communication style of the leaders. Therefore, it's critical any organization explore how their managers' and leaders' communication skills impact the overall communication practices in the workplace.

Do you need to improve communication skills?

Ignoring the impact of communication can have severe negative consequences, including a less productive workforce, unhappy employees, and unhappy clients, guests, or customers. Conversely, embracing this fact can lead to increases in employee commitment, innovation, and loyalty on all fronts.

Understanding the difference is why having a strong understanding of what leaders are, the roles they play, and how their communication practices impact others is crucial.

## Leadership Types

The word "leadership" conjures up many different thoughts, feeling, and images. Stereotypically, you might see strong willed individuals who demand the best from those working alongside and under them.

This image might include someone whose communication

style is straightforward, assertive, and unyielding. Picture the finger-pointing individual who demands and directs people to do as they desire; the "Do as I say" person.

An alternative image may be of someone who takes on more of a guidance counselor role, with a more inquisitive communication style that seeks to gain as much information as possible before determining the best course of action.

This person may ask many questions, listen attentively, and interact in a manner that gently draws information from the people around them.

There is no absolute right or wrong here, but **leaders who recognize and understand how their communication practices both positively and negatively impact the people around them have a much higher probability of success than those who do not.**

## Why Effective Communication Matters

The Three Pillars of Effective Communication are the keys to having effective communication in the workplace. Developing high degrees of trust, positive emotions, and being perceived as reasonable are the keys to communication success.

There is no place this has a greater impact than with leaders and managers.

Research on leadership communication by Deborah Barrett of Rice University states, "As the manager's perspective and control expand, he or she will need to improve the core communication skills to become effective in the larger, more complex organizational situations."

Two notable pieces of research identified by Catrin Johansson, Vernon Miller, and Solange Hamrin state, "Leaders provide employees with a sense of purpose, direction, and identity," and "Individuals perceived as effective leaders enact sets of communicatively competent behaviours (sic) that are consistent and appropriate to their settings."

With this in mind, the question becomes: *what communication approaches work best for leaders and managers?*

To answer that, we must look in the direction of communication competence.

### **Improve Communication Skills for Competence**

Communication competence occurs when both parties are satisfied with *how* the message is presented, not necessarily the content of the message itself, according to Dr. Brian Spitzer, Senate Distinguished Professor of Communication at San Diego State University.

In other words, competent communication occurs when both the sender and receiver of a message *feel* good about how the message was transmitted, even if one of the parties is not happy with the actual content of the message.

For example, if you had to tell an employee they were being laid off, you know they'd be upset because they are losing their job. Being a competent communicator, you would consider that information, and this would allow you to deliver the message in such a way they're not personally upset at you because you relayed the news in an accepting way.

### **Communication competence is challenging and demands forethought, empathy, and effort.**

Managers and leaders are not immune to having insufficient communication repertoire that inhibits their communication competence. Most people aren't taught how to be competent communicators.

In the case of managers and leaders, whatever communication skills they do possess have allowed them to advance to their current position. At the same time, we don't want to run into a communication Peter Principle, so to speak, where one rises to their highest level of communication incompetence.

There's always room to improve communication skills and practices, so it becomes a matter of:

- identifying what skills are solidly in place
- what skills need further development
- what about current communication methods may be producing undesired and unintended negative consequences

### **Positive Impact of Competent Communication**

Competent communication practices have a significant positive impact on an organization. Consider the jobs you found unsatisfying because those above you were communicating in a manner you found off-putting, pedantic, or callous.

*How did this impact your desire to work harder? To be more committed? To bring your best each day?*

In research conducted by John Trombetta (Bryant and Stratton Business Institute) and Donald Rogers (Rollins College), they note, "we can argue that participation in decision making, communication openness, and information adequacy are antecedents of organizational commitment and can be used as predictors of organizational commitment."

With less turnover, decreased friction, and greater buy-in, organizations that develop competent communication among their managers and leaders are at a competitive advantage.

Also, those with higher degrees of communication competence possess a greater ability to empathize with the people around them and develop more situational awareness. This is because competence requires empathy, emotional intelligence, and perspective taking to best predict how others may perceive our communication.

This perspective-taking ability allows leaders and managers to have a great understanding of their workforce. This helps them make better decisions that are in everyone's best interest, which helps create a more efficient and effective organization.

No matter the type of manager or leader, from the more authoritarian to the most collaborative, possessing wide-ranging communication skills will allow them to relate better to their colleagues and subordinates. Strengthening these relationships is the key to increasing organizational success.

Investing resources towards improving communication skills with a goal of communication competence is a logical next step in developing stronger managers and leaders for any organization.