

# Executive Excellence

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## Leadership Communication in Ten Easy Steps

Effective communication is the life blood of an organization. If you asked the average employee or executive to grade communications in their company they would say it was average or below average.

When I was a U.S. Marine, we circulated the following humorous spoof of top down communication:

The General issued the following directive to one of his Colonels:

Tomorrow evening, at approximately 2000 hours, Halley's Comet will be visible in this area; an event which occurs only once every 75 years. Have the men fallout on the parade ground in dungarees, and I will explain this rare phenomenon to them. In case of rain, we will not be able to see the comet, so assemble the men in the theater and I will show them films on it.

The Colonel to Lt. Colonel:

By order of the commanding general, tomorrow at 2000 hours Halley's Comet will appear above the parade ground. If it rains, fall the men out in dungarees, then march to the theater where the rare phenomenon will take place; something which occurs once every 75 years.

Lt. Colonel to Captain:

By order of the commanding general in dungarees at 2000 hours tomorrow evening, the phenomenal Halley's Comet will appear in the theater. In case of rain on the parade ground, the general will give another order, something which occurs once every 75 years.

Captain to Lieutenant:

Tomorrow at 2000 hours, the commanding general will appear in the theater with Halley's Comet, something which happens every 75 years. If it rains, the general will order the comet onto the parade ground.

Lieutenant to Platoon sergeant:

When it rains tomorrow at 2000 hours, the phenomenal 75-year-old General Halley, accompanied by the commanding general, will drive his Comet across the parade ground to the theater in dungarees.

Platoon sergeant to Corporal:

The commanding general will be dressed in dungarees and driving a 75-year-old Comet across the parade ground in the rain tomorrow at 2000 hours on his way to the theater. Fall out to see this phenomenal event.

Corporal to his Privates:

Stand in the rain at 2000 hours tomorrow and watch a Comet go across the parade ground; then into the theater for a phenomenal 75 years.

Privates to boot:

2000 Comets will start raining down on the parade ground tomorrow so go in the theater because it will last for a phenomenal 75 years.

Boot in letter home:

Comets will start falling here tomorrow and the theater is the only place that will afford protection from this phenomenon.

While the account above is fictional, similar scenarios seem to exist in many of our client companies. Studies show typical top down communication degrades rather quickly:

President	100%
Vice President	67%
General Manager	56%
Department Manager	40%
First Line Supervisor	30%
Employee	20%

Not quite as bad as my Marine Corps days, but it shows "filters" at each level reduce the amount of communication that gets to the rank and file by 80 percent. This isn't news to anyone who's worked in a medium or large company, but it points out how much harder one has to work to improve communication.

Today, we find ourselves drowning in data and information but starved for real communication. Following are ten principles of leadership communication that will put you at the head of the class.

1. **Actions speak louder than words.** Example is the most powerful communication tool you have, bar none. Research shows that *over 75 percent of communication is nonverbal*. You can't choose if you set an example, but you can choose what kind of example you set.
2. **"Get the water to the end of the row."** As the examples above illustrate, there is a significant message dilution as it travels through the ranks. Getting the full message to every employee ("the water to end of the row") is vital to organizational success. Equally important is getting unfiltered communication coming up through the organization, and it is the leader's job to make sure no one blocks the upward flow.
3. **Apply the Golden Rule to communication.** Communicate with your employees the way you want to be communicated with—communicate in a *timely, respectful and open* way. Say what you mean and mean

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what you say, and expect everyone else to do the same. Set the example and employees will follow.

4. **Stand for something.** When you and your organization stand on principles or core values it's easier to have consistent communication. Just be sure they are real, clear, make sense and easy to remember. They should be inspiring, differentiate your organization and stand the test of time.
5. **Communicate courageously.** People know when you're open and honest. They also know when you are doing the management "two-step." There will be times when you will make mistakes or don't have the answer.  
*Admit it quickly, apologize, and briefly tell them what you're doing to fix it.* Your employees will respect the courage it takes to be accountable.
6. **Good communication is the best investment.** In the absence of good communication, the grapevine and rumor mill takes over. The fruit of the grapevine is "whine," and it drains good will from you and valuable productivity, and commitment to your organization.
7. **If it looks important, it must be important.** How you package your communication has a big impact on perceptions of the message. It's been said that the media is the message so match the quality of the presentation with the level of importance. Employees always notice if the communication they receive is a watered down version of what their bosses received.
8. **Open up a true dialogue.** Communication is a two-way process. Have a number of communication channels and do something with what you hear.  
  
There will be times when you can't communicate because of regulations or laws; explain why you can't communicate and when you expect the situation to change.  
  
Simply put, if you're asked a question the best way answer is:
  - Yes, I know the answer and it is....
  - No, I don't know the answer, but I will get back to you on it (note: make sure someone is capturing the question and you do get back to the group on the issues).
  - I know the answer, but we haven't completed our decision making process and it will probably change. I will let you know as soon as it has been finalized.
9. **Know your audience.** Take a lesson from the Madison Avenue—know the demographics and profile of your various audiences and tailor communication messages,

content, style, and channels to them. Remember, one size does not fit all.

10. **Differentiate "Information" and "Communication"** – Both words end with *tion*, but there's a big difference between them. People are bombarded with information from their computers, email, voice mail, cell phones, white papers, closed circuit television, PA systems, etc., but they're starved for meaningful communication. Communication influences thoughts, feelings, and actions while information simply conveys facts. When it comes to keeping the channel open try **the 80/20 rule** – 80% communication and 20% information.

Yes, in the final analysis, successful communication comes down to you, and preparation, practice and the desire to reach out to your organization are a good start.

We coach executives to lighten-up when they communicate with employees. Many executive presentation training programs advise a formal approach, i.e., wear your best blue suit, white or blue shirt and conservative tie, and deliver a warm, but formal message. This is good advice in many settings, but when it comes to changing organizations your employees need to see you as a regular person, not an executive.

One of our clients, the Chairman and CEO of a 90,000 employee company, was preparing to film an "all company" video message. His handlers insisted on a scripted, white shirt, blue suit behind the desk approach. After the first few takes, we asked if he could remove his coat, sit on the corner of his desk and speak from the heart. A couple of takes later, he chose the less-formal version, and we used the video with his employees as a kick-off to our leadership sessions. The impact was immediate and powerful. We heard people say, "Now, that's a guy I can follow," and words to that effect.

We've found that when executives connect with people, change is much easier. In the end, effective communications is about being yourself. ☺

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John Brady is founder of John Brady & Associates, a consulting firm specializing proven, powerful leadership and performance improvement solutions. John came to consulting after over twenty years as a senior executive in Fortune 500 companies, and has been a close, trusted advisor and coach to top executives in major corporations internationally for two decades. Brady holds an MBA in organizational systems development and a PhD in organizational psychology. According to one client, "Brady is the Yoda of organizational change."