

# Cynicism Rx:

## Authentic Communication

Are mistrust and hidden agendas subverting your messages? Use these keys to make your words matter.

By Elaine Crowley

Cynicism is the most dangerous disease facing organizations today. The nonprofit world has struggled with increasing challenges and decreasing resources for so long that its employees already work under considerable stress. Concerns about the veracity of what they're told increase that pressure.

Cynicism thrives when employees perceive there's a gap, intentional or not, between what leaders say and what they do. Fueled by off-hand remarks, unkept promises, evasions, and hidden agendas, cynicism depletes trust.

Authentic communication can serve as both vaccine and antidote. Matching thoughts and actions can neutralize the damage. Although it sounds easy, communicating authentically can be challenging and even scary. Moving from casual socializing to authentic communication calls for self-awareness and strong relationships.

Everyone is capable of building the muscle memory necessary to practice authentic communication. The return from doing so is two-fold: increased integrity for the speaker and higher morale among colleagues.

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### Clear Intentions vs. Hidden Agendas

One of the biggest enemies of honest communication is the hidden agenda. We use hidden agendas unconsciously when we hope to deflect rejection or embarrassment by creating a desired impression. Hidden agendas attempt to mask our fear of losing control, being found out, or getting an undesirable outcome. They are

unintended defensive messages, the face we put on to show others.

Hidden agendas create resentment, foster cynicism, and demotivate others. What makes them especially insidious is that you may not even be aware of them. To gain an insight into your own agendas, see "Hidden Agendas and their Antidotes" on page 16.

To avoid hidden agendas and communicate authentically, you may need to increase your self-awareness with a clearer picture of what you're thinking and feeling. You need to risk saying aloud what's really going on for you.

Naming what you're feeling is powerful. Many public speakers report that their stage fright disappears when they admit to the audience, "I still get nervous with a new audience, even after all these years."

Empathy can also defuse your need to use a hidden agenda.

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## Hidden Agendas and their Antidotes

■ **The “I’m so great” agenda.** People with this hidden agenda are always the heroes of their own stories. Overusing this message distances you from others, bores listeners, damages trust, and invites a defensive response.

■ **The “You’re so great; I’m not” agenda.** Someone who needs an ally and doesn’t know how to make one might say, for example, “You really can get your ideas across in meetings, but no one takes me seriously.” The trouble is that people begin to believe the negative propaganda, and accomplishments go unrecognized.

■ **Victim agendas such as “I’m helpless; I’m blameless; I’m fragile.”** People with these hidden agendas alienate others by making connections based on negative energy. “Please don’t upset me. I’ve had a horrible day” sends a mixed message: I want to hear what you say, but nothing difficult.

■ **The “I’m so busy/harried/important” agenda.** The secondary message people send with this agenda is that they can’t take on anything else, so don’t count on them.

■ **The “I know it all” agenda.** Insecure managers often fall back on this agenda, which quickly erodes morale. As others learn they won’t be heard and their input won’t be appreciated, they care less about the work. Since there’s little in it for them, they avoid getting too close; the resulting relationship is hollow.

Discover your hidden agendas by keeping track of your stories and remarks for a day or two. List them on a card and make a check each time you use one. Record the name of the person with whom you used the agenda and how much of what you said was influenced by those agendas. For example, one manager found that 60% of his communication with his boss was a mixture of “I’m so great” and “I’m blameless.” “I know it all” was present in 30% of his conversations with colleagues and 80% of those with his staff. This manager began to understand how his inauthentic communication was damaging his relationships and demotivating his team.

Once you identify the agendas you rely on, you can consciously shift to a new way of looking at things. Remind yourself, for instance, that you have both strengths and weaknesses, that nobody’s perfect, and that you can earn respect with your strengths and abilities without making excuses. Use these new points of view as reminders in situations that typically elicit your hidden agendas.

When facing a difficult discussion, for example, build trust by beginning, “I believe this is a challenging situation for both of us.”

### What Is Authentic Communication?

Compare the impact of these two conversations:

**Conversation A:** “Hey, Dan, you need to do a better job of getting a lower price. I want you to check with three competitors and let me know what you find out. Fast!”

**Conversation B:** “Dan, is this a good time for us to talk about one aspect of your work? Overall, your project is proceeding well. My goal is to get your agreement to look at alternate suppliers. Would you look into ABC’s competitors to see if they can meet our specs at a lower cost, and let me know what you find out? Who else would you look at? . . . OK, so you agree it’s worth checking with those three companies, and we’ll meet

Thursday at 3:00 to look at your results. Thanks for agreeing to take this on. I appreciate it, and I think you can save us a lot of money.”

### Surveys report a high correlation between trust and employee motivation.

If you were Dan, would you prefer to be on the listening end of A or B? Which conversation would motivate you more?

The second conversation has more motivational impact because the speaker is using authentic communication. Such discourse is a powerful way of signaling respect to others.

With authentic communication, you pay attention to all aspects of the messages you send, focus on the other person, and check into how your messages are received. You clarify your intentions via accurate, complete information, delivering the message in a way the other can fully understand.

### Seven Steps to Authentic Communication

Follow these steps to be sure you’re authentic in all your communications:

**1. Before speaking, clarify** in your own mind what you intend to accomplish as a result of the conversation.

**2. Be sure you understand** how you and your conversational partner will both benefit from the discussion.

**3. Start the conversation** by stating your intention and getting your partner’s agreement to communicate.

**4. Notice** how your message is being perceived.

**5. At the end of the conversation, verify** that your message has been understood.

**6. Tell** your conversational partner whether you consider the dialogue a success, and arrange next steps.

**7. Express** appreciation for the other’s participation.

## Trust & Motivation

National surveys conducted over the past 10 years by Gallup, Linkage, and others consistently report a high correlation between trust and employee motivation. Trust breaks down when we disappoint or damage another. Often, the gap between what we expect and what we get comes from a communication breakdown. The injured person withdraws, limiting contact and creating a climate ripe for additional misunderstandings and further withdrawal. As more examples of “untrustworthiness” mount up, trust deteriorates rapidly.

When people think we’re being evasive or posturing, they become guarded, and trust erodes. Consider the manager who realized that her desire to make a good impression led her to regularly over-promise and under-deliver. Increasingly strained relationships with colleagues caused her to blame others for missed deadlines and incomplete work. She worried that admitting she’d messed up would make things worse. She let her stress spill over onto her staff, whose morale and productivity dropped. Recognizing that others were unhappy with her work, she began spending as little time with them as possible. Their frustration with her led to even greater isolation.

Trust can be rebuilt, with time and hard work. This woman used authentic communication to replenish her credibility and integrity. After reviewing how she had been working, she asked key stakeholders, “What would you like to see me do differently?” By building timelines that anticipated delays and using history to predict how long her work would take to complete, she was able to set more realistic goals. She then increased communication with others, especially those whose input she needed to do her work. She generated a weekly progress report to stakeholders and made sure it came out reliably.

Perhaps the hardest part was acknowledging to her coworkers and staff the gaps she’d created in

the past. Then, she assumed responsibility for new gaps as they occurred. Rather than making assumptions, she asked questions to clarify people’s expectations. Finally, she overcame her discomfort and reached out to colleagues, spending time with them, getting to know them, and letting them get to know her.

After months of fulfilling her commitments and communicating openly, relationships with her colleagues began to improve. Slowly but surely, trust was rebuilt.

## The Golden Rule

At its best, authentic communication becomes a practice. By building the required skills and trusting the value of the process, you can make authentic communication your daily way of being with other people. Like anything worth doing well, communicating authentically requires effort and the commitment to make the change. After discovering your patterns, you need to set specific goals, as well as a deadline. Then keep raising the bar with more challenging goals over time. Very simply, apply a variation of the Golden Rule: Communicate with others as you would have others communicate with you.

Communicating authentically can feel risky. But when you make

a genuine commitment to it, and work to develop the practice, and when you overcome your fear and choose to trust, the rewards can be surprising, productive, and liberating. ■

## More Communication Secrets

These articles from previous issues of *Nonprofit World* (available at [www.snpo.org/members](http://www.snpo.org/members)) will help you get your messages across and improve communication throughout your organization:

- **Top 10 Keys to Effective Communication** (Vol. 15, No. 4)
- **How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate?** (Vol. 13, No. 1)
- **Face to Face: The Only Way to Make a Real Impact** (Vol. 14, No. 1)
- **11 Communication Keys that Will Change the Way You Lead** (Vol. 14, No. 2)

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