



Red, Yellow, or Green: Which Kind of Leader Are You?

New research highlights the need for better communication strategies – and ways to improve.

BY Jimmie Flores, Ruby Rouse, & Richard Schuttler

A study into leaders' communication skills provides a wake-up call for nonprofit leaders.¹ When compared with leaders in business, manufacturing, and government, nonprofit supervisors were rated the worst by survey participants. A shocking 51% of nonprofit employees described their leaders' communication as "poor" (see Figure 1).

The study used a stoplight metaphor to describe three types of leaders.

Stoplight Zones Target Strategies for Improvement

The study used a stoplight metaphor² to describe three types of leaders:

- **Red leaders:** Myopic, often authoritarian supervisors who frequently change direction and micro-manage employees. Red zone behaviors warn of immediate, significant danger to the organization.
- **Yellow leaders:** Reactive "fire-fighting" managers who flounder with a haphazard organizational approach. Yellow zone behaviors signal the organization to exercise caution.
- **Green leaders:** Active, open individuals who "walk-the-walk" with coaching and mentoring. Such supervisors inspire employees to display innovative, imaginative

problem-solving skills that help organizations manage change. Green zone behaviors indicate that the organization is fine, but leaders should remain alert.

Nonprofit workers consistently scored their leaders in the yellow zone. They reported misaligned objectives, ineffective explanations, and supervisors acting in self-interest rather than for the organization's benefit. Such "yellow" leadership is tied to poor staff performance and low morale.

Employees Worry about Secrecy, Lies, and Threats

Nonprofit employees in the survey expressed concern about four areas of communication:

- **Secrecy and lack of information.** Unless asked directly, nonprofit supervisors are silent about crises and problems, one worker wrote. Such silence fuels gossip, speculation, and poor morale.
- **Lies and misinformation.** One executive called staff together to "tell them lies about what has happened," according to one nonprofit employee.
- **Lack of input.** "The executive director does whatever he wants without any input from anyone other than himself," another respondent complained. "The employees do what they're told."
- **Threats and intimidation.** Some typical comments from work-

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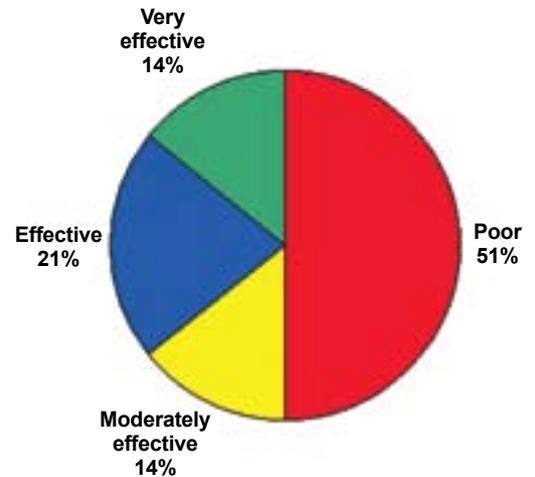


Figure 1: Only 14% of nonprofit staff rated their leaders' communication as very effective. A shocking 51% called their leaders' communication "poor."

ers: "We are not told anything and are made to feel guilty for not doing enough." "75% of the staff left because of the hostile work environment." "Questions get you written up or fired."

How to Become a Green Leader

The study reveals ways you can move into the green zone by improving your communication skills:

- **Engage staff.** Rather than treating staff as bystanders (reflective of red or yellow zones), include them in decisions and plans.
- **Use communication to build trust.** "Communicate early and often," one survey participant suggested. "Make yourself available to all employees to answer questions. This helps to allay fears and builds more trust throughout the organization." Another noted, "I would rather know the truth from the beginning. If employees know the reality of the situation, they will be more

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Alarming, some participants described leaders who use threats and intimidation to motivate nonprofit workers.

likely to participate in activities to help.”

- **Ask staff for input.** One nonprofit employee suggested, “Include employees in brainstorming about ways to cut expenses.” Then, if cutbacks or downsizing are impossible to avoid, people will feel their viewpoints have been fully considered.

- **Open your door.** Supervisors should have an “open door policy,” according to one nonprofit worker, to encourage honest dialogue.

- **Coach and mentor** employees, helping them align their values with your organization’s mission. Encourage them to become more entrepreneurial and proactive in implementing ideas.

- **Encourage teamwork** throughout the organization.

- **Evaluate** your organization, gathering feedback about its strengths and opportunities for improvement. Use the spotlight approach to identify leaders’ red, yellow, or green scores, and then use the results to improve performance. A nonprofit manager who participated in the study stressed the importance of regular assessments and noted, “There must be a solid strategic plan, with a scorecard in place. We cannot flourish if we don’t plan properly.” ■

Footnotes

¹Funded by the University of Phoenix, the national study (www.NRC-SLCI.com/Results.pdf) included 1,150 participants, using a tool called the Supervisor Leadership and Communication Inventory (www.SLCI.ws). Similar to the Myers Briggs inventory, which measures individual characteristics, the SLCI assesses organizational communication traits.

²Schuttler, Richard, *Laws of Communication: The Intersection Where Leadership Meets Employee Performance*, John Wiley & Sons, www.wiley.com.



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It’s Not Easy Being Green

It may not be easy, but every effort to improve your communication skills and become a “greener” leader will reap rewards in morale and productivity. Here are some *Nonprofit World* resources (www.snpo.org/members) to help:

- **The Key to Building Productive Teams** (Vol. 21, No. 4)
- **Avoid Headaches: Engage Your Employees** (Vol. 27, No. 2)
- **Strategic Planning on a Budget** (Vol. 23, No. 4)
- **Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence** (Vol. 27, No. 1)
- **Overcome Organizational Indifference** (Vol. 24, No. 2)
- **Cynicism Rx: Authentic Communication** (Vol. 24, No. 6)
- **How to Ignite Entrepreneurial Spirit in Your Organization** (Vol. 20, No. 5)

Nonprofit workers reported supervisors acting in self-interest rather than for the organization’s benefit.



WHAT’S UP ONLINE?

To broaden online discussions on nonprofit topics, we’re expanding our Discussion Forum with a ListServe, provided by Yahoo Groups. To join, you can either click on the “Yahoo” button at:

<http://www.snpo.org/social/>
(free Yahoo login required)

or send a blank e-mail to:

snpo-subscribe@yahoogroups.com

If you have any questions, contact Jason Chmura at jchmura@snpo.org.