

11 Ways to Renew Your Effectiveness: Communication Keys that Will Change the Way You Lead

Communication can transform your organization. It's your job to make it happen.

BY LARRY D. LAUER

Surveys show that the biggest workplace problem is communication. Yet many managers see communication as someone else's responsibility.

If you're one of those managers, you aren't harnessing the real power of leadership. To be effective, you must take a head-on approach to communication. Here are 11 principles to strengthen your leadership:

1 Understand that communication is your responsibility. It's your job to communicate the organization—not only to the public but to your employees. In the daily turmoil, it's hard for them to remember the big picture. It's up to you to give them a broader perspective, keep them focused on the future, and provide an atmosphere of trust and respect. Since progress is rarely felt day to day, remind them of the past and of how far the organization has come. Looking ahead for purpose and behind for encouragement helps avoid the “this-place-is-a-mess” feeling about the present.

2 Address the communication dimension of each decision you make. Before you make any decision, identify its communication impact—the effect it will have on others. There are two secrets to dealing with this communication component.

First, be sure that people have input before a decision is made. For each

decision, give them a way to let their feelings be known. Your employees are more adaptable than you may think—but only if they are a part of the conversation.

Second, have someone at all meetings ask, “What are the communication effects of the decision we're making? How should we address those repercussions?” For instance, you may need to set up mechanisms to let people know your plans, to gather feedback, or to evaluate results. Every decision has a communication dimension; you ignore it at your peril.

3 Think strategically about every communication situation. Strategic communication requires that your organization have:

- a clear mission
- clear related objectives
- thorough knowledge of your priority audiences

The media love a nonprofit scandal—and don't think it can't happen to you.

- an understanding of the best ways to communicate with each of your audiences.

Such a strategic approach takes planning. Be sure you, your managerial staff, and your communications staff are all part of this planning.

4 Take an integrated approach. Communication programs which depend on media campaigns are destined to be short-lived and of limited value. Effective communications must be orchestrated. The conductors are the managerial leaders. The scores are written by professionals with special talents. The players are the rest of the organization—supervisors, employees, board members. Some carry out communications assignments and projects. Others support with word of mouth. Everyone has a part to play.

Larry D. Lauer is associate vice chancellor for communications and public affairs and assistant professor of corporate communications at Texas Christian University, Box 30776, Fort Worth, Texas 76129. He also teaches international and intercultural communication in the University's programs at Oxford University and Regent's College-London.

Nonprofit World • Volume 14, Number 2 March/April 1996
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations
6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, WI 53719 • (800) 424-7367

5 **Become more visible.** You can no longer stay in your “executive suite.” Today’s environment requires you to be out-front and hands-on—a visible symbol of vision and hope. Your accessibility gives people confidence about the future. Your vulnerability to criticism creates the group dynamic that raises you above that criticism. The bonding essential to morale results from shared experiences; your participation in these experiences is crucial.

The perception of a cover-up can destroy overnight the support you took years to develop.

6 **Design communications around your organizational culture.** Media campaigns often fail because they’re run by people

who don’t know the organization deeply enough. Your culture—how you go about your work—is critical to people’s perception of your organization.

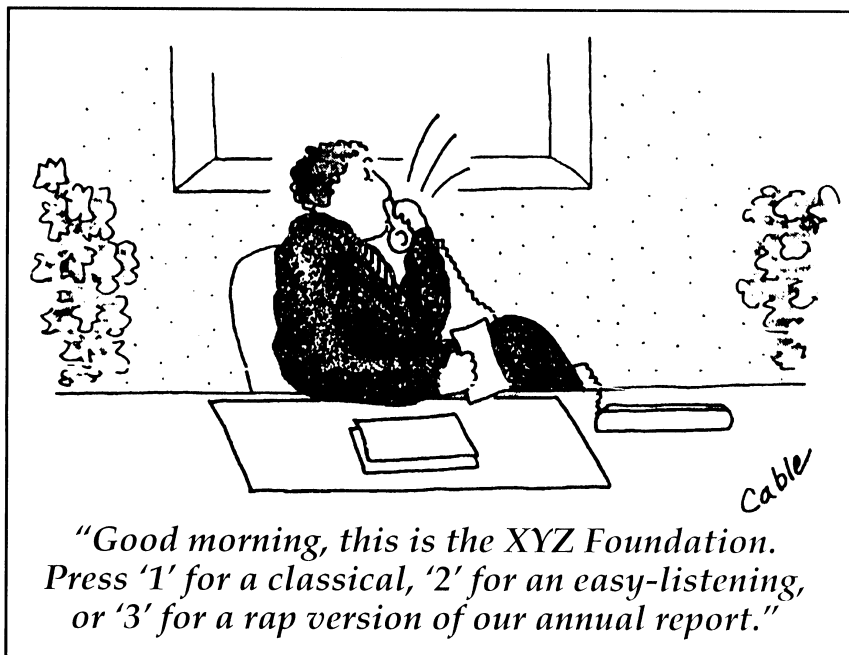
Shape a culture you can be proud of. Ask yourself:

On what values was our organization founded? Why do we do things the way we do? What customs and beliefs do we share? Of what significance is all this to our customers? How can we convey our culture in our messages? Your answers will help you identify your organizational culture. Once you do so, insist that all communications reinforce that culture.

7 **Always be available to discuss what’s on employees’ minds.** Employees talk about their concerns whether you’re there or not.

It’s far better to guide the discussion. By being part of the conversation, you can put misconceptions to rest before they get out of hand. As a bonus, you’ll gain some great ideas by listening to people on the front lines.

The worst thing you can do when employees are upset is to ignore the problem, thinking, “They’ll get over it.” They won’t get over it . . . and it will grow and fester into bad morale, work



Things to Do Today:

- Praise at least one employee for helping the organization fulfill its mission. If possible, put the compliment in writing.
- Remind employees of at least one past success.
- Ask, “How are you?” and show genuine concern for the answer.
- Join in employee conversations. Listen more than you speak.
- Be available to employees who want to talk.
- Make it easy for employees to submit suggestions.
- If you offer advice, do so like a coach, not a judge.
- Remind employees how what they’re doing today will move the organization toward its vision.
- Ask employees for their input into upcoming plans.
- As soon as you receive news, pass it on. Ask those affected by the news for their opinions.
- If employees seem unhappy, find out why.
- At least once today, laugh with your employees.

slow-down, and eventually the loss of competitive edge.

8 **Manage every crisis proactively.** The media love a nonprofit scandal—and don't think it can't happen to you. Every organization today is vulnerable in some way. Any disgruntled employee could force a public showdown with you. If you react defensively, the perception of a cover-up can destroy overnight the support you took years to develop.

On the other hand, you can turn bad news into good if you plan ahead with two steps: (1) List potential crises and prepare "what if" scenarios. (2)

Fashioned into allegory, the tale of where you've been and where you're going is the key to your success.

Develop good day-to-day relations with people in the news media. If you do these two things, you can actually turn a crisis to your advantage. By responding to a crisis with self-confidence, you will impress the public, increase your stature, and build your organization's reputation.

9 **Design communication as a process over time.** To be successful, you can't view communications as separate, hit-or-miss messages. Your communication strategy must combine the power of public relations, advertising, marketing, and volunteer activities. It must be a long-term, two-way, give-and-take approach. You must incorporate communications into every facet of your organization, from the bottom up.

10 **View training programs as a communication opportunity.** Your training programs can do more than teach skills. They can reinforce organizational objectives. They can strengthen planning, problem-solving, and evaluation processes.

Well planned, they are one of the best ways to revitalize your entire organization.

11 **Talk mission, vision, and goals every chance you get.** This is your most important job: to reshape the story of your organization's founders into a vision for the future. Telling and retelling this story is essential to organizational dynamics. It establishes the foundation for your organization's culture and legitimizes your mission and vision. It's the anchor that keeps your communications focused in an otherwise cluttered and confusing world. Fashioned into allegory, this tale of where you've been and where you're going is the key to your success. ■

Selected References

- Belasco, James A. and Ralph C. Stayer, *Flight of the Buffalo: Soaring to Excellence, Learning to Let Employees Lead*, New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1993.
- Covey, Stephen R., *Principle-Centered Leadership*, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990.
- Dilenschneider, Robert L., *A Briefing for Leaders: Communication as the Ultimate Exercise of Power*, New York: Harper-Collins, 1992.
- Drucker, Peter, *The Effective Executive*, New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967.
- *Drucker, Peter, *Managing the Nonprofit Organization*.
- Hampden-Turner, Charles, *Creating Corporate Culture: From Discord to Harmony*, Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, Inc., 1990.
- *Harrison, Thomas A., "Six PR Trends that Will Shape Your Future," *Nonprofit World*, March-April 1991.
- *Lauer, Larry D., "How to Handle a Crisis," *Nonprofit World*, January-February 1994.
- *Lauer, Larry D., "How to Use a Total Marketing Approach to Renew Your Organization and Make an Impact," *Nonprofit World*, May-June 1995.
- *Lauer, Larry D., "On Your Feet and Speaking: An Absolute Requirement for Today's Nonprofit Leader," *Nonprofit World*, September-October 1995.
- *Lauer, Larry D., "Using Your Organization's Culture to Build Productivity and Reputation," *Nonprofit World*, November-December 1993.

*Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *PR & Communications, Leadership Series*.

Plunkett, Lorne C. and Robert Fournier, *Participative Management: Implementing Empowerment*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, Inc., 1991.

*Starred publications are available through the Society for Nonprofit Organizations' Resource Center. For ordering information, see the Society's *Resource Center Catalog*, included in this issue, or contact the Society at 6314 Odana Road, Suite 1, Madison, Wisconsin 53719 (800-424-7367).

Selected Software for Nonprofits

Human Service Information software, ECHO Consulting Services, 1620 Main Street, P.O. Box 540, Center Conway, New Hampshire 03813-0540 (phone 603-447-5453 or 800-635-8209; fax 603-447-2037).

QModern PRO communications software, Dustin Discount Software, 21010 Superior Street, Chatsworth, California 91311 (phone 800-274-6611; fax 818-772-7790).