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Communicate Your Leadership Agenda



Today leaders must cut through the clutter, focus their leadership agenda, and endlessly persuade.

WHAT DO YOU THINK IS the most needed leadership skill in the digital economy? A top priority should be communicating your leadership agenda. Why? Because business leaders are under enormous pressure to sell their corporate strategies to their best customers, employees, and partners—just to retain them. In an economic downturn, communication and influence skills only increase in importance.

In my experience, the best leaders use a thoughtful and systematic approach to communicating their leadership agenda. These leaders master six skills.

1. Listen. Your leadership team has forged a new strategic direction. Now it's time to execute. But before you do, you must listen, to yourself. Start with some inward reflection. Think through what you want to say and why. Once you have found your authentic voice, listen to others. Test your arguments and explore new ideas. Far from being dogmatic or arrogant, the best communicators learn about the people they hope to influence, their needs, aspirations, and concerns.

2. Prepare. Influencing requires careful preparation and planning. Take time to research and develop your ideas. Think through an influence strategy before you start communicating. Don't go straight from inspiration to communication without preparation and testing.

3. Align your messages strategically. Remember, everything you say and do sends a message: Your passion, the clarity of your ideas, your policies and business practices, the structure of your organization, who makes decisions, who gets pro-

moted, who gets fired, and media relations to the press and analysts. The best communicators ensure that all their messages—whether formal (corporate speak), organizational (policies and practices), or personal (what you say)—are aligned with their core business strategies, personal values, and behavior.

4. Feel passionate. Pursue the ideas and values you feel passionate about. Communicate that passion to others. If you don't, you will never connect emotionally with your audience and win them over to a shared vision and course of action. The best leaders draw upon their emotions to get buy-in. They understand that peoples' hearts and souls are often greater motivators than pure reason alone.

5. Use vivid language and compelling stories. To influence, you must position your arguments and present vivid supporting evidence. As one executive said, "There's just as much strategy in how you present your position as in the position itself." Use graphics to enhance your message.

And tell a story. Story telling is a powerful tool in a leader's literary basket.

6. Influence continually. Seldom will you win over all the critical stakeholders to your leadership agenda in the first try. Rapid communication can never replace a systematic and thoughtful approach to winning people over to your agenda. The best leaders view influencing as an ongoing process that is linked to a larger strategy for change. Persuasion often demands listening to the people you are trying to influence, testing your message, incorporating feedback, developing new messages, retesting, making compromises, and then trying again. Yes, this process can be time-consuming and difficult. But the credibility and influence you gain will make it worth your while. EE

The best leaders use a thoughtful approach to communicating their agenda.

Daniel Williams is the founder and co-CEO of Leadership Communications Inc. in the Boston area. www.tolead.com or 781-828-4199.

Excellence in Action: Assess your leadership communications against these six criteria.