

Communicate Your Leadership Voice ©

Helping Chinese Leaders Communicate and Influence

By Daniel Williams*

As more Chinese leaders at all levels of the organization compete in multinational environments, they must learn how to communicate their leadership voice successfully. Today, effective communication is based upon the assumption that everything you say and do sends a message. The collection of the messages you communicate daily is your voice. And the more your voice is authentic and compelling, the greater chance you will have at establishing credibility and distinguishing yourself in a crowded field of competitors.

After decades of working with multinational executives, we believe Chinese leaders can learn three key lessons about communicating in business environments successfully. The best communicators:

- Know what they stand for
- Listen to their audiences and adapt culturally
- Execute influence strategies effectively

Know What You Stand For

To communicate your leadership voice, you must first know what it is. You must listen

to yourself and articulate your core beliefs, vision and values. You must also explain, in a clear and convincing way, exactly what's unique about your ideas.

Therefore, to know what you stand for, you must explore such questions as:

- What am I deeply passionate about?
- If people only remember one or two things from my leadership message, what would they be?
- What do we stand for as a leadership team, what are our values, vision, and management philosophy? What's unique about our leadership approach?
- Do I give myself the right to communicate my ideas to influential people?

As you find your voice, make sure you are giving yourself the right to communicate your ideas to people who may hold more powerful positions than you. This is particularly important in Western cultures where less importance is placed on hierarchy, status and title. For instance, in American culture you are expected to voice your opinion. You are expected to communicate your and your team's

* This article was published in the August issue of *Sino American Times*, a national weekly targeting the Chinese community in the U.S. The Mandarin Chinese version can be found on our home page. Leadership Communications Inc. specializes in leadership development and cross-cultural communication. The company offers a training program to help Chinese knowledge professionals and managers communicate and influence in Western corporate cultures. The article is based on a presentation delivered by Daniel Williams at a recent Sino-American Pharmaceutical Association conference at MIT. Daniel Williams is co-founder of Leadership Communications Inc. in Canton, MA; dan@tolead.com; 781-828-4199, www.tolead.com.

accomplishments, and how they are helping the organization achieve results. You are also expected to enter a discussion on your own. In fact, if you don't assert yourself, it is often assumed that you agree with the dominant theme being discussed. If you are not able to articulate what you stand for to influential people, you may miss important business or career opportunities. Begin to think like the person you are trying to influence—even if you don't hold the title—which leads to the next requirement for communicating your leadership voice.

Listen & Culturally Adapt

Once you listen to your own voice, you must listen to the people you hope to influence, their needs, aspirations and concerns. You must also understand how cultural differences impact your ability to communicate and adapt your communication style to the environment that you are communicating in.

Listen

To listen effectively, you must ask such questions as:

- Have I researched and tested my ideas in depth?
- Do I really know what my targeted audience is thinking? What keeps them up at night? Are my messages addressing their concerns?

Say, for example, you are trying to build a relationship with a senior manager of a fast-growing biotech company in the U.S. What is your strategy? As discussed, your first step is to clearly define your core ideas and messages. The second step is equally important. Take measures to thoroughly understand what this executive is thinking—his or her questions, business issues and concerns—and how you can tailor your

ideas to address the issues that are personally relevant to him or her. For example, after researching the Net through such Web sites as www.ceoexpress.com, www.hovers.com, and www.bestcalls.com, which lists big-company analyst conference calls, you might find that this executive spends a lot of time asking such questions as how can we:

- accelerate the pace of drug development, clinical trials and drug sales
- reduce costs without compromising long-term goals
- leverage innovative technologies and research?

Tailoring your presentation to address these issues will increase the probability that the executive will listen and consider to your ideas.

Adapt Culturally

You must not only listen to yourself and your targeted audience, you must also listen to the culture you are communicating in. Understanding how to reach out to your audience is more challenging if they are from a different culture.

To adapt culturally, you must ask such questions as:

- What cultural differences and strengths need to be clarified to get my message across?
- How can I avoid my own cultural bias?
- How can I adapt my communication style to the cultural assumptions of my targeted audience?

Consider the cultural differences between China and the United States on

the degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of a group. While the United States is considered one of the most individualistic cultures in the world, Chinese society is rooted in communitarianism e.g. a strong identification in the family, a group or organization. These cultural differences have a huge impact on how people in the two cultures communicate. For instance, Chinese communicators in American culture must learn how to be more direct in their communication. They must get to the “bottom line” early in their communication and clearly articulate why the listener, who may be impatient, should care about the Chinese communicators’ ideas.

Conversely, the American communicator must learn that building relationships based on mutual respect and trust is often a pre-requisite for doing business in China. Therefore, the American communicator must learn to build relationships patiently and realize that the context of the message—how you communicate—is just as important as the content of the message itself.

Recent studies indicate that the best multinational communicators use a broad repertoire of styles to communicate their ideas, depending on the culture in which they do business.

Execute Influence Strategies Effectively

Like other disciplines, your ability to prepare a well-thought-out plan of action and implement it over time is critical to communicating your leadership voice successfully. You must ask such questions as:

- Who is my target audience?
- What would interest them?

- How can I get to them?
- What is the sequence of action items over time?

Table 1 on the following page illustrates one approach for executing a personal influence strategy. In this case, a senior manager at a multinational financial service company was viewed by upper management as “too tactical and not strategic enough.” He needed to develop and implement an influence strategy that would change his image in the organization. Working with Leadership Communications, the executive decided that one way he could gain more influence was to publish an article on what he had learned about leadership as a senior manager operating a large profit and loss business over ten years. To publish this article, he first defined his primary audience—his senior management team—and secondary audiences—his immediate boss and publication editors. We helped this executive define his core ideas, his voice. At its core was the need to personalize your leadership—making sure that everyone understands what you stand for over time and continually reinforcing and linking your stand with changing business goals and operational tasks. We also researched leadership literature and tested his article with others before it was submitted to his boss and corporate communications. Ultimately, the editors published the article and helped change senior management’s perception of this executive.

As we adapt to new multinational environments, people at all levels must learn how to develop themselves and make a difference in their organization. Communicating your leadership voice effectively is one critical requirement for doing that. Take the time to listen to yourself, to what you stand for as a leader. Then listen to the people and culture you are trying to influence. Develop a plan of action

that you can effectively implement over time. If you do this with uncompromising

faith in yourself, you will gain credibility and succeed in your work life.

Illustration of a Personal Influence Strategy

Table 1

Who	What Approach	What Voice/Messages	How	When
<p><u>Primary Audience:</u> Senior management team</p> <p><u>Secondary Audience:</u> - Boss - Corporate PR - Publishing editors</p>	Develop high-level leadership article for senior executives	“Personalize Your Leadership”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clarify ideas - Research literature - Draft article - Test messages - Submit article - Get buy-in from boss, corp. PR, editors - Present to senior management 	Week of...

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