

Episode 016

Did You Get What I Said?

Introduction

In my many years in leadership, I am yet to find an effective leader who is ineffective in communication. For a fundamental pillar for effective leadership is the ability to communicate well. The communication skills required of a leader is far more complex than what is normally required for personal relationships. Unfortunately, many stumble in this area because they do not grasp this differentiation. By only relying upon the skills and experiences gained from personal interaction and applying it directly into leadership, it severely limits its effectiveness.

When a leader communicates, the communication has greater weight because of the role of the leader. It will be relied upon, built upon, even judged upon. Its scope will often involve more people, perhaps even thousands. The larger the group, the further they tend to be from the leader personally and more easily the message is misunderstood. Hence, the need to be more careful about our communications.

In this podcast, I will unpack some key insights into effective leadership communication. This topic is a complement to my podcast Did I Get What You Said? (Effective Listening).

What Can Motivate Others?

1 It is a core leadership function

For a leader to effectively lead, cast vision, articulate strategies and plans, solve problems, manage, organise, delegate etc – it is crucial to be able to communicate it well. A leader who is unable to communicate adequately is severely handicapped. We may have a powerful vision or the best plans. But if we mangle our message and confuse our listeners, little will be achieved.



2 Clear communication improves alignment

Alignment can be achieved when leaders clearly communicate the vision, the goals, the milestones, the strategies and plans and so forth. When it becomes clear what the expectations are, then subordinates know what to aim for. When our teams are not clear on what to aim for, it means we have not been communicating effectively.

3 Good communication improves trust and engagement

When leaders communicate adequately and transparently about where the group is going, the issues it faces, the current situation – it helps to build trust and engagement. When people are left in the dark or when they feel that information is deliberately withheld from them, it allows mistrust to breed.

4 It facilitates a better communicative environment

Leaders model the types of communication that is acceptable and expected. When leaders exemplify good communication, it becomes a role model for good communication between the people. When leaders are vulnerable, or openly discuss challenging issues, it gives permission to the group to do likewise. When leaders model good communicative approaches to conflicts, it shows others how it can be done effectively.

Key Attitudes for Effective Communication

The effectiveness of a leader's communication is not dependent only on the content and style but most importantly on the heart of the leader. People want to listen to and follow leaders they can trust. Following are some key attitudes that enhance communication.

1 Be loving

Leaders ought to have a genuine concern for the people they lead. Theodore Roosevelt remarked 'People don't care how much you know until they know how much you care'. People are more interested in what we have to say when they know we are interested in them.



For our communication to reach into our hearers' hearts, it helps tremendously when they know that we have their welfare in our hearts. They will be willing to open their hearts and invest into carefully listening to our message when they know the message is relevant and helpful for them.

2 Be authentic

Leaders need to be real. People want to know that the real you is talking to them, rather than a facade. Don't disguise yourself, trying to be someone you are not. If you want to be different, first change your heart not your message. Hence, honesty is the best policy. Be as transparent as is appropriate.

3 Be emphatic

Empathy is the ability to identify with others. Alfred Adler made this point, "Empathy is seeing with the eyes of another, listening with the ears of another and feeling with the heart of another." The more we are able to identify with our hearers, the more we will tend to have their attention. Because they now know that we appreciate the situation they are in. In other words, what we have to communicate will not be divorced from their context. Many listened to Jesus because He had empathy. He was a man, a fellow Jew, a commoner. He spoke their heart language and understood fully their ways.

Best Practices for Effective Leadership Communication

1 Be relentless

It is better for a leader to somewhat over-communicate than to under-communicate. For often only a small percentage of what a leader communicates gets through to the intended audience or sticks, in the first time. Hence the need for repetition until the message gets through. Though it should be done creatively, so that it does not get boring.



Leaders should communicate thoughts, ideas, values clearly and frequently. Be intentional and diligent to open as many effective communication channels as possible for your teams and organisation. The bigger your church or group grows, the more critical it is to communicate effectively.

As our church has grown over the past 3 decades, we have examined and re-examined our communication channels as to its effectiveness. We re-looked at what we should be communicating, to different segments of the church, its frequencies, and its mode. Our communication channels have evolved greatly and continues to evolve. We now make extensive use of digital communication channels including social media.

The scope of my responsibilities have enlarged significantly over these decades and my role evolved. Consequently, I have had to personally re-examine how I have been communicating, what I need to communicate and to whom I should focus on communicating to.

2 Be relational

Our team wants to know us and hence we need to communicate our hearts, peel open our lives and be vulnerable. Even if the group we serve is much larger, people still want to know the real us. They want to know something of our lives. Hence, we must be intentional to be relational. To appropriately reveal snippets of our lives and what we are going through. Social media is one way to do this on an on-going basis.

3 Be clear and concise.

It is important to be clear and concise than to present too much data or complexity. People are easily overwhelmed by too much. Especially today where there is information overload and people's capacity to digest information in any single communication has reduced. Most are used to scanning and hence easily tire when a message is too long. Always aim to simplify your message to the essential components. Always ask yourself, is this necessary to include these? Be direct.



4 Be memorable.

Together with clarity and conciseness, aim for important messages to be memorable. This will help your audience capture and remember your message. This will mean crafting your message to use memorable taglines or sentences. Learn to use short stories and illustrations to capture the essence of the point you wish to make. The human mind tends to recall pictures and emotional content better. In the Bible, we find that God is a master communicator. He uses burning bushes, angelic visitations, splitting mountains, donkeys, storms, etc as precursors to the messages He brings. Who can forget such memorable incidents and messages?

5 Be positive and empowering

Where possible, be positive and empowering. People need hope amidst a sea of hopelessness, light to shine through the darkness around their lives. Even when dealing with dark and troubling issues, it is crucial to offer hope by bringing it in a positive and empowering manner. I always ask myself, how are my sermons offering hope to the hopeless, faith to the faithless?

6 Be invitational to feedback.

People want to know that they can approach and communicate to you. They have ideas, opinions, etc that they believe is important for you to know. People will value your communications more when you value theirs. For this to occur, you must intentionally create a safe and invitational environment for feedback. To do so, you must communicate consistently that you welcome feedback. At times the feedback may be negative or critical. Though it is challenging at times, we must not react but thank the person for the feedback especially when you know the intent is good. Remember that usually only less than 1 in 10 people will provide feedback. We should value those who do have the courage to provide feedback. It can be very helpful to our leadership.



7 Be consistent

Consistency and sustainability in our communication is crucial for the long run. It is better to communicate with consistent regularity through consistent channels than in spurts and ad hoc means. People need to know where and when they can get specific information, updates, teachings etc. Where possible, spread out the communication with a plan. In HIM Global and in my church we have communication plans where we have worked out what needs to be communicated, when and which channels to reach different audience segments. Even for myself, we have a plan for my social media communications, our website wilsonlailing.com so that it has a consistent regularity.

8 Be wise.

Be wise to develop the most effective strategies to communicate in the most impacting way with minimal resources. We have to identify what the most relevant messages ought to be communicated to various segments of your intended audience, when and how. This requires formulating a workable plan and implementing it well.

Always make sure that we don't waste people's time with unnecessary or irrelevant messages. Be thoughtful about the messages sent. Consider whether the communications should be informative, inspiring, relational, directional and so forth and choose the most appropriate channels to use.

As an example, in our church we have a twice weekly bulletin to all our leaders where we update on all matters relevant to our church general leadership. This includes providing our weekly Bible discussions. These leaders also have access to a leadership database where they can search for and download other information, policies, etc.

9 Be adaptable in communication styles.

We have to appreciate that people receive and retain information in a range of different ways. Some prefer to listen while some, like myself, prefer visual. That is why I prefer to read than to listen to audiobooks.



Some educators refer to 7 learning styles which include visual, audio, verbal, kinesthetic (touch), logical, social and solitary. If we desire to reach the widest possible groups of people, we need to adapt our communication methods appropriately. To suit our listeners, not ourselves.

For example, I was involved teaching a subject in a recent leadership development programme. As it was online, we used a combination of methods to more effectively communicate. We provided full notes and used video segments accompanied by memorable graphics to reinforce points. The teachers asked the participants for questions and answered it live. We provided interviews and role play scenarios. We also had some quizzes and breakout times for small group discussions.

10 Be contextual.

We should always seek to appreciate the context the people are in when we communicate. The more relevant our communication is to their context, the more useful it will be, the more it will be remembered and even appreciated. During the early periods of the COVID pandemic, we tailored our messages to our congregation and leaders about how to deal with crises and uncertainties, in God.

When people are struggling or caught up in certain difficult situations, it can much more difficult for them to give attention to mundane messages. On the other hand, there are seasons when people are far more open to be challenged or inspired on certain areas. Once when I preached at a church, I was prompted to share about aspects of godly humility. After the service, a lady approached me and shared how much the message spoke directly to her. For she had been seeking the answer to this issue for many months. God can help us communicate in relevant ways we are not even aware of, if we would listen to Him.

11 Be aware of listeners' capacity

Jesus was well aware of the listeners' capacity to receive what He had been teaching. Jesus pointed this out to His disciples in Mark 4:12 (NIV84).



Mark 4:12 (NIV84)

'they may be ever seeing but never perceiving, and ever hearing but never understanding...'

People's ability to receive vary according to a variety of reasons. It could be due to intellectual capacity, emotional availability, spiritual receptiveness, experiential familiarity and so forth. The effective communicator takes these into account

12 Be reinforcing with actions

What you do matters as much, perhaps even more than what you say. Your actions communicate as much as your messages. When your actions align with what you say, that is when it has greater impact.

Conclusion

Effective communication is fundamental to effective leadership. It is a core function of leadership. It improves alignment, trust, engagement and facilitates a better environment for communication. An important foundation for effective communication is our attitudes. When it is loving, authentic and there is empathy, it sets the ground for a good heart connection with our listeners.

We also unpacked 12 key insights for best practices in leadership communication. I trust that you will take these insights to heart and live it out to better your communication as a leader!



Discussion Questions

These questions could be done personally or as part of a group discussion.

1. In what key ways have you seen communication to be so crucial in effective leadership?
2. How do you think the 3 key attitudes shared today can enhance your communication?
3. Consider which 3 key best practices would be most helpful to improving your communication?

Actionable Steps

Following questions are to prompt us on suitable actions. Importantly, come up with steps you will take to make progress. Give them datelines and priority.

1. What steps can you take to improve 1 key attitude to enhance your communication effectiveness? Consider getting feedback from your team.
2. Choose 1 best practice you wish to improve on. What specific steps can you take to learn more about it and to improve on it? Discuss it with someone who could give you feedback.





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