



The Leadership Communication Trap

An excerpt from The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons For Work & Life

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Jim was a general manager of a medium-sized consumer goods manufacturer that had seen the usual shift in business strategy caused by intense global competition. He was by most measures a successful leader who consistently produced excellent bottom line results.

As the market became saturated with foreign competition, Jim's business unit underwent some tough cost-cutting measures in an effort to survive. Employees who had been with the company for many years often commented that they had never seen so much change in such a short period of time.

To make matters worse, much of the change was being directed, not by Jim and his leadership team, but by corporate finance which was located in Europe. Some days, Jim would tell me that he didn't know whether he was coming or going. He, like most of the people at his division, was stressed and more than a bit overwhelmed.

My role in working with Jim and his leadership team involved helping them create a leadership communication strategy for managing the change and as a result, help to minimize the potential burnout associated with the change. We made good progress quickly except for one major obstacle that almost derailed our efforts entirely.

Jim didn't always know the whole story behind the corporate-driven changes. He just knew that he had to make them happen. This was part of the new corporate yardstick that he was being measured by on a daily basis. As the rate of change accelerated, employees seemed to ask more questions. This is often the case, as absent clear and consistent communication from you and your leadership colleagues, they make up the answers. It's called the rumor mill.

Jim's frustration with the constant barrage of questions began to show. He didn't have all of the answers and in his words, "I would never let my team know that." He

was convinced that as a leader, you can never let your people know that *you don't know*. Unfortunately, many leaders get caught up in this communication trap as *not knowing* is perceived as a weakness. By contrast, it's actually a strength that arises from authenticity and transparency.

As the change related questions increased, Jim would say things like, "I'll have to get back to you on that one" (and he rarely did), or "no comment at this time," or worse, "this subject is on a need-to-know basis, and you don't need to know" What kind of message did that response send? You don't count? You're not valued? A huge mistake in leadership judgment for sure.

I had many long and at times difficult discussions with Jim about his style of communication. The turning point for him was when I asked him to put himself in his team's shoes for a moment. You can do the same with how you communicate your story and other key leadership directives. Think about it, do your communications build clarity or do they create fear? Do they inspire your people, or do they feed the rumor mill with more questions than answers? Your team deserves the truth. Granted, there are times when some things must remain confidential and certain people need to remain out of the loop, but being as transparent as possible is still the best policy. At a minimum, it is a leadership communication strategy that builds clarity, confidence, and trust. It also goes a long way in reducing the rumor mill.

No matter how challenging or uncomfortable it may be, the value of transparent communication should not be underestimated. When you consistently share information with your team, you send a message that they're valued and respected and that their opinions matter.

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7 Things You Can Do Today:

1. Initiate a conversation with your team about how you are feeling regarding the unknown. This shows your vulnerability as a leader, and also exemplifies that you empathize with some of the fears they may also have.
2. Share news of what you know, when you know it, even when you may not have all of the answers. Be clear with your team about what you can and can't share and why.
3. Learn to be okay with not having all of the answers. Because of the wide range of factors driving change in today's workplace, uncertainty at one level or another can be expected. Part of being a transparent leader is acknowledging that at times, you don't have all the answers. Accept this as both okay and quite normal.
4. Clarify that information can change, and when it does, update your team as soon as you know it.
5. Communicate clearly and frequently. Absent clarity from you and your leadership colleagues, your employees may just feed the rumor mill. At the very least, they will be less likely to understand their role in the change equation.
6. Assess your leadership. As a leader, you set the tone for your team. Everything you do or don't do impacts employee engagement at some level. How well do you model the behavior you want from your team? Do you demonstrate the critical leadership characteristics of transparency, integrity, resilience, trust, and respect?
7. Manage the rumor mill. Play an active role in managing your team's perception of the organization. Focus on what's working well and on the positive aspects of the culture including recent successes, external reputation, shared values, and future goals.

About David A. O'Brien:

David is President of WorkChoice Solutions, a trusted provider of leadership and team effectiveness training, coaching, and consulting services founded in 2000. He works with a wide range of corporate, nonprofit, and public sector clients to help bring about sustainable improvements in organizational effectiveness. His first book, [*The Navigator's Handbook, 101 Leadership Lessons for Work & Life*](#) is available on-line and in bookstores nationwide. His second book, [*The Navigator's Compass 101 Steps Toward Leadership Excellence*](#) was released in 2016 and is also available nationwide.

To learn more about the scope of David's work in helping leaders and teams to be more effective or to arrange for David to speak at your next conference or other special event, please visit [WorkChoice Solutions online](#) or call him directly at 860.242.1070.

