

# How Great Leaders Communicate

**George Anders**

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You've just been promoted into one of your organization's Big Jobs. Now you've got an impressive office, a hefty budget and vast expectations about how you will lead dozens or even thousands of people. Can you stick with the leadership style that brought you this far? Or do you need to recalibrate your approach, starting with the way you communicate?

Some fascinating rethinking is under way on exactly that topic. Scholars such as Harvard Business School's [Boris Groysberg](#) argue that effective leadership no longer revolves around brilliant speeches and heroic exhortations. (We can call that the Fidel Castro approach – and it doesn't work especially well in either government or mainstream business.) Instead, Groysberg and co-author Michael Slind argue in their 2012 book "[Talk Inc.](#)" that the higher you go in an organization, the more you must engage other people in conversations, rather than trying to shout them into submission.

I'm in favor of traveling 70% of the way down that road with Groysberg and Slind, without becoming so chatty that you lose the ability to stretch people's horizons. Over the past 25 years, as a business-book author and writer for the likes of Forbes, Fast Company and The Wall Street Journal, I've seen a lot of corporate leaders in action. Here are seven ways that the best leaders increase their effectiveness by the ways they communicate.

**1. Bring the vision to life.** Anyone can write a mission statement, full of lofty words that sound good. But you aren't communicating that vision unless you repeatedly signal how those values translate into concrete actions. What people learn from your routine decision-making matters far more than what you pack into your speeches.

A case in point: Jeff Bezos's insistence that Amazon.com is "the most customer-centric company in the world." Nice slogan. What does it [really mean](#)? Hang around the Amazon CEO for a while, and you will notice that he vetoes sassy ads that mock customers. He insists that mid-level meetings include one person serving solely as the customer advocate – with the power to veto actions that undermine customers' interests. And when Amazon reorganizes departments, which it does fairly often, each regrouping is justified as a way of serving the customer better.

In the same spirit, bring *your* bedrock values into the daily workplace. Salute other people's actions that reinforce what you prize. Call out conduct that doesn't. And infuse these principles into other people's thought patterns by referencing key values as decisions are being made.

**2. Ask smart questions.** In his new book, "[To Sell Is Human](#)," best-selling author Daniel H. Pink cites studies showing that when you want to persuade someone, questions can be more powerful than statements. The reason: you engage another person's heart and mind more strongly. You get him or her thinking about the ideal answer – and then all the steps necessary to get there. By being less dogmatic, you let people on your team build game plans that they believe in, rather than trapping them in a helpless state until you issue your next command.

While developing my most recent book, "[The Rare Find](#)," I was impressed with the way that David Evans, the former head of the computer science department at the University of Utah, got great work out of his graduate students by asking simple but profound questions that pointed the way to revolutionary advances. He inspired the engineers who later built Pixar, Adobe and Netscape. Often that could be done simply by pointing at a big goal on the horizon and saying: "How would you get there?"

**3. Take time to read the room.** Once you're in senior leadership, you will meet a lot of outsiders that you hardly know ... but whose support or forbearance is crucial to your company's success. Do 90% of the talking, and it's tempting to think that you carried the day with Washington regulators, Chinese suppliers, that big customer in Dallas or the investigative reporter from New York. Guess what? If you don't know what the other party really wanted, all that bluster was in vain.

Take a tip from Silicon Valley executive Meg Whitman, early in her career, when she was building eBay into a global e-commerce powerhouse. Some of her most important meetings

were with eBay's Power Sellers. These merchants booked huge amounts of business on the site, yet for a time they felt the company didn't understand their frustrations with fees and service issues. Every few months, she would visit Power Sellers on their turf, looking for ways to fix their problems or at least offer sympathy. Her keen ear helped eBay stay ahead of its competitors.

Don't fall prey to the belief that careful listening is only for the little people in the room. When you listen carefully, you win people's trust – and that's crucial to everything else you want to accomplish. There's a maxim in the public speaking business: "The more your audience talks, the more they think they have learned from you." Use that sly insight to your advantage.

**4. Create a climate where things get done.** In any organization, there's a huge gap between projects that are headed to the finish line, right now -- and ones that live indefinitely in limbo, hardly moving forward. Which do you prefer? If you're looking for results, make sure your employees and front-line managers are repeatedly aware of your top priorities. Help set interim mileposts. Get roadblocks out of the way. Walk through the areas where specific tasks are being done. Even a 10-minute visit by the boss conveys the clear and uplifting message: "This is important."

Be mindful of how many "top priorities" your organization can handle successfully. Better to win two big campaigns a year than to stumble in the midst of 20. I've seen ambitious but unfocused organizations end up with overcrowded agendas that create internal strife -- with the unpleasant consequences of missed deadlines, constant changes of directions and ugly battles for resources and recognition. The higher up you go in an organization, the more important it is for you to communicate key goals with clarity and brevity.

Tim Boyle, the CEO of Columbia Sportswear, is remarkably good at peeling away the clutter. I've chatted with him since 2005, and he keeps his business centered on three simple concepts: innovation, enhanced design and compelling marketing. Zoom in on each idea, and details abound. He's a remarkably hard-working and well-read boss. Those core concepts, however, help ensure that Columbia's 4,000 employees are pulling in the right direction.

**5. Use stories to get your points across.** When you're at the top of an organization, you can seem pretty distant from the people on the front lines. Now you're in a job where it may be impossible to schedule enough face time with everyone you'd like to influence. One of your best ways to compensate: sharing teaching anecdotes, so that even people who hardly know you will still feel they know your human, authentic side.

Nobody does this better than Warren Buffett, the 82-year-old chairman and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway. His conglomerate has \$143 billion in annual revenue, with interests that range from insurance to energy, furniture and chocolate. But when you read Buffett's [annual letters](#) to shareholders, his dry wit and wise-uncle judgment come through on every page. Countless investors and managers who have never met him still feel that they know him -- and like him.

You don't need to be nearly as polished as Buffett to succeed in this domain. Just think how you would explain your week's battles and goals to a neighbor, a spouse or a college roommate, and you'll find the right tone.

**6. Be mindful of what you don't know.** If your subordinates are any good at all, you often won't know the fine-grain details as well as they do. Expect to be learning constantly on the job. Find ways that your in-house experts can quietly bring you up to speed on emerging issues that are catching your eye. You've got vital strengths that other people don't, particularly in terms of experience, broad perspectives and judgment. As you work toward important decisions, make sure your remarks and conversations are opening the way for other people to keep augmenting your knowledge base.

Two of the most skillful learners I ever encountered are Sheryl Sandberg (the chief operating officer of Facebook), and Lou Gerstner, the former CEO of RJR Nabisco and then IBM. I traveled with Gerstner during his RJR era as part of a Wall Street Journal front-page profile. He was still mastering the company's endless product line, but he got up to speed shrewdly, calling some meetings on a supermarket floor so he could walk the aisles as people talked, looking around to see whose brands dominated each category.

**7. Make people feel they work for a winner.** Can you single-handedly improve your organization's morale -- in ways that genuinely translate into better performance and innovation? That's one of the great mysteries of leadership. Some executives try smothering their employees in perks. Others praise good work, hoping that it will lead to greater doings in the future. Still others scold slackers and kick out the weakest performers, believing that some situations call for toughness.

Any of those approaches can work; yet I've seen executives try all three and still come up short. A memorable insight here came from John Young, who was CEO of Hewlett Packard for many years during its prime. We chatted after his retirement, and he contended that what shapes morale the most is employees' conviction that they are working for the best company

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in their field. Earn that honor, he said, and you gain a level of employee commitment that cash and perks alone can't buy.

All the other six techniques in this article point toward this final priority. If you're conveying a clear vision, asking good questions, setting the right priorities and so on, you're creating that winners' aura that is the ultimate reward for great leadership communication.



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