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5 Communication Best Practices of Great Leaders

A "Thoroughbred Leader" can be described as that rare breed of leader with both strong task and relationship skills. They're somehow able to lead with firm focus on the goals (and tasks required to reach them) while simultaneously building strong, authentic connections within the team and engendering sincere trust. Certainly, one critical trait that distinguishes great leaders is their ability to communicate with both clarity and sensitivity. In the Harvard Business Review article: *The Most Important Leadership Competencies, According to Leaders Around the World*, two of the top six traits are communications skills. Let's explore five ways great leaders communicate.

#1 - Great leaders value transparency and tell the truth.

Oftentimes, leaders feel stressed when team members ask questions about difficult topics or issues (e.g. pending reorganizations, disappointing business results, leadership mistakes). Instead of being as candid and transparent as they can, many leaders default to "safer" options (e.g. not communicating, offering misleading platitudes, or deflecting). Unfortunately, they don't understand that being less than candid (or even worse) is a real breach of trust that may not be repairable and can have devastating relationship consequences. What Thoroughbred Leaders understand is that team members don't expect 100% transparency on all issues, but they do expect honest communications so when an employee asks them virtually any question, they default to one of three responses:

1. They tell them the truth.
2. They tell them "I don't know, but I'll find out."
3. They tell them that they can't tell them.

All answers are honest - the employee can sense that they're not being fed a line or strung along, and they understand if there are certain details that a leader can't share at that particular time.

While it's easy to think of transparency and a "feel good nicety," it's also important to recognize that it makes good business sense too.

#2 - Great leaders increase communications during times of change.

During times of change and uncertainty, there's often a natural inclination for leaders to avoid communicating with their teams. Thoroughbred Leaders resist that urge and instead increase communications during times of change. One leader is credited with adding "Questions and Team Gripes" as the last item on a weekly team meeting agenda during a major reorganization. While this might seem counter-intuitive to most leaders, the Thoroughbred Leader understood that venting is a normal part of moving forward, and he wanted to keep lines of communication open during that difficult time. His rationale was that if they had a gripe, he'd rather know about it as soon as possible instead of hearing about it third-hand weeks later (or worse, never). Similarly, this standing agenda item gave him an opportunity to always share what he knew and take any questions. The team always knew they were being kept in the loop, and for them that reassurance was priceless.

#3 - Great leaders tend to listen more than they talk.

Thoroughbred Leaders are guided by the mantra "Seek first to understand, then to be understood." Since they're natural connectors, they truly want to understand others' thoughts and concerns. Furthermore, they acknowledge the difference between listening and just waiting to talk. Talking to them, you get the impression that they're really listening and not just thinking about their response or their perspective. Their natural ability to actively listen not only makes others feel heard and respected, it also facilitates enhanced decision making. They don't just listen to "check the box". Instead, they're eager to learn and open to changing their mind on an issue when they get new information. Indeed, their focus isn't winning the debate but instead doing what's best for the organization. In their mind listening is half of the communication equation.

#4 - Great leaders stay connected to the lowest levels of the organization.

Once purported to be "perhaps the best CEO in America" Herb Kelleher consistently connected with the lowest levels of the organization (including inviting employees to a weekly cookout and stepping in to handle bags during the Thanksgiving rush). Similarly,

President Barack Obama reportedly read 10 letters a day from regular American citizens. These two amazing leaders both recognized while sitting at the top of the food chain how critical it is to stay connected to the lowest organizational levels as well.

Everyone has played that game of "operator" as a child where a group sits in a circle and whispers a simple statement person to person until it makes its way to the last person. Invariably, the content of the final message is drastically different from the original message. The same phenomenon poses major challenges with workplace communications. As messages are shared throughout the organization in various formats (e.g. email, chat, video conference, face to face, reports, etc.) the content and tone can become wildly distorted causing major miscommunications. As such, it's critically important that leaders create opportunities to cut through the hierarchy and communicate directly with all levels of the organization.

#5 - Great leaders communicate goals and tasks clearly.

One of the most important tasks for any leader is providing clear direction. While that might sound pretty simple, in reality it's often not. Too many leaders are downright confusing communicators - some don't really know what they want, others may ask for A when they really mean B and some just speak in a language that others can't understand or are just plain boring. In contrast, great leaders speak with clarity, conviction, consistency, and charisma. Great leaders also know how to shift their messaging depending on the audience. While large town hall meetings might benefit from messaging that is witty, motivating and inspirational, one on one task delegation discussions require more clarity, specificity and sometimes even targeted questioning.

Jennifer Utz Ilecki, Vice President, Buzz Marketing & Global Partnerships, Marriott International also emphasizes the importance of considering the different ways people absorb information when discussing goals or tasks with her team.

"It is incumbent upon a leader and department head to share important information several different ways to set a team up for success. This means not just communicating verbally but including visual materials to present the information and, in some cases, helping the team experience it through offsite activities. For example, when the team is assessing a new activation opportunity, going on-site to see the environment they are working in helps get everyone on the same page much faster than describing it."

Indeed, the best leaders don't bark orders, spout platitudes or provide vague direction. Instead, they realize that communicating well is one of the most important things they do, so they take time to do it right.

As always, we're interested in your thoughts on these hiring, selection and retention insights.

Source: Dana Brownlee Contributor, Forbes.com; Harvard Business Review

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Chief Revenue Officer/Sr. VP Sales- Private Equity- **COMPLETED**

Federal Accounts Sales Executive- Enterprise Identity Management/Access Control

Regional Sales Manager- Access Control- Upper Midwest Region

VP Sales- Physical Security Solutions- **COMPLETED**

Product Manager- Enterprise Access Control/Identity Management/Cloud Solutions

Manager of Sales Engineering: Access and Identity Management Software-VA/DC

Regional Sales Manager- Access Control- New England Territory-**COMPLETED**

Operations Manager- Enterprise Systems Integrator- Metro NYC Region

End User Business Development- Network Video Solutions- New England Territory

Regional Sales Manager- Cloud-Based Access Control: Western US- **COMPLETED**

Regional Sales Manager- Cloud-Based Access Control: Midwest

General Manager- Systems Integration/Life Safety Solutions- Boston

Business Development Manager- Access Control- Dallas/North Texas Region-
COMPLETED

Global Key Accounts Manager- Life Safety Technology

A&E Business Development, Mid-Atlantic Region- Network Video Solutions-
COMPLETED

Regional Sales- Connected/IoT offerings- Intelligent Building Software- NYC

Regional Sales Manager- Access & Video Solutions- Texas Region- **COMPLETED**

Regional Account Manager- (Existing Accounts) Metro NYC- Systems Integration/BAS

Regional Service Sales- Building Automation- SaaS solutions: Chicago, Atlanta, South Fl
Territories

Regional Sales Manager- Intrusion Solutions- Pacific Northwest Region

VP Global Engineering- Access/Video/Intrusion Solutions- **COMPLETED**

Solutions Architect- Cloud/IoT offerings

Director of Product Management/Key Accounts- Life Safety Systems- **COMPLETED**

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