

Essential Communication Skills for Leaders

When done well, leadership communication inspires trust and positive change, and drives better outcomes for individuals, teams, and organizations.

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What's Communication in Leadership & Why Is It Important?

Good communication is a fundamental leadership skill and a [key characteristic of a good leader](#). Leaders must be skilled at communicating with others in countless settings and relationships — with individuals and at the organizational level, in communities and groups, and sometimes even on a global scale — in order to achieve results through others.

What Is Leadership Communication?

Leadership communication is how leaders inform and inspire others, and it encompasses verbal, nonverbal, and written messages. From giving instructions and feedback to direct reports, to sharing the vision with employees, to mediating conflict with teams, to providing updates to stakeholders — effective communication in leadership is critical.

Why Is Communication Important for Leaders?

At CCL, we see communication as one of the [“fundamental 4” core leadership skills](#) — those timeless skills needed by leaders in any organization, regardless of role, industry, or location.

Leaders must be able to think with clarity, express ideas, and share information with a multitude of audiences. They must also handle the rapid flows of information within the organization and among colleagues, customers, partners, vendors, and others.

Effective leadership communication allows managers to deepen connections, build trust, and drive creativity and innovation through their daily interactions with others. It also helps during change or disruption, as communication is one of 3 critical competencies that our research has found are essential for [successful change leadership](#).

The Connection Between Communication, Conversations & Culture

In organizations, conversations are the foundation upon which the majority of communication happens, as people communicate every day through the formal and informal discussions they have with colleagues and leaders. And the more effective these conversations are, the stronger their organizations become — because [better conversations drive better culture](#).

Core Traits of Successful Leadership Communication



Authenticity

Be honest and sincere. Find your own voice; avoid using corporate-speak or sounding like someone you're not. Let who you are, where you come from, and what you value come through in your communication. People want, respect, and will follow [authentic leadership](#). Forget about eloquence — worry about being real. Don't disguise who you are. People will never willingly follow someone they feel is inauthentic.

Accessibility

Visibility is a form of communication. If you want to communicate well, be accessible. Emails and official missives aren't enough. Be present, visible, and available. Getting “out there” — consistently and predictably — lets others know what kind of leader you are. People need to see and feel who you are to feel connected to the work you want them to do. Find ways to interact with all of your stakeholder groups, even (and especially) if [communicating in a crisis](#).

Clarity & Confidence

Being clear and confident when communicating with your team helps avoid ambiguity, misinterpretation, and confusion. Speak in specifics, use nonverbal communication to augment your words, and speak not just with facts but also with feelings and values. Being able to speak clearly and confidently builds trust and commitment with your team.

Empathy & Respect

Empathy is critical for leadership success, and that extends to communication. Employees want empathy from their leaders and appreciate compassionate leadership. Acknowledge their feelings and pain points when you speak to them, and that will help them feel valued and heard, creating a strong culture of psychological safety.

Trust

Trust isn't something you can mandate — it grows from consistently demonstrating your commitment to better communication with those you work with. By modeling the values you hope to foster in your team and in your organization, you can build trust. And by building trust, you also encourage those around you to communicate more authentically, contributing to a culture of [psychological safety at work](#). When people feel safe with their team and organization, they're more open to sharing ideas and taking risks, which can lead to more creativity and more innovation.

15 Tips for Effective Leadership Communication

1. Communicate relentlessly.

Get vocal and get involved. Communicate information, thoughts, and ideas clearly — and frequently — in different media. Keep processes open and transparent, and find ways to help smooth the path of communication for your team, employees, or organization. Shed all traces of detachment and arrogance, and take the time to talk to your people.

2. Set clear expectations.

Set the tone. In every relationship, our behavior is guided by a set of rules or social norms — and in a professional setting, these norms tend to go unspoken. Be intentional about [establishing team norms](#) at your organization, whether you're leading a group discussion, mediating a conflict between employees, sending an email to your colleagues, or having a one-on-one conversation with a direct report.

3. Simplify and be direct.

Say what you mean. Be direct. Don't hide behind complexity or pile on a ton of information. Direct, clear communication can be the most important type of communication. This is even more important when [communicating in a virtual setting](#).

4. Illustrate through stories.

Use stories to bring your ideas to life. When you tell a good story, you help clarify a vision, goal, or objective. Telling good stories creates trust, captures hearts and minds, and serves as a memorable reminder of the message. This is key when [communicating the vision](#). Plus, people find it easier to repeat a story or refer to an image or quote than to talk about a mission statement, strategy document, or project plan. Your ability to create and communicate a compelling, authentic, and bold story will also help you [bolster your leadership brand](#).

5. Be prepared.

Do your homework. Poor communication in the past might mean your audience resists what you have to say today. So start familiarizing yourself with the context around an issue, and any alternative viewpoints and perspectives about it, so you're ready to handle any concerns or objections *before* you initiate communication. If you're met with resistance or presented with a different position, solid preparation will make addressing and overcoming objections much easier and communicate your ideas more effectively.

6. Know your audience.

Communication isn't just about what you say — it's also about who is listening. Different stakeholders may have different concerns. The way you approach [influencing others](#) will vary from one group to the next, depending on their needs. Tailor your influencing strategy for the particular person and consider their personality, goals, and objectives, as well as their roles and responsibilities. For example, someone who is highly rational may be more easily swayed by a logical appeal than an emotional one.

7. Reinforce intent with body language.

Don't rely just on words. Showing positive body language like eye contact, nodding your head, and other relaxed nonverbal communication can inspire team members and make them feel more comfortable communicating with you. A simple head nod or smile can go a long way to show you're

paying attention and that you care, and little gestures like this can add up, slowly helping you to build rapport and collaboration and transform your organizational culture, too.

8. Read the room.

Good leadership communication means being flexible. Watch your audience closely for nonverbal signs of engagement or disengagement, confusion or understanding, etc. and adjust your message and style accordingly. You can do this quite literally during in-person meetings, but you can also “read the room” in virtual settings by looking closely at others’ faces on the screen and by explicitly soliciting feedback.

If people are understanding your communication and aligned with your message, you may get lots of eye contact, see nodding heads, observe audience members leaning forward or demonstrating other body language that suggests alignment with your message. If you see listeners leaning back, with arms crossed, and bored or confused expressions on their faces, then you may need to adjust your message or delivery style.

It’s helpful to pause occasionally to let people ask questions and check for understanding, giving your listeners a chance to respond or seek clarification, etc. Stay flexible so you can continually notice how your communications are landing with your audience, and do ongoing adjustments based on the signals they send.

9. Ask good questions.

Leaders ask powerful questions. Ask powerful questions that open the door to learning what others really think and feel. The [best leadership questions](#) get right to the heart of things, cut through complicated situations, and identify levers that will really make a difference. Asking non-directive inquiries can also unlock insights — especially key in [coaching people](#), such as direct reports.

10. Listen and encourage input.

Good leaders listen more than they speak. Leadership communication isn’t just about the messages you send, but also the messages you receive. The most effective communicators are also good listeners with strong [active listening skills](#). When you listen well, you gain a clear understanding of another’s perspective and knowledge. So seek out, and then listen to, individuals from all levels of the organization — from the key stakeholders who have a lot of opinions you need to consider, to the new employees who may be reluctant to voice concerns. Allow people to air their concerns. Let team members know their input is valuable, so people feel comfortable speaking up. Pay close, respectful attention to what’s said — *and* what’s left unsaid. It will show those you lead that you care about both them *and* the organization.

Also, be okay with silence. Encourage others to offer their ideas and solutions before sharing yours. Do 80% of the listening and 20% of the talking. Demonstrate an interest in — and respect for — your colleagues, as this builds trust and makes the emotional connection that’s so important for effective leadership.

11. Take feedback seriously.

Feedback is a gift. Asking for candid feedback from your team or employees can foster a positive stream of communication, and it helps build trust overall. This tactic can also make your team feel more respected, giving them a chance to have their voices heard. If you take their feedback seriously, you will grow as a leader and enhance your skillset. However, if you ask for and then *don't* incorporate their feedback, the opposite is true — it could lead to a loss of trust and alignment. In fact, [our research has found](#) that following through with action is *critical* for leaders to convey they really were listening, as it shows that they truly heard and understood the other person's concerns.

12. Affirm with actions.

Leaders don't just talk — they act. Again, if people hear one thing from you but see another, your credibility is damaged. If employees speak up and you seem to be listening, but then do nothing based on what you learned, they won't feel heard. People need to trust you. Your behavior and actions communicate a world of information — so focus on following up where appropriate and be clear on the messages you are sending with your actions.

13. Initiate the tough, but needed, conversations.

Don't shy away from conflict. [Holding difficult conversations](#), whether with a customer or direct report, are an inevitable part of any workplace. It's tempting to ignore conflicts, but effective leaders must be able to address concerns as they arise. Be sure to approach any difficult conversation from a neutral perspective and explore both sides before coming to a conclusion. Work to problem-solve by inventing options that meet each side's important concerns, and do your best to [resolve conflicts](#) through open communication.

14. Involve others before developing a plan of action.

Leadership doesn't stop when the communication ends. Take whatever you've learned in the exchange, synthesize it, and present your plan to the appropriate stakeholders. Generating buy-in and making sure that everyone is on the same page before executing on strategy will be key to achieving organizational goals.

15. Remember your reputation.

Good communicators never compromise their reputations. At times, you may feel you are walking a fine line between being too aggressive and being too relaxed, and as a leader, you need to make sure you find and balance and avoid leaning too heavily in one direction.

To navigate these challenges and bolster your [leadership image](#), consider asking yourself thought-provoking questions like, “*When do I stay out of an issue, and when do I get involved?*” or “*How do I respond when errors are identified?*” Make a list of communication concerns you have, and ask a colleague to describe the behaviors they would consider too aggressive or too relaxed — their responses will help gauge how to move forward.

How Poor Leadership Communication Can Cost Your Organization

Workplace communication is a moving target. Leaders must continue to find new ways to make their communications more effective, purposeful, and trustworthy. But, what if communication becomes stagnant, unorganized, and messy?

Leaders may unintentionally derail their own efforts to enhance their communication. They may not communicate enough because of a fear of oversharing, they may think out loud at the wrong moment, or they may have been *too* honest with a colleague.

These challenges typically arise in high-stress situations, when expectations or deadlines aren't met, when an opportunity is lost, or when innovation is lacking. It can be frustrating, but it's worth putting in the extra effort to tackle these conflicts head-on with candid conversations and productive debate, because when a conflict is mismanaged, costs will continue to mount — whether they result in tangible out-of-pocket costs like turnover, or intangible costs like poor morale, decision-making, or broken trust. Learn more about the impact of poor leadership communication in such situations and [the costs of conflict incompetence](#).

How to Evaluate Your Leadership Communication Skills

Strong communication is one of the quickest ways leaders can build trust. Here are some actions that you can take while communicating. As you're reading them, rate yourself on a scale of 1 to 5 — with a 1 signifying it's an area that you need to work on, and 5 meaning that you have excelled:

- Avoid mixed messages: ensure that your words and actions are consistent.
- Act in ways that support the values of your organization.
- Go directly to the relevant individual to discuss the situation if having difficulty with another coworker or team member.
- Serve as a sounding board on sensitive issues for others.
- Share your opinions and perspectives, even when they're different from the majority view.
- Avoid being a “yes” person.
- Keep your focus on the big picture and the shared goals of the organization.
- Accept accountability for your actions and the results of those actions.
- Promote respectful dialogue and productive debate.

Now that you've assessed your skills, how high is your score? How well did you do? If you identified any areas that need improvement, begin today by marking the one that you will start with immediately to improve your skills in leadership communication.

BASED ON RESEARCH BY



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About CCL



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