

COMMUNICATIVE LEADERSHIP

THEORIES, CONCEPTS, AND CENTRAL
COMMUNICATION BEHAVIORS

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CORE

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Executive summary & recommendations

This is the first report generated in the research project “Communicative Leadership – Conceptualization, Analysis and Development of Core Competence” at Mid Sweden University.

The project, which runs between 2011-2013, is led by Associate Professor Catrin Johansson and conducted by the CORE and Quality Management research groups at Mid Sweden University.

The project is financed by the Swedish Knowledge Foundation and seven participating companies: Norrmejerier, Saab AB, Sandvik, Spendrups, Volvo Group and Nordisk Kommunikation AB. The project is also sponsored by The Swedish Public Relations Association as well as Per Zetterquist.

The research questions studied are how Communicative Leadership can be defined and evaluated; how it is perceived by leaders and employees; and how organizations measure communication, leadership, and employee health. The project will also develop a method to evaluate Communicative Leadership supported by research, and study relationships between Communicative Leadership and organizational performance and outcomes.

The present report contains an overview of research on leadership and communication; a tentative definition of the concept “Communicative Leadership”; and key communication behaviors of leaders related to organizational outcomes such as employee engagement, team confidence and organizational performance. This is a short version of the full report, written by Catrin Johansson, Vernon D. Miller and Solange Hamrin.

The authors define Communicative Leadership in the following way:

A communicative leader is one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision-making, and is perceived as open and involved.

Research highlights the important communication roles of top, middle, and team leaders. Leaders’ framing of messages and events influence sense making processes and actions of both leaders and employees.

Communicative Leaders create performance

Eight key principles of Communicative Leadership emerge from research:

Communicative leaders:

1. **Communicative leaders coach and enable employees to be self-managing.**
2. **Communicative leaders provide structures that facilitate the work.**
3. **Communicative leaders set clear expectations for quality, productivity, and professionalism.**
4. **Communicative leaders are approachable, respectful, and express concern for employees.**
5. **Communicative leaders actively engage in problem solving, follow up on feedback, and advocate for the unit.**
6. **Communicative leaders convey direction and assist others in achieving their goals.**
7. **Communicative leaders actively engage in framing of messages and events.**
8. **Communicative leaders enable and support sense making.**

We summarize the principles in four key communication behaviors of leaders: structuring, facilitating, relating, and representing.

Structuring

consists of the leader’s clarifying goals and expectations, defining mission, planning and allocating tasks, selecting appropriate team members, and providing sense making or interpretations of events.

Facilitating

work involves coaching and training, providing performance feedback, engaging in problem solving and encouraging self-management.

Relating

consists of creating openness, demonstrating supportive behaviors and approaching conflictful issues in a constructive, respectful, even-handed manner.

Representing

employees and the unit denotes being able to exert upward influence and be seen as capable of obtaining resources, actively monitoring the environment, and networking.

Communicative leaders create organizational performance by creating employee role clarity, commitment and engagement as well as team cohesion and confidence.

Communicative leadership thus leads to improved organizational outcomes on individual-, unit-, and organizational- levels.

These four key communication behaviors of leaders and eight principles can guide the development of leadership theory and practice within organizations. These principles can also aid in assessments of leaders when matched with leaders communication environment, requirements of work design and context.

Communication environments in organizations and units consist of culture, climate and systems for performance appraisal and feedback. Environments are shaped by and influence leader and employee communication. Leaders' communication behavior is also related to their individual communication awareness, acquaintance, attitudes, and ability. It follows that the concept of communicative leadership and research findings in this report must be translated and adapted to each and every organizational setting.

Recommendations

The report may serve as a basis for further development of communicative leadership through dialogue and discussions, evaluations, problem solving and support related to communication between leaders and employees. The following four recommendations may serve as a roadmap for developing communicative leadership in organizations:

- 1. Determine Values and Expectations**
- 2. Regularly assess Leader Communication and Communication Climates**
- 3. Develop Coaching Systems**
- 4. Increase collaboration between Human Resources and Communication Units**

Since communicative leadership is closely linked to the activity, it is important to discuss the values and communicative behaviors that are worth pursuing in any organization. By regularly evaluating the leader's communication and communication environment to get an overview of strengths and weaknesses, coaching systems and the training of leaders can be developed. In this work, collaboration between Human Resources, HR, and Communications departments is a success factor.

Communicative leadership

The concept of "Communicative Leadership" has been embraced during the past decade by a number of Swedish organizations that value communication. In these organizations, communication of leaders is continuously evaluated, and leadership programs to develop communication skills are developed. The Volvo Group has been a pioneer in the field, as well as the consultancy firm Nordisk Kommunikation, which has trained leaders and evaluated their communication in a large number of organizations.

Communicative Leadership refers to the way a leader communicates with her or his employees. The general assumption is that communicative leaders are better communicators than other leaders and managers, and that they have profound influence on employee attitudes, well-being and performance.

The concept of "Communicative Organizations" is similarly used by the Swedish Public Relations Association about organizations where: leaders and members are convinced that effective communication creates value and is a competitive advantage, decision making integrates communication effects, more members are better at communication, leaders are role models in communication, and communication professionals provide core competence .¹

Research has established that the benefits of good internal communication include job satisfaction, greater productivity, less absenteeism, improved quality of goods and services, reduced costs, and increased levels of innovation. Other studies confirm that employees who are more satisfied with top management's communication are more likely to be committed to the organization, and that personal feedback, supervisor communication and organizational information are important to employees' identification with their organizations. Increased commitment is positively associated with improved organizational functioning, and even small changes in employee performance often have a significant impact on the bottom line.

Accordingly, well-developed communication programs are important to overall organizational performance, and many organizations devote increased attention to audits and assessments of their communication and the promotion of "communicative" leaders. However, researchers have heretofore not studied these programs, and the concept of being a "communicative" leader has not previously been defined.

Leadership theory generally glosses over the communication aspects of leadership, with the result that communication is treated as secondary to other managerial actions and responsibilities.

¹ www.informationsforeningen.se

Communication researchers, however, have long demonstrated the important role of communication to leaders: ²

“Leadership occurs through the process of interaction and communication.”

These researchers regard communication as an absolute necessity to leaders and managers – not communicating equals to not leading or managing. CEOs and other senior executives in all industries and countries consistently list good communication skills among the most important qualities necessary for organizational success.³ Studies show that some form of communication occupies 70 to 90 percent of managers’ time every day. The time managers spend communicating underscores the importance of communication to organizing, change management, and organizational performance.

For the rest of this report, we will refer to leaders and managers interchangeably. Some researchers draw a clear dividing line between them and argue that leaders inspire others and create visions, while managers create rules and manage activities. We see these activities as different sides to the leader role, and have met both line managers who inspire their employees and CEOs who fail to do so. Thus, we will use the terms leader and manager broadly and synonymously.

Conceptualizing communicative leadership

We tentatively state that:

A communicative leader is one who engages employees in dialogue, actively shares and seeks feedback, practices participative decision making, and is perceived as open and involved.

This definition is based on our literature review of research on leadership, and evokes Redding’s almost four decade-old summary of research on effective managers. Redding states that the better managers tend to be more “communication-minded.” They enjoy talking and speaking up in meetings and they are able to explain instructions and policies. They enjoy conversing with employees and listen to suggestions and complaints. They are approachable, open in their passing along of information, and give advance notice of impending changes, and of explaining the reasons “why.”⁴

² Barge & Hirokawa (1989, p. 172) ³ Barrett (2006) ⁴ Redding (1972, pp. 436-446)

Communicative leaders expressively and “anchor” organizational goals and make sense together with their employees. To understand “why” is central to employees’ motivation and their actions and communication.

We also contend that four important individual prerequisites influence the communication behavior of leaders: communication awareness, acquaintance, attitude and ability. Leaders that possess communication awareness are consciously planning and adapting their communication to individuals and teams. Communication ability is both related to attitudes, i.e. which importance leaders give to communication; leader’s acquaintance with communication theories; communication competence and the enactment of communication in a certain environment, which may enable or constrain communication.

We would like to emphasize that the leader is not solely responsible for communication, although this report is confined to Communicative Leadership. Communication is a reciprocal process where participants have different expectations and make different interpretations. Employees are co-creators in the construction of dialogue and development of a common understanding. Both parties are responsible for their actions based on their understanding of what is communicated. Communication is also influenced by the surrounding organizational culture, communication climate, and the social context that can both enable and constrain the leader’s communication.

Communication and Leadership theories

Turning to communication research, we find that two approaches to communication have been very influential: one approach focusing on transmission of information and the other focusing on the formation of meaning. Traditionally, communication was viewed as a simple linear process, in which a sender transmitted a message to a receiver, who then understood and acted on the message.

From the 1980s onwards, researchers increasingly have applied a sense making approach to communication, in which leaders and employees are seen as active participants who interpret information differently. Through observations and interviews in organizations, they have studied communication in practice, for example examining how leaders frame messages and use stories in order to make sense of events. This research has been important in illustrating how leaders and employees create a collective understanding of visions, goals and change initiatives.⁵

⁵Johansson (2003); Johansson & Heide (2008)

Communication of CEOs

For organizational leaders, a core responsibility is to direct organizations towards achieving strategic objectives. Thus, articulating the organization's mission, vision, strategy and goals, is important for CEOs and organizational leaders in top management teams. Leaders at all levels are responsible for communicating and ensuring implementation of the strategic objectives. The effectiveness of implementation depends on how well other leaders at different levels of the organization perceive and clarify the goals. Trust is developed through personal relationships and close contact. Employee awareness of strategic goals is related to leaders' openness, listening, and careful articulation of strategic messages.

Top management, particularly the CEO, also has an important external communication role to represent the company or the organization in front of customers, owners and other external key stakeholders. Research has focused on leaders' rhetoric in letters to shareholders, during crises, and in CEO blogs. In this report we focus on the internal communication role of leaders, and conclude that studies of CEOs roles in internal communication are virtually non-existent.

Communication of middle managers

Middle managers have an important communication role in organizations. They link hierarchical levels, actively engage in downward and upward communication processes and also communicate laterally with their peers. The impact of middle managers on outcomes of organizational strategy processes is considerable. They make sense of messages in different ways, based on their position, individual experience and motivation, and also impact on each other's sense-making processes. Middle managers may increase the divergence in interpretations across hierarchical levels – or contribute to the development of a shared understanding in dialogue.

Middle managers' actions are both enabled and constrained by organizational conditions and relations to top managers. A key enabling condition is top management narrating the thought processes that have led to the formulation of the goals to be implemented. This is instrumental in helping middle managers make sense of how the present objectives are linked to past ones. Also, when top managers do not evaluate and reward ideas, motivation to promote one's ideas is undermined.

Leaders' communication behavior with teams and individuals

Research on leader communication behavior with teams and individuals is extensive. In the figure below we present the key communicative behaviors and their related organizational outcomes. They are supported by a large number of quantitative studies and meta-analyses published during decades.⁶ Several of these behaviors are best enacted in dialogue, which is an open conversation where all parties are contributing, between employees and leaders.

Profile of Central Communicative Behaviors

	Manager-Employee Level	Team or Unit Level
Initiating Structure	Set goals and expectations Plan and allocate tasks	Define mission Set goals and expectations Plan and allocate tasks Select Sensemaking
Facilitating Work	Coaching and training Performance feedback	Coaching and training Performance feedback Problem solving Encourage self-management
Relational Dynamics	Openness Supportiveness Conflict management	Openness Supportiveness Conflict management
Represent	Upward influence	Active monitoring Networking Manage boundaries Provide resources
	↓	↓
Outcomes	Role Clarity Commitment Engagement	Cohesion Confidence Group processes
	↓	↓
	Performance	Performance

⁶ A complete list of references is provided in Johansson, Miller, & Hamrin (2011).

Relevant Outcomes of Leader Communication Behaviors

A great number of studies have associated leader communication behaviors with organizational outcomes and performance. At the manager-employee level, effective leader communication is associated with employees having role clarity, commitment to the organization, and acting in an engaged manner toward their work assignments. At the unit level, effective leader communication is associated with work unit cohesion, the unit's belief in their abilities or confidence, and effective internal group operating processes.

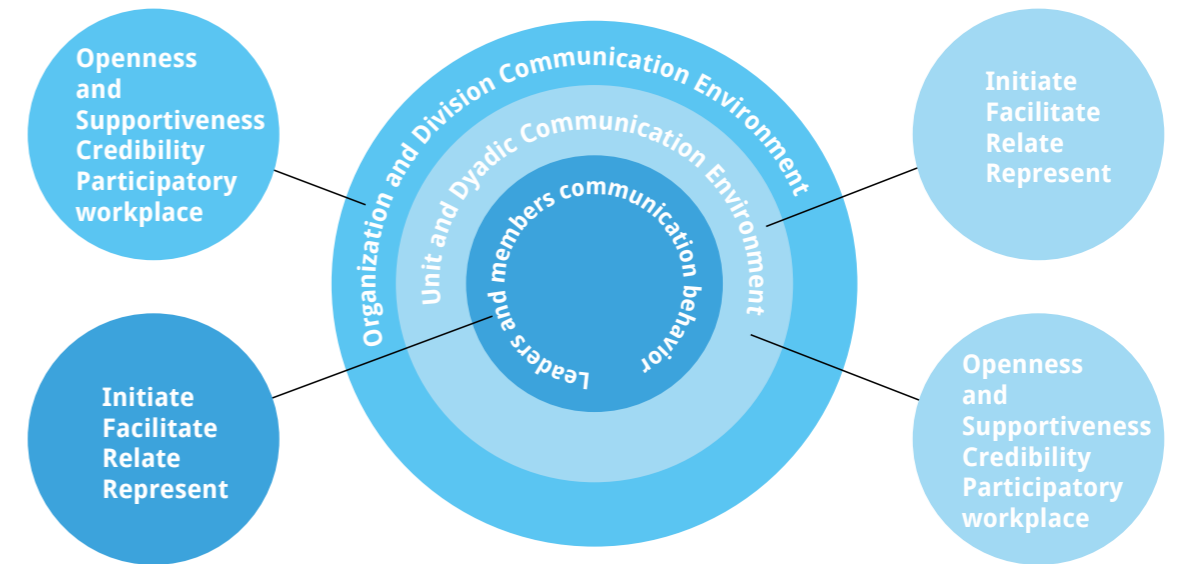
As a result of role clarity, employee commitment, and engagement; communicative leadership leads to higher levels of individual performance. As a result of unit cohesion, confidence, and effective group processes; communicative leadership leads to higher levels of performance at the unit level.

Communication Environments in Organizations

The interactions between leaders of all levels and those who follow or report to them shape, and in turn are shaped by, the communication environment in which they work. The communication environment may enable, but can also constrain the exchange of information between individuals and units, and their interpretations of different messages. Leaders' communication is influenced by the communication of other leaders. A "communicative" leader working in an environment where other leaders are not "communicative" may be negatively affected, and vice versa. Moreover, communication behaviors that work well in one environment may not be transferred to another context.

The organizational communication environment is composed of patterns of information sharing, feedback frameworks and rules through which the organization operates. They may differ between teams and units and are closely related to the cultures developed in those units. The extent to which these systems provide timely, accurate, and sufficient information to relevant parties influences individuals' attitudes toward the overall organizational leadership and their immediate managers. When the systems work well, they contribute to an environment where information from management is perceived as rich and mutual understanding is enhanced.

Below we illustrate how the characteristics of the environment concerning openness and support, credibility and participation influence communicative behaviors such as structuring, facilitating, relating and representing in different levels of organizations.



Communication Environments

The organizational and unit environments shape individuals' interactions, leading employees to be more (or less) willing to share feedback, engage in earnest problem solving, and pass along information. In turn, interactions between managers and employees and among employees shape the perception of the unit communication environment. In this respect, it is vital that organizations attend to their communication systems, communication environments at the organizational and unit level, and quality of interactions between all employees – not just attending to employees' perceptions of their leaders' communication behaviors.

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