

CHAPTER 10

Communications, Technology, and Social Media

*Regardless of the changes in technology, the market for well-crafted
messages will always have an audience.*

—Steve Burnett

Guide to Reader

Communication—listening and talking, holding meetings, sending e-mails, presenting PowerPoints, persuading and directing others, and participating in LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, and other social media. All these actions—and many more—come to mind when one thinks of leadership. It can be said that communication is the lifeblood of leadership; without it, leadership dies. Communication touches every aspect of leadership, from crafting vision to executing plans to leading change. Yet at the same time, it can be the foundation for the most severe stumbles that leaders suffer.

The Merger That Wasn't

In anticipation of significant changes in the postreform era, the leaders of two nonprofit healthcare delivery systems that had historically been competitors decided that their greatest chance for success would be to build scale and negotiating power through a merger into a single network. The respective CEOs and board members for the organizations met several times over the course of a year to map out the parameters of the deal. After much discussion, they decided that the larger of the two systems would become the dominant brand and that the CEO of that organization would be the leader of the new, merged entity. The CEO of the smaller organization would stay on as system COO, and the boards would be merged into a unified structure, with the most senior members placed on the system board and the more junior members serving on various functional committees. A letter of intent was signed to move forward with the initiative, and both CEOs began communicating the plan to their leadership teams and employees.

Both CEOs carefully crafted messages about the deal structure and attempted to convey their excitement around the prospect of moving forward together. The messages, however, failed to have the desired effect. Having been so deeply involved in the merger discussions over the past year, the CEOs fully understood the strategic rationale behind the merger, and they assumed their employees would understand as well. They did not spend much time explaining the implications of the significant changes in the healthcare environment, the effects of those changes on the local market, and the benefits of building scale both from the standpoint of improving negotiating position and

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influencing population health. As a result, the message around merging with an organization that had been the “enemy” seemed confusing and counterintuitive to employees. The CEOs also began an e-mail campaign to inform employees about the timeline of the merger process. However, the messages came across as tactical, did not provide sufficient information about the benefits of the proposed structure, and failed to assuage real fears about job loss in the merger process.

Employees from both organizations launched campaigns on social media to rally their peers, former patients, and community members to keep the hospitals separate. The campaigns emphasized concerns about losing the “unique culture” that each organization had built and how the merger might negatively affect the care provided to patients within their communities. The efforts exerted a great deal of pressure on the board members. The organizations made subsequent attempts to more effectively communicate the benefits of the merger and turn the tide of public opinion, but ultimately the organizations bowed to the pressure and agreed not to merge. Less than two years later, the organizations were purchased by separate investor-owned hospital-operating companies. They remain fierce competitors.

Be mindful: Because leaders often deal with numerous demands at once, employees typically form impressions of them through a series of brief interactions over time. Being thoughtful about each of these interactions can help ensure that the staff has a positive mental image of you as their leader and of the decisions you make. Problems with culture and poor communication can derail even the most well-thought-out strategies.

THE IMPORTANCE OF COMMUNICATION

In the dynamic and complex environment of a healthcare organization, clinicians regularly make decisions that have a dramatic impact—positive or negative—on the lives of the patients being served. Likewise, healthcare leaders frequently make decisions that have a dramatic impact on the overall health and sustainability of the organization. When a major decision is made, leaders rely on frontline staff to understand the rationale for the decision and to execute the decision in a manner that will move the organization toward its goal. Communication is critically important in garnering staff support, and it can make the difference between success and failure for otherwise talented executives.

Communication is essential for effective functioning in every part of a healthcare organization. Staff can receive broad direction from organizational documents such as a strategic plan, but leaders within the organization have the responsibility to translate these goals into actions that are understood and endorsed by the front line. Executives who lack proper communication skills will struggle to gain support and often can create animosity inadvertently because of poorly worded or ambiguous directions.

Historically, leaders were judged on their ability to produce results and on the “hard skills” of business planning and financial management. In recent years, however, organizations have become increasingly aware that excellent performance can be better sustained with an additional focus on the “soft skills” of communication, humility, and respect. Today, executives are judged not only on the results they achieve but also on the manner in which they achieve them. A survey of top US executives (summarized in Exhibit 10.1) found that leadership skills such as integrity and communication were rated as “extremely important” to overall organizational success by more than 90 percent of the senior leaders polled (Robles 2012).

EXHIBIT 10.1: Leadership Attributes and the Percentage of Executives Rating Them “Extremely Important”

- Integrity: 93%
 - Communication: 91%
 - Courtesy: 85%
 - Responsibility: 72%
 - Interpersonal skills: 61%
 - Positive attitude: 47%
 - Teamwork: 43%
 - Flexibility: 42%
 - Work ethic: 36%
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Source: Robles (2012).

Effective communication takes many forms—especially in today’s environment, where modern communications systems and approaches all present different benefits, appropriate uses, and challenges. Advances in technology have allowed for the proliferation of information on a scale and speed that were unthinkable a generation ago. Executives today must have the ability to craft effective messages, to understand the methods for broadcasting messages, to know how to manage multiple information systems, and to determine which methods are most appropriate for specific situations. In this chapter, we share protocols for enhancing your interactions—whether formal interactions in the boardroom, informal ones in a hallway, or those on paper, in e-mail, or over social media.

EFFECTIVE VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Verbal, or spoken, communication is the most direct and intimate form of communication. Most experts agree that it is typically the most effective. Verbal communication reveals emotion—passion, joy, anger, stress, concern, or excitement—of both the communicator and the receiver(s) of the communication. It is unfettered

and personal, and its impact is observable, memorable, and influential. A leader's approach to verbal communication will vary depending on the setting (informal chat versus formal presentation), audience (employee forum versus board meeting), and subject (celebrating excellent results versus communicating a layoff); thus the message must be crafted to meet the specific needs of the situation. Carefully crafting the message greatly enhances the likelihood that the communication will achieve its desired result. What does all this mean? Simply this: The preparation for communication requires forethought, planning, agility, sensitivity, and caution. The following protocol, summarized in Exhibit 10.2, can assist in this regard.

EXHIBIT 10.2: Protocol for Effective Verbal Communication

The following framework can assist in crafting effective verbal messages:

1. Practice dialogue, not monologue.
 2. Actively listen.
 3. Be concise.
 4. Be aware of nonverbal messages.
 5. Prepare, prepare, prepare.
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Practice Dialogue, Not Monologue

Getting a point across hinges on a two-way interaction, especially in the communication of a complex rationale or instruction. Open exchange and feedback are important in ensuring that both parties understand and agree with the direction being taken. Too often, however, time constraints and busy schedules relegate executives to an “information sharing” mode, in which they pontificate in individual and group settings without giving others a chance to respond. Once these patterns have been established, subordinates often become too intimidated to ask for clarification and may interpret messages incorrectly. The following steps can help create an atmosphere that encourages interactive dialogue:

- Take a deep breath and be deliberate in the delivery of your message to avoid seeming rushed.
- Pause frequently to give staff the time to ask clarifying questions.
- Ask staff to repeat the message in their own words to ensure understanding.
- Follow up through employee rounding to reinforce the key messages and obtain feedback.
- Follow up with a written summary or e-mail.

Actively Listen

Senior leaders often approach personal interactions with a goal of solving problems, rather than seeking feedback and truly listening to the needs and viewpoints of those with whom they communicate. This tendency can lead not only to frustration and misunderstanding but also to wasted efforts by executives who have not taken the time to discern the key issues important to the staff. Listening to what someone has to say is a sign of respect, and it can promote a culture of openness if leaders act on the feedback that they receive. In group and individual interactions, remember the adage: “You have two ears and one mouth; therefore listen twice as much as you speak.”

Be Concise

Executives should strive to craft verbal communication that is simple, can be delivered in a short amount of time, touches on all the salient points of the strategic message, and allows an opportunity for interactive discussion. When rounding in the organization, leaders should have a weekly list of five key initiatives or issues that they want to reinforce with the staff, and they should use this

list as a basis for interactions with the units. Leaders should also ask direct reports to create their own weekly “Friday Five” lists that they share with their staffs. The short lists prepared by direct reports can also help leaders keep abreast of the important issues in their areas of responsibility. Exhibit 10.3 offers additional pointers for being succinct in your communication.

Be Aware of Nonverbal Messages

Leaders should manage their nonverbal communication as carefully as they manage their words. Even seemingly insignificant details—for instance, staying behind your desk when someone enters your office instead of coming around to meet him—have potential to offend people with whom you interact. Eye contact, facial expressions, and body language indicate a person’s mind-set and often can send a more powerful message than what is being spoken. Appropriate nonverbal cues can be the difference between an employee’s perception of interest or distraction, emotion or lack of it, and attention or disregard. Leaders should maintain appropriate personal space, consistent eye contact, and open and approachable body language. Their facial expressions should express that they have heard and understood what employees have shared.

EXHIBIT 10.3: Want to Be More Succinct?

- Use fewer words.
 - Use words with clarity.
 - Use simple words.
 - Use fewer adjectives.
 - Get to the point.
 - Repeat your key message.
 - Think: “bumper sticker.”
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Prepare, Prepare, Prepare

In presentations and formal communications, preparation—both internal and external—is key to success. Internal preparation demands that the speaker learn and understand the specific material and overall subject matter to be discussed. External preparation involves the specific details of the presentation, such as the supporting slide deck or handout materials, the room’s location and layout, and the meeting agenda and invitation list. The most persuasive presentations often follow a discussion-and-dialogue format, in which the speaker knows the material so well that she does not need to refer to slides or notes to convey the message or to answer questions from the audience.

EFFECTIVE WRITTEN COMMUNICATION

Although verbal communication is the most direct and intimate way to deliver a message, the ability for humans to retain all the intricacies of a complex verbal message is finite and can be affected by personal biases and interpretations. Written communication therefore becomes more significant on a long-term basis because it provides a message that staff can keep and review repeatedly. Messages in writing thus provide great advantages, but they also carry inherent risks: Written communications lack the assistance of facial expressions, body language, and voice inflection, and they can easily be misinterpreted if not carefully planned and executed. The fact that written messages endure in perpetuity can also have human resource and legal implications if such messages are fired off in a haphazard manner. The following protocol, which is summarized in Exhibit 10.4, can help leaders communicate more effectively in writing.

EXHIBIT 10.4: Protocol for Effective Written Communication

The following framework can assist in crafting effective written messages:

1. Be selective in using written communication.
 2. Develop a mental checklist.
 3. Consider timing.
 4. Use a clear and personal writing style.
 5. Be generous with handwritten notes.
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Be Selective in Using Written Communication

Written communications addressed to large groups are impersonal and should be reserved for such purposes as general information sharing (e.g., announcing an upcoming employee forum), implementing policy changes that need to be communicated widely and referenced in the future, and providing in-depth, complicated, or technical information. When written communications are used to thank others, the messages should be handwritten and individually addressed, and they should contain specific information on the reason for thanks. Personal communications that have the potential to become emotionally charged should generally be handled face to face.

Develop a Mental Checklist

Before writing, leaders should use a mental outline to map out why they are writing, the specific message they wish to convey, to whom they are writing, the appropriate writing style to underscore the desired message, and the appropriate writing format (e.g., formal memo, letter, informal note). In recent years, e-mail has become the quickest and most frequently used format for sending written messages; however, leaders should be aware that e-mail generally does not offer the same impact as personally handwritten

notes and does not have the confidentiality of traditional written formats. Leaders should exercise caution in choosing the appropriate format when sending written communications.

Consider Timing

The timing of written communications is often more important than the content. Messages drafted when one is angry, upset, or tired can lead to embarrassing exchanges that the sender will soon regret. Remember this simple but critical point: Written communications—especially e-mails—last forever, and they can be easily shared or forwarded. In emotionally charged situations, a leader often benefits from allowing time to pass before committing a message to writing.

Use a Clear and Personal Writing Style

Consistency is one of the hallmarks of professionalism, and it is especially important in executive communication. The written “voice” in which executives express themselves reflects who they are as people and as leaders. Effective leaders know that their writing needs to be a genuine representation of their personality and leadership style. A leader who is affable and approachable but uses an aggressive and abrupt writing style will create cognitive dissonance with staff. As with verbal communication, leaders should be concise and clear in their written communications. They should avoid jargon, use concrete language, and be direct and to the point. Many executives make the mistake of using lengthy, complicated statements when simpler wording would be more effective—for instance, giving the direction to “terminate this employee” is less prone to misinterpretation than “give due consideration to ending the employment relationship with the aforementioned employee.” Readers might enjoy this sentence that was actually used in a

physician leadership-development workbook: “There are a large number of physicians, usually specialists and sub-specialists, who find significant challenges and difficulties with their abilities to maintain an appropriate sense of balance in their communications during interactions with others because typically and historically they have worked and practiced medicine in situations where most of what they say and communicate is involved with one-way messages and environments where feedback is rarely given.” An effective communicator might make the point more clearly: “Many physicians are poor listeners.”

Be Generous with Handwritten Notes

Handwritten notes clearly demonstrate that a busy executive has made an extra effort to send personal communication to the individual receiving the note. A note of thanks, sympathy, or congratulations sent from an executive to an employee’s home can make a tremendous impression on the employee. It can create a loyalty that far outweighs the few moments needed for the leader to write the message.

TECHNOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

Exciting advances in information technology have dramatically increased the speed and convenience of communication. Today, e-mail, Skype, and social media enable executives to break down geographic boundaries and communicate rapidly and broadly with employees. To remain competitive in a rapidly changing world, leaders must keep abreast of the latest trends in information technology and determine how to best use this technology. This chapter’s opening vignette demonstrates how social media can provide powerful mechanisms for spreading messages and

creating momentum—for good or bad—among employees. Leaders must make informed decisions about when to introduce technology to facilitate communication and how to set appropriate guidelines so that the technology does not endanger information security or cause productivity loss. The following protocols, which are summarized in Exhibit 10.5, can assist leaders in appropriately using technology to enhance communication in their organizations.

EXHIBIT 10.5: Protocol for Effective Use of Technology in Communication

The following framework can assist in effectively using technology to enhance communication:

1. Set guidelines for technology use during meetings.
 2. Be responsive and timely.
 3. Understand appropriate uses of social media.
 4. Apply the *New York Times* test.
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Set Guidelines for Technology Use During Meetings

With the proliferation of smartphone technology, the sight of people texting, responding to e-mail, or even surfing the web has become a ubiquitous distraction in all businesses, including healthcare. Quite simply, writing or reading e-mails or text messages during meetings or other work-related functions sends the wrong signals to others. Even if you think you are being discreet, others will notice you hunching over your cell phone when you are supposed to be paying attention. This behavior is rude, may cause you to miss important information, and curbs your ability to contribute in a meaningful way to the discussion. Unless you are administrator on call and need to respond to an immediate crisis, the messages can wait until the meeting is over. Many CEOs have adopted “no cell phone” meetings.

Be Responsive and Timely

Most leaders receive numerous messages on a daily basis through a variety of media, and many of these messages contain complex information, considerable data, and requests for action. Leaders should respond to all such messages in a timely manner. Leaders should not be so eager to clear out their inboxes that they respond definitively to messages without fully reviewing the information, but they must not let the messages languish. The most successful leaders develop methods to skim and triage their messages and try to respond to all e-mails within 24 hours.

Understand Appropriate Uses of Social Media

In the early days of Myspace and Facebook, healthcare organizations generally took a hard-line approach that banned all social media use by employees during work hours. Since that time, however, most organizations' social media policies have evolved. Used properly, social media can be a powerful tool to enhance communication, strengthen an organization's reputation, and develop a robust professional network. Nearly all hospitals now take a more proactive approach to social media. Most host Facebook and Twitter accounts, which allow leaders to share announcements of special events and exciting patient stories with the communities being served. Social media accounts also enable leaders to respond quickly to any negative comments posted online regarding the organization's services. Professional networks such as LinkedIn allow busy leaders to stay in touch and build new relationships in an industry in which leaders change employers frequently. Leaders should embrace the positive aspects of social media tools to advance their careers and professional reputations. However, some caution is in order: Personal social media use should occur only after normal working hours and outside of the office, and leaders should

never share or post sensitive information about their employers or patients. Leaders at all times are visible representatives of the organizations they serve, so they should hold themselves to a high standard on their personal sites. Pictures on a Facebook page showing a leader in risqué clothing or drinking alcohol with friends can not only prove embarrassing to the organization; they can also limit the individual's employment options for the future.

Apply the *New York Times* Test

Before writing an e-mail, sending a text, leaving a voicemail, or posting a comment online, ask yourself this fundamental question: Would you mind seeing that message published on the front page of the *New York Times*? If your answer is yes, you should reconsider the message. The facts are clear: Numerous professional careers have been harmed by an embarrassing photo on Facebook, an e-mail sent in haste, a false statement on LinkedIn, or a problematic tweet on Twitter. Electronic communication is permanent, is discoverable in a court of law, and has great likelihood of being shared. *Do not* write anything that you would not want to see become public. Frankly, considering how frequently this precept is violated, we suggest that readers read it once again. Consider the suggestions in Exhibit 10.6. In addition, see Appendix B for more in-depth suggestions for maximizing the value of LinkedIn without violating appropriate behavior.

SUMMARY

Effective communication is perhaps the most critical and most challenging skill set that leaders in any industry must master. Leaders may be brilliant strategists with plans to catapult their organizations to national prominence, but failure to communicate these

EXHIBIT 10.6: Professional Guidance on the Use of Social Media

1. Think before you post.
 2. Ask yourself this question: Do you really want profile information that is political, is publicly sensitive, or may reflect negatively on your job or career?
 3. Pictures used on *any* site should be professional. Definitely use a professional picture on LinkedIn.
 4. Guard your professionalism by monitoring what others post about you and “untag” photos that may be inappropriate.
 5. Be cautious when accepting friend requests.
 6. Do not join unprofessional groups.
 7. Make sure your language is not considered obscene or offensive.
 8. Use privacy settings to ensure confidentiality.
 9. Finally, although many social media sites are “personal” in nature, the reality is that leaders give up certain rights along these lines. Be cautious about what you share and what is shared about you.
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strategies in a clear and compelling manner can lead them to failure. *Leadership* can be defined as the process of influencing others toward common goals. The abilities to influence, inspire, persuade, and deliver effective messages are inextricably linked to all the core competencies that every healthcare leader must possess. Dye and Garman (2015, 50) write, “As important as vision is, it will not move an organization where it needs to go without systematic and compelling communication.”

GUEST COMMENTARY: JEREMY C. ADAMS

Digital communication tools amplify any signal sent by a leader, whether good or bad. Leaders therefore must carefully consider the type and content of messages they send and remain attuned to digital media’s risks

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and pitfalls. A leader's lazy, one-word reply to an e-mail, for instance, might initiate hours of unnecessary effort by subordinates. A smartphone's "autocorrect" typing system might drastically alter the content of a brief Twitter post seen by thousands. Public trust can be eroded instantly when a leader communicates an opinion or political position over social media that is at odds with organizational values.

At the same time, digital media, when used in a positive manner, can expand career opportunities, increase employee engagement, and help retain customers. Intranet articles and blog posts allow leaders to distribute long-form content—materials that might be overlooked if sent via e-mail—to interested followers. Platforms such as Twitter and YouTube allow leaders to communicate with many people at once without the delays of formal chains of command. A leader can use a variety of digital media tools to gain personal feedback, gauge public perception on a tough issue, or allow employees to report problems directly.

When using any digital communication platform, remember that what you communicate matters. It matters to you, it matters to the receiver, and it matters to all those who were not an intended receiver but still received the message all the same. Digital communication technology is a force multiplier—use it wisely.

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REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

1. What are your organization's policies on social media use? How could they be enhanced to facilitate more effective communication to staff and patients?
2. Using the protocols presented in the chapter, develop your own "mental checklist" to guide your e-mails and other written communications. How can this tool be used to improve the quality of your written communications going forward?
3. Do you have social media posts, pictures, blogs, or messages that might be considered unprofessional?

RESOURCES AND EXERCISES FOR LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

1. Many websites provide communications exercises to be used by trainers. Seek out these sites and try some of the exercises at an employee meeting. Use the exercises to generate discussion about the quality of communications within the work group.
2. Do you feel that gender differences drive different communication styles? Before concluding with an answer, consider the views of Simma Lieberman (www.simmalieberman.com/articles/maleandfemale.html) and the American Psychological Association (www.apa.org/research/action/difference.aspx).
3. Take one of the more common style tests, such as the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the Keirsey Bates test, or the Personalysis. (Some tests are available in abbreviated versions online: www.capt.org/take-mbti-assessment/mbti.htm; www.keirsey.com/sorter/register.aspx; www

- .humanmetrics.com/cgi-win/jtypes2.asp.) Have your spouse or good friends take the same test and compare results. How do your communication styles compare?
4. Social media have become a pervasive part of life. Gather a group of peers and discuss the various ways in which social media can be helpful or harmful. To what extent does everyone agree?
 5. Review the following books related to social media:

Golden, M. 2010. *Social Media Strategies for Professionals and Their Firms: The Guide to Establishing Credibility and Accelerating Relationships*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Lipschultz, J. H. 2014. *Social Media Communication: Concepts, Practices, Data, Law and Ethics*. New York: Routledge.

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Dye, C. F., and A. N. Garman. 2015. *Exceptional Leadership: 16 Critical Competencies for Healthcare Executives*, 2nd ed. Chicago: Health Administration Press.

Robles, M. M. 2012. "Executive Perceptions of the Top 10 Soft Skills Needed in Today's Workplace." *Business Communication Quarterly* 75 (4): 453–565.