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# Leader Communication Strategies

## Critical Paths to Improving Employee Commitment

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### INTRODUCTION

This article addresses how key leader communication strategies can increase worker loyalty. Leader communication has long been shown to be a critical factor in superior worker motivation and performance (Levering, 1988; Robbins, 2001), and has great potential to aid organizations in their quest for committed employees. Organizations' need for committed employees is now acute due to such recent shifts in the business environment as the current economic slowdown (which places a premium on increasing worker productivity), skilled worker shortages, increasing ethnic and cultural diversity, rapid technological innovations, and growing organizational reliance on "knowledge workers" to achieve competitive advantage.

Research clearly shows that leader communication practices play an integral role in developing and sustaining the employee commitment demanded by the preceding scenarios (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, 2000; Reina & Reina, 1999). However, leaders are often faced with a plethora of options and communication techniques that are not directly linked with strategic goals. To make sense of these various communication tactics, leaders need a systemic method which links practice to results.

This article presents such a model, which can also be used to diagnostically assess training needs. In essence, the model is a set of strategy-based "best practices" that guide leaders to more effectively transmit and foster organizational trust; which, in turn, will significantly enhance worker loyalty and

organizational outcomes. To best explain this model and its relevance, this study first examines the link between leader communication and worker loyalty. Next, selected, well-documented leader communication skills and practices are discussed, followed by a section that presents the Motivating Language Model and a resultant "best practices" checklist for managers. Finally, our study concludes with suggested future directions for both the research and applications of leader communications that promote worker loyalty.

### LEADER COMMUNICATION: A BRIDGE TO WORKER LOYALTY

Employee commitment is one of the most important measures of leader success. Worker commitment reaps benefits far beyond improved organizational performance. (High levels of employee loyalty have been linked to an estimated 11% boost in productivity [Mayfield, 2000]). Commitment also explains more than 34% of employee turnover. And this outcome can cost organizations an estimated 100% to 150% of the departing worker's annual salary (Cascio, 1998). Furthermore, loyal workers enhance an organization's reputation in the job market; and this elevated status helps to recruit better employees (Goman, 1991).

These valuable benefits of employee loyalty can only be achieved through high levels of effective leader communication. Research strongly suggests that worker performance, job satisfaction, and

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retention are all influenced by relations with his/her immediate supervisor (Goman, 1991; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Robbins, 2001). Such positive relations depend largely on competent leadership skills, many of which are firmly grounded in communication abilities including listening/feedback, coaching, and information-sharing (Goleman, 1998; Goleman, 2000; Robbins, 2001). Fortunately, these skills can be learned. Research also shows that leader communication abilities can be improved as a result of training, and this improvement positively effects the performance of direct reports (Goleman, 1998; Scandura and Graen, 1984).

Moreover, communication is a powerful catalyst for establishing and sustaining trust, the emotional state that is shared by highly committed workers and leaders. Leader communication is the bridge that transmits behavioral intent to employees, thus creating the foundation for trust. In their recent book, *Trust and Betrayal in the Workplace*, noted organizational development experts, Dennis and Michele Reina, define trust as a “relationship of mutual confidence in contractual performance, honest communication, expected competence, and a capacity for unguarded interaction” (Reina & Reina, 1999, p.10). To illustrate the role of leader communication in trust, the Reinas include a “Communication Trust” anchor in their general model of organizational trust.

### **SELECTED LEADER COMMUNICATION SKILLS AND PRACTICES**

This section examines applicable leader communication skills and practices that help to generate organizational loyalty. These techniques include across-the-board guidelines, listening/feedback, coaching, and information-sharing. To be effectively implemented; however, these methods require the proper organizational context.

Organizational loyalty is best nurtured when communication practices take place in an organizational culture that places high value on and engenders trust in employees. Reina and Reina (1999) identified communication trust as one of the four major components of cultures that embody trust in the workplace. Equally important, these authors and other management experts theorize that culture and communication practices have an interactive influence with each other. Robert Levering, coauthor of *The Hundred Best Companies To Work For In America*, defined managerial trustworthiness as tolerance and consistency, openness with communications, sharing rewards with employees, following-through on promises, and employee support that goes beyond contractual norms (Levering, 1988). This definition envisions both cultural and communication rules as mutually supportive. In conjunction with cultural

support, “walking the talk” is requisite for any communication effectiveness. In fact, communication that is incongruent with behavior can undermine employee motivation and be perceived as manipulative or insincere (Dulek & Fielden, 1990; Goffman, 1959).

Organizations with high trust cultures have distinct managerial communication practices that emerge to encourage organizational commitment. These practices were identified by a contemporary, broad based study on successful leader communication policies in companies that were coping with major restructuring changes (Robbins, 2001; Young & Post, 1993). Within this sample group, the authors identified a set of five principal communication practices in which these companies were always involved, regardless of their change initiatives: 1) Managers explain why decisions are made; 2) Communication occurs in a timely manner; 3) Important information flows continuously; 4) Direct supervisors and other leaders explain the specific implications of environmental and organizational changes to each level of workers; and 5) Employee responses to leader communications are validated. In other words, emotions are accepted by managers for what they are, not what they should be (Robbins, 2001; Young & Post, 1993).

Other leadership experts have listed additional factors as essential to loyalty-enhancing communication practices. Two classic studies extol the merits of active listening in leader-worker relations (Nichols & Stevens, 1957), and the managerial insights that can be gained from observing employee verbal metaphors, office settings, and body language ( McCaskey 1979). Similarly, Goman (1991) noted that optimal leader communication activities involve effective listening skills and understanding one’s own communication style. Again, Robbins & Hunsaker (1996) included listening ability and self-awareness among their primary training goals for leader competence.

These diverse practices can be more neatly categorized into types of leader communication skills that inspire worker loyalty. Most communication experts agree that active listening is a major factor. Active listening includes such behaviors as empathetic body language (eye contact, appropriate gestures and expressions), posing helpful questions, validating employee expression through considerate conversation turn-taking, and paraphrasing to ensure mutual understanding (Robbins & Hunsaker, 1996).

Feedback is another group of communication skills that is both critical to fostering loyalty and integrally linked with listening. Reina & Reina included “give and receive constructive feedback” (Reina & Reina, 1999, p. 82) as a major feature in their Communication Trust Model. Importantly, the authors emphasized the necessity for feedback timeliness and mutuality. To achieve mutuality,

leaders must be receptive to honest, useful criticism from employees. These leader communication practices are aligned with recent performance management innovations in multi source feedback. With multi source feedback, leaders receive developmental input on performance from a variety of relevant, anonymous sources (Dalessio, in Smither, 1998). In addition, constructive leader feedback is significantly linked with other worker loyalty-related outcomes such as performance, self-confidence, recognition, and emotional bonding (Goleman, 1998; Goman, 1991; Robbins and Hunsaker, 1996).

Guidance and listening are also incorporated into the communication activities of coaching. This behavior has been defined as counseling that is oriented towards subordinates' personal development. The process is ongoing and focuses on employee career aspirations, including long-term individual goals. In brief, coaches serve as employee mentors (Goleman, 2000; Robbins & Hunsaker, 1996). Understandably, this leader communication practice has a positive impact on employee commitment and also factors as one of six leader behaviors that achieve the best financial performance according to a recent, large scale, multinational study (Goleman, 2000).

The coaching role's more democratic aspects have also been incorporated into the leader's information-sharing communication functions. Information-sharing contradicts more traditional, autocratic leader communication tactics that withhold and control information as a source of personal power. Conversely, leaders bolster trust when they share the information that workers need to perform their jobs well. Mainly for this reason, Reina & Reina, (1999) included information-sharing as a principal component in their Communication Trust Model.

Organizations are increasing their information-sharing to employees due to rapid innovations in technology, especially in the area of human resource information systems. In addition to greater personal control, high technology based information-sharing reinforces worker loyalty due to its perception as organizational responsiveness to hectic schedules and work/family balance (McCormick, 2000). Also important, company intranet systems are now delivering just-in-time, highly specialized training modules that enhance career development on a 24/7 basis. Workers interpret this convenience as a valuable organizational benefit.

#### **THE MOTIVATING LANGUAGE MODEL**

The preceding leader communication practices are known to have positive influences on worker loyalty. Unfortunately, situational factors can substantially impact these tactics' effectiveness. For example, listening skills may be applied more successfully by leaders in conflict resolution scenarios

than in hands-on training sessions (Robbins & Hunsaker, 1998). Furthermore, as high technology innovations increase in complexity and number, leaders find that selecting the most goal appropriate communication options and media is sometimes bewildering.

What leaders need is a strategic communication framework to help them choose the most effective communication practices. Motivating Language Theory (MLT) offers such a comprehensive model by guiding leaders in communication tactics that improve worker outcomes (Sullivan, 1988). The predictive power of MLT rests on a few simple assumptions. First, Motivating Language represents all three speech acts as defined by linguistics research, "the basic or minimal units of linguistic communication . . . where language takes the form of 'rules governed, intentional behavior'" (Searle, 1969, p.16). Thus, MLT applies to most forms of leader-worker oral communication.

These three types of speech acts translate into organizational settings as the following: 1) *Perlocutionary or direction-giving language* occurs when a boss facilitates worker performance by clarifying tasks, goals, and rewards while reducing ambiguity. This language is similar to leader speech used in goal-setting and MBO initiatives. 2) *Illocutionary or empathetic language* takes place when leaders express compassion and humanity to workers. Compliments for performance and special consideration for work or personal problems are examples of empathetic language. Finally, 3) *Locutionary or meaning-making language* happens when a leader explains the cultural norms, values, and behaviors that are unique to every organization. These expressions are often indirect, and appear as stories or metaphors. Even so, meaning-making language can serve as a critical channel during organizational assimilation and change (Sullivan, 1988; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998).

The second and third assumptions that support MLT are congruent with the other forms of trust-inducing leader communications that are discussed in this study. Namely, leaders must also walk their talk, and subordinates must understand the intended messages that leaders send. Lastly, Motivating Language Theory assumes that leaders will achieve the best results when all three forms of speech acts are used at appropriate times (Sullivan, 1988; Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998).

MLT's positive relationship with worker job satisfaction and performance has been well-supported by research (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998). In practical terms, a 10% increase in Motivating Language (ML) use will generally boost worker job satisfaction by about 10% and performance by approximately 2%. In addition, a Motivating Language Scale has been developed that can serve as a

very useful diagnostic tool for pinpointing more specific areas for leader communication training programs. Again, the ML scale has been robustly supported for reliability and validity (Mayfield, Mayfield, & Kopf, 1998).

All of the major communication techniques presented in the previous section fall under one or more categories within the MLT model, and one of ML's greatest contributions is found with its ability to incorporate this wide variety of leader communication practices into a strategic framework. This framework provides leaders with the increased flexibility in their worker communications that is indispensable for today's organizations because of workforce diversity, rapid changes in the business environment, and much greater variability in workplace settings. In fact, Goleman (2000) found that the leaders who exhibited such communication flexibility in their leadership styles were most successful in both increasing worker loyalty and in reaching financial goals.

This same advantage that ML offers leaders becomes an indispensable tool when organizations confront the harsh economic realities of an unfavorable business cycle. Today, many businesses are faced with difficult decisions to ensure economic survival. Most of these decisions involve a negative impact on worker; i.e., reduced stock option values, freezes on bonuses and salary increases, diminished perks, and even job loss when restructuring is necessary. Paradoxically, the successful planning and implementation of these measures often requires higher levels of employee loyalty and support than organizations expect from workers during more prosperous times.

Such motivational challenges can be navigated best with the help of an ML based communication strategy. For example, direction-giving language supports the principal that employees perform best when given realistic workplace expectations. Such previews are especially necessary for "worse case" scenarios when organizations grapple with economic adversity. These messages reduce stressful ambiguity and clarify focus on what performance goals must be attained. In addition, empathetic language supports validation for the emotional states of workers during organizational distress (Robbins, 2001; Young & Post, 1993). Last, but still very significant, meaning-making leader speech can encourage employee motivation through stories that reinforce inspirational cultural values.

Meaning-making language's role in maintaining and strengthening worker loyalty becomes even more critical in scenarios where job loss and/or major cultural changes are necessary to restore an organization's financial health. Deal and Kennedy (1999) address the debilitating effect that such extensive changes have on employee loyalty, and how

these loyalty changes can effect such critical outcomes as performance and turnover. In response to these risks, the authors contend that downsizing and mergers too often occur when more feasible alternatives are available. Furthermore, in all such cases, leaders need to include employee loyalty as a key factor in strategic decision-making.

However, the authors also acknowledge that organizations will continue to choose downsizing and/or mergers regardless of negative impact, and that in certain situations downsizing and/or mergers are the only feasible options for organizational survival. Once these paths have been embarked on, the organization must then face the bigger challenge of rebuilding its culture and reviving the trust and commitment of its workers.

Motivating language can be instrumental to rebuilding loyalty in these situations. After downsizing and/or mergers, the relationship between immediate supervisor and employee becomes much more critical since confidence in top management is eroded by radical change. Deal and Kennedy (1999) noted that cultural cohesiveness tends to be replaced by smaller units of subcultures throughout the organization. Within these subcultures, a leader's ability to articulate the new cultural values and performance norms is a major method for reviving shattered morale.

At all stages of an organization's economic health, the ML framework allows leaders to reflect on language usage and optimize communication styles that are most supportive of organizational goal attainment. ML also can be used as a diagnostic tool. Leaders can analyze their worker communications to determine what areas need strengthening, and then take necessary steps towards improvement. To aid leaders in performing this analysis, we provide a "best practices" diagnostic checklist of leader communication behaviors (see Table 1). The checklist is drawn from the ML model and incorporates relevant leader communication tactics that have received wide research support. These "best practices" focus on oral communications, the area in which ML has been formally tested to date.

## CONCLUSION

The Motivating Language Model presents a clear, practical strategic path for improving worker loyalty through leader speech. Overall, MLT's greatest value may be in its role as a planning/measurement tool for implementing leader trust development programs. Towards these and related goals, the model offers multiple benefits since it can also be applied as leader communication assessment, a leader training guide, and as a framework for choosing appropriate leader communications to increase worker loyalty.

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TABLE 1.  
Best Practices Checklist

Direction Giving Language

- 1 Do I provide my worker's with positive feedback when they do a good job in performing organizationally relevant tasks?
- 2 Do I provide my workers with feedback on how to improve their performance when they are not performing at the desired level?
- 3 Do I clearly explain to my workers what is expected from them in their job duties?
- 4 Do I provide my workers with the relevant organizational information that they need in order to perform their jobs?
- 5 Do I tailor my performance feedback communication to maximize each worker's understanding?
- 6 Do I use the communication media that are most effective for providing performance direction and feedback?
- 7 Do I tailor my performance communication so it is most suitable for a given task?

Empathetic Language

- 1 Do I spend time talking with my workers about non-work related issues?
- 2 Do I give feedback to my workers in ways that validate their own feelings?
- 3 Do I talk to my workers about how to better deal with their colleagues in the workplace?
- 4 Do I let my workers know when I have had relevant experiences similar to their own?
- 5 Do I show my workers that I am willing to listen to their concerns?
- 6 Do I use the most appropriate media for expressing my ideas and feelings?
- 7 Do I show more or less empathy as is appropriate for a given situation?

Meaning-Making Language

- 1 Do I tell my workers about organizational opportunities for them?
- 2 Do I tell my workers stories about people who have been successful in the organization?
- 3 Do I tell my workers stories about people who have failed in the organization?
- 4 Do I provide new hires with information about the organization's culture?
- 5 Do I tell my workers what they need to do to fit in to the organization's culture?
- 6 Do I tell established workers about how to succeed in my organization's culture?
- 7 Do I provide workers with cultural information that is relevant for their jobs?

implementation of leader trust development programs, the Motivating Language Model gives leaders a broader perspective on which types of communication will be most suitable for diverse organizational settings. On a practical level, leaders can use the Motivating Language Model to determine a comprehensive strategy that supports organizational objectives, then choose appropriate "best practices" (including those listed in Table 1) to achieve such strategic goals. For example, the Motivating Language Scale might indicate that workers need more direction-giving language from leaders. In this case, performance and feedback training could be recommended. The expected outcomes of these tactical interventions would be workers who are more confident in task performance and hence more loyal to the organization.

Still, unanswered questions must be addressed about the link between Motivating Language Theory and worker loyalty. Many of these limitations have

been raised in this study, and can be tested with future research and applications. At present, MLT has only been studied with one -on-one speech communication. Could it also be successfully applied to improve worker loyalty and other key organizational outcomes with written communication or to groups in situations such as telecommuting or departmental team building? Similarly, which training methods work best to develop the leader tactical skills that promote worker loyalty, such as effective listening and coaching? Finally, leader loyalty communication training must be cost effective to organizations. Cost benefit models should be developed to select those methods that give the highest return on investment.

In conclusion, organizations are beginning to make meaningful advancements towards "growing" loyal employees. In today's workplace, leaders must learn to strategically adapt their communication styles towards these ends in order to achieve and sustain competitive advantage.

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