

# Communication Sabotage or Success?

## Seven tips for great manager communication

*By Lee Wilkinson*

**H**ere is Leo, at work first thing in the day and gazing at his busy work schedule. As always, his 'to do' list is huge; there are problems in a couple of the branches and the day is already packed with meetings.

That last meeting of the day, with his direct reports, is really important and it's going to be difficult: How to persuade them to follow through on making the changes they agreed to last time. He's been pondering the communication challenge. The changes are vital to progress, but Leo hasn't had time to focus on it because of everything else going on.

*Here is the moment of choice. He sighs. Does he set out on his busy day and sabotage his opportunity to create a change?*

*Or does he somehow find the time to think through how to handle that meeting successfully.*

The temptations are clear, aren't they? There are always so many urgent tasks to do. Leo has winged it before because he really knows what he is talking about and is passionate about the necessary changes. How do these choices sabotage or stimulate successful communication?

## Sabotage 1:

### Not taking time to plan your communication

**W**hen we are busy, we easily convince ourselves that we know the content for the communication, so surely we can communicate

about it on the spot. This option forces us to think things out as we talk. There's no time to organise it or to pre-plan the right way to connect. Worse still, while we are thinking hard, we produce a very boring voice. Then if people react badly, we don't have a planned response and instinctively retreat to the default option of fight or flight.

**This wastes important opportunities.** Most people will lose concentration and some will get annoyed. Leo's speech for the staff Christmas party had the potential for this type of sabotage. He did briefly plan it, but he was tired and busy. His quick plan accidentally focused on how tough the year had been and how hard they were all going to have to work next year. If Leo had not realized this, his people would have left unvalued and demotivated.

**What can managers do about this,** given that work only gets busier as time goes on?

### **Success tip 1: Make time to plan key communication**

**Planning does not use as much time as you think and will save you time in the end.** Once managers know good planning techniques, they can easily prepare the key elements of their communications and keep an eye on potential traps. Leo was surprised how little time it took compared to how productive the results were.

**With our planning template, you can quickly structure the communication and prepare for managing any likely objections.** Leo asked around and found on some great team success stories from the past year. He was able to acknowledge progress made and stimulate his audience about challenges coming up in the next year. Staff went off on holiday feeling valued and positive about the coming year. This made further initiatives much easier to introduce in the New Year.

## Sabotage 2:

### Not understanding your own communication style

**E**veryone has their unique pattern of communication and research shows that most of us believe that our communication habits are above average. We may think we communicate really well, but our habits will not suit everyone on the receiving end. For example, extroverts can often think that talking about a problem is the same thing as solving it. These outgoing people love discussing the issue, but often don't pin down the action points required. Other people in the conversation get very frustrated and the meeting leaves the problem unsolved.

Leo, for example, is a quiet person who likes to think things through before he speaks. In Board meetings, some people think he is short on ideas and is not innovative. Others decide that stronger personalities in the organisation will push him around. Leo has many innovative ideas and knows that he is a strong leader, so how to change their perceptions?

### Success tip 2: Use your communication strengths and counter your weaknesses

You can develop an understanding of your unique communication style and it is an enormous relief to be able to organise your communication to make the most of that style. For example, a person with a quiet style might always make sure he used a clear and interesting structure for a presentation, or find interesting anecdotes from his reading about an issue. Our extrovert might consciously use some tools in her communication to enable her to stop talking and listen to others, or she might prepare a list of criteria for knowing that the meeting has agreed on a solution to the problem.

Once we worked with Leo to harness his communication strengths and manage his weaknesses, he was able to use tools to change people's perceptions and create enough space to be at his best. It was great to see

the buzz he got from seeing people's perceptions change.

## Sabotage 3:

### Not reflecting the vision in your communication

**L**eaders often pay lip service to their vision and then wonder why their people are just going through the motions. If we just focus on what we want people to do, or how we want them to do it, the communication is purely transactional. Simon Sinek talks about this very effectively in his work on The Golden Circle. Most people's communication focuses on the 'what' we are doing, or should be doing and sometimes they focus on the 'how' we should be doing it. Without a core motivation, safety initiatives lose way, money invested is wasted, and those accidents keep happening.

Leo's health and safety initiatives usually put a lot of emphasis on the 'what' of vital policies and procedures for workplace safety. He made a bit more progress once he added in the 'how' staff might do the safety, with catchy slogans such as 'looking after your mates' or 'be prepared to call out senior managers'. All very good, but the slogans became clichés and people reverted to their old habits. How can we tap into the power of emotion when we live in a practical world?

### Success tip 3: Align your communication with your vision

The more permanent solution comes from the vision – getting clear 'why' we are doing it. This strikes to the heart of motivation and when you find a way to people's hearts, your communication will engage them. Your vision for your team, the vision for the organisation is the route to their hearts. For example, if you are communicating about reducing error rates and your vision is about faster responses to customers, connecting the errors to the real way that speed assists customers, your communication will be more effective.

Leo's organisation did have a workplace safety vision: 'Send all our people home safe, every shift'. Once knew how to align his safety communication with the vision, he found ways to make the effect of accidents on families very real. His messages became far more effective, plus the added bonus of making the communication easier. He is typical of our clients - often they already have a clear vision and with some useful tools, they can bring it alive in day-to-day communication.

## Sabotage 4:

### Unclear purposes for the communication

**I**f you do not focus on your purpose for the communication, someone else will harness the moment for their purposes. The communication will meander through people's egos, or negative people will channel it into destructive emotion. The rest of the people finish the meeting feeling disappointed and frustrated. As the leader, you will know that the meeting got hi-jacked.

If Leo goes into his manager meeting without being clear what he wants to achieve overall and with each agenda item, he will be lucky to achieve anything positive, but how can you have a worthwhile purpose to a weekly team meeting?

### Success tip 4: Focus on your goal for the communication

Before and during the communication, keep in mind two aspects of what you want to achieve - your purpose in having the communication plus what you want the listener to think about you.

For example, if you decide that your purpose for your Christmas 'thank you' is for people to feel valued for their work and excited about next year, that will provide the frame for the speech. It will also remind you that you want to come across as someone who values your staff and who is stimulated by your job. Step by step, with tools to know what you want to

achieve from communication, the doing becomes easy.

## **Sabotage 5:**

### **Not seeking to understand what others are communicating**

**T**his sabotage comes in here chronologically but in some ways, it should come in everywhere! When we fail to listen to the other parties in the communication, we are talking to ourselves, and no one gains anything from that. If we do not want to hear about people's problems, they will just fester. If we are not prepared to listen to alternative suggestions, we might not find the best solution. If our people do not feel heard, they will become very negative.

Leo found it very difficult to listen when managers were resisting changing the command and control culture to one of collaboration and accountability. They were so wrong and it was so bad for the organisation. What can you do when people put up frustrating barriers to your great ideas?

### **Success tip 5: Listen to understand your listeners**

Think about the situation from the listener's point of view, not just from your own point of view. When they respond in a communication, you need to stop and listen fairly to what they are saying. Put simply - get out of your own way and listen to others, not to yourself.

Listening is a broader issue too - we need to listen strategically, so we know what is going on in the wider context. If we think about the possible reactions of the others in the conversation ahead of time, we can prepare ourselves to handle them constructively. When negative emotions inevitably arise, we can create a far more constructive atmosphere. Usually we make faster progress as well.

Once Leo prepared for listening and worked on the skill, he then was ready to put his own reactions on the back burner and focus on really trying

to understand what his team members were saying, or feeling.

## Sabotage 6:

### Boring your listeners

**I**f we are just talking content, people on the receiving end will turn off and think about something else. The immediate manager is the person who is most likely to talk at the right level for a group of people. More remote managers often use different vocabulary and examples and presume that the group is thinking about things in the same way that he is.

Leo has a quiet voice. When he is thinking hard, his voice becomes a monotone. He is a technical expert and can easily drift into very complex technical language. How does a busy technocrat avoid that happening?

### Success tip 6: Think about how you will engage them

Deliberately include approaches that retain people's attention. With some planning you can include tools like interesting anecdotes, a metaphor that makes the idea clear, maybe some surprising data. Plan to handle the personalities you are dealing with by consciously finding tools to engage them. If you are dealing with a bunch of extroverts, you will need to find ways for them to interact and you will need to find some lighthearted anecdotes. If there are introverts in the room, you will need to give them time to think and they will want more background to the situation.

Leo deals with a lot of introverts. With some good systems in place, he was able to quickly engage with his audiences, and sometimes even make them smile. He was able to do a good job of handling even difficult issues. Engagement techniques that work well often make the real time communication much easier.

## Sabotage 7:

### Trying to sell us a solution when we don't feel we have a problem

**S**o often managers leap into talking solutions, when their staff don't even think they have a problem. The gap in perception is understandable - the managers might have spent the last month thinking about an issue and figuring out answers. They have moved on from the problem while staff have not begun that thought journey. Of course they won't agree about the changes. Why should they, if they don't see a problem?

Leo found workers and supervisors were stuck in the old ways of doing things and were very resistant to change. They couldn't see anything wrong with command and control approaches to sorting out technical problems. Leo was frustrated when he saw how slowly solutions were developed, how many resources were wasted and how it distracted managers from more valuable roles. Why on earth couldn't they see it?

#### Success tip 7: Inflict pain!

When you need buy-in to a solution, make sure your listeners understand the problem. If the issue is new to them, you may need to spend a lot of time communicating about the problems before there is any point discussing potential solutions. In the sales world, this is sometimes called 'inflicting pain'.

Leo needed his direct reports to work with staff to work on solving their own problems instead of bringing them straight back to the managers. There was no point in trying to change the approach until managers truly understood why command and control was a problem. Once they did understand the way it sapped resources and attention, they were much more excited about encouraging staff to use their initiative.

## Where to from here?

**I**n this report, I have outlined seven key pivotal very simple tools that have great potential. Worked through with managers, they are enormously valuable and energizing. There are also heaps more that are possible. You are not on your own with your challenges in getting good communication and we have helped hundreds of people become better communicators at every level.

If you want to find out how to do that, call me to arrange a **Communication Development Strategy Session**. During this session, we will explore your organisation's communication challenges, current habits and the results you want to achieve. We will work out the best way of creating engaging communication for your leaders. You can decide whether these solutions are a good fit for you.

The conversation will take about one hour. We can talk in person or by telephone. Email me at: [lee@communicate.co.nz](mailto:lee@communicate.co.nz), or call me on 04 471 0845.

## About Lee Wilkinson

Put in a short bio here that highlights your experience and expertise.