



Making Communications Matter

How to share
ideas in the
post-COVID era

The COVID-19 pandemic demonstrated how resilient organizations could be. At the same time, remote work revealed that communication skills had become even more critical – not only for leaders, but for critical talent at all levels of an organization.

Now the stakes are even higher. Every organization is navigating a new work environment that mixes remote and in-person engagement. Employees have higher expectations and more demands for feedback. Customers want clear explanations of a company's value proposition. Board directors and investors are seeking succinct, logical corporate strategies in the midst of a downturn. And leaders are expected to address unfamiliar topics in a roiling atmosphere of political and social change.

To succeed in this new era, organizations must ensure that their leaders, managers, and high-potential employees can lead discussions and communicate effectively. Yet many struggle. Why?

In his recent book, *The CEO Test*, former Amgen chief executive Kevin Sharer writes that “getting rid of complexity is the Swiss Army knife of leadership.” It’s a tool that is missing at all levels of business.

Most companies are confounded by complexity because they misunderstand “communications.” They operate under the belief that communications is a function of PR, product announcements, CEO town halls, and crisis planning. Instead of helping their leaders and top talent become clear and persuasive communicators, companies continue to invest in training for “executive presence.” Typically, media coaches are hired to improve the performance of leaders whose growth path depends on engaging with high-stakes audiences.

The people with the best communication skills are gaining the most influence inside business organizations.

The emphasis on “stage presence” has proven to be a false hope. The hard truth is that, in many companies, most employees have no natural gifts for public speaking or sharing ideas. Nonetheless, many of these employees lead critical business functions, oversee large teams, and often present high-stakes decisions to senior management. What matters most in these situations is not “stage presence,” but the ability to advance ideas in plain, jargon-free language with a clear flow and strong logic.

Efforts to turn leaders into Oprah Winfrey or Steve Jobs are misplaced.

There is a better alternative. Companies should use today's volatile business environment to help their leaders and high-potential employees build skills that enable them to communicate in a way that is clear and compelling. Three ideas ought to dominate these efforts.

1 Brevity Drives Productivity

A CEO once complained that every hour-long strategy discussion he attended was dominated by 50 minutes of presentation, followed by 10 minutes of discussion. An enduring problem of corporate life is the failure to create meetings where rich, structured, productive discussions take place.

In the era of Zoom, the 60-minute meeting becomes anachronistic. Most meetings can be 45 minutes – provided participants have the ability to make presentations succinct and engaging, and lead discussions that are focused and organized.

Indeed, there is a strong case to be made for mastering communications in 10-minute blocks. This does not imply that effective communication demands “overly simplifying” or “dumbing down” content. It requires reducing the clutter of corporate presentations and focusing on key decision points that can be explored later in the meeting or during another, more focused session. Leading this type of discussion is an essential leadership communications skill.

The same brevity and focus should be a requirement for every type of business communication: investor presentations, product pitches, board meetings, or team syncs. The point is not to fill time, but to use every presentation as a platform for productive discussion and issue analysis.

2 Structure Guides Effective Presentations

The best communicators are those who impose a structure on a diffuse set of ideas and establish a point of view. Strangely, very few organizations train leaders to develop this skill.

As corporate employees know from experience, most internal business communications are delivered as rambling lists of objectives or product details that no one can remember. Professional coaches offer “storytelling” or humor skills as an antidote – which is only helpful for the few endowed with those natural gifts. Now, the shift to virtual meetings makes these problems more apparent than ever.

The distinction between a dull business discussion and an engaging one is structure. The best communicators are those who impose a structure on a diffuse set of ideas and establish a point of view. Very few organizations train leaders to develop this skill.

Yet “structure” makes all the difference. It enables a sales leader to deliver a persuasive pitch rather than rattling off a product’s features. It turns a quarterly business review into a deep analysis of opportunities. Good structure forces someone to develop a thesis, establish the right amount of background, identify a persistent problem, and then match that problem with a tightly focused plan of attack.

Unlike “charisma” or “storytelling,” structure can be taught – and mastered. Introverts and extroverts, engineers and sales leaders, first- and second-language speakers can all learn to structure their ideas. It does not require confidence, but it builds confidence by giving a discussion leader the ability to control and direct a conversation.


3 Outcomes Must Shape Discussions

The most common flaw in business communication is failing to prepare for the kind of discussion you want to have.

Presenters often arrive at a meeting without fully considering what outcome they want to achieve – or even what type of meeting they are leading. Video calls have robbed presenters of the pre-meeting chatter and visual cues that often help set a meeting's tone. In today's evolving environment, it is more critical than ever to approach each phone or video conference with a clear sense of what has to be achieved.

Time is wasted and productivity is sapped when the discussion leader fails to determine and clearly articulate whether a meeting is designed to reach a decision, debate a strategy, provide an update, or simply educate colleagues. While complaining about the redundancy of meetings is a favorite corporate pastime, companies with a deep communications culture hold more meetings – and make better decisions. This is because their meetings are focused and driven by debate, lively engagement, and clear direction.

It is an immutable law of business that bad communicators become failed leaders. Many executives claim their first responsibility is to “communicate, communicate, communicate.” But what if they capture no one's attention, inspire no one's confidence, or inform no one's thinking? Platitudes, however frequently and passionately repeated, are still platitudes.



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In an era when sharing thought-provoking ideas and engaging colleagues and customers has never been more important, strong leaders must think about communications not as “wordsmithing,” but as the ability to articulate ideas, increase productivity, and move organizations forward. The companies that master how to share their best thinking will be the companies that move fast, emerge strong, and win – in any environment.



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