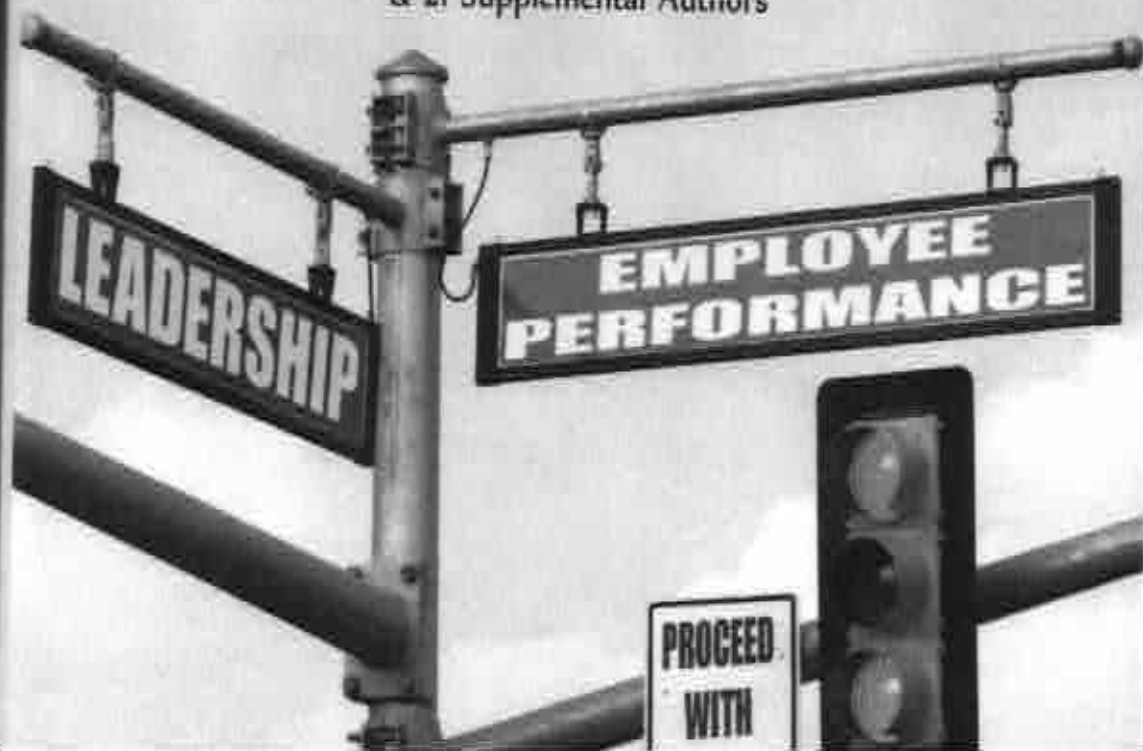# Laws of Communication

The Intersection Where Leadership Meets Employee Performance

Richard Schuttler, Ph.D.

with Jake Burdick
& 21 Supplemental Authors

LEADERSHIP

EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE

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CHAPTER 21
EVALUATING THE COMMUNICATIVE STRUCTURES AND PATHWAYS

Michael J. Nanna

What is Communication?

Communication is touted as being the *sine qua non* of building and maintaining both healthy relationships and organizations. It is a word that is frequently bandied about as being vital to addressing employee concerns and for improving the overall functioning and health of an organization. But, effective communication, although easily stated, is probably the single most significant obstacle that an organization can confront.

Why is it that something that seems so simple is in actuality infinitely complex? One reason, perhaps, is that too often communication is taken for granted, at least superficially, as being straightforward. For example, a simple command such as, "please close the door," is easily understood and readily addressed with minimal confusion, provided that both the subject and object in this dyadic exchange speak the same language.

It seems noteworthy to point out that if the person on the receiving end of the command has even a minimal linguistic deficiency in the language in which the command was spoken, simply is not paying attention to the request, or has no interest in the request, what at first seemed simple has now become increasingly complex, if not impossible. And, this example is probably one of the simplest forms of linguistic communication, i.e. it is one directional, involves only two people, and consists of a single simple command. Complicating things even further is the fact that a great deal of communication is actually non-verbal in nature and often not direct.

What does it actually mean to communicate? Although the term "communication" is often thrown around liberally, what does it actually mean to communicate? What are the requirements that must be met, and how do we measure whether something has actually been effectively communicated? There is little doubt that what seems to be an uncomplicated process on the surface is in actuality anything but uncomplicated.

For example, using our above scenario, what would be the intended outcome if, while the person giving the verbal command (in this case to close the door) simultaneously signals using body language (e.g., a hand signal), that the person receiving the command in actuality should *not* close the door? What is really being communicated in this situation, and how is one to discern between the contradictory signals?

At the most basic level, communication is a directed attempt to (accurately) convey the multi-dimensional internal experience of one person via a two-dimensional medium (usually language) to another person. This is done in an attempt to evoke that same multi-dimensional experience within the individual or group of individuals on the receiving end. This is particularly true when we move beyond the simple command level of communication and enter into the arena of abstract concepts, complex constructs, and hypothetical future events. Even if we take the simplest communicative pathway, one between two individuals, and even if we can assume that the two individuals come from identical socio-economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, it is an exceptionally complex proposition; and one fraught with potential pitfalls of misunderstanding, misinterpretation, and even a complete lack of comprehension.

If we acknowledge the simple fact that many people come from different socio-economic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds—let alone professional or gender backgrounds—the probability of effective communication decreases exponentially. Then multiply the number of communicative pathways that exist within even the smallest of organizations and the complexity indeed becomes for-

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given the underlying complexity of human language and commu-
nication in all of its forms, e.g. verbal and non-verbal.

Given this complexity, what can be done to facilitate effective
communication, and what are the foundational requirements neces-
sary for effective communication? How can people in relationships
and across organizations effectively address the potentially unlim-
ited number of pitfalls that lie in wait, ready to thwart even the best
of intentions? These are not easy questions and have been the fo-
cus of countless psychological, sociological, and leadership studies
over the years. What is more, the significance of these questions is
taking on a greater level of importance as the world continues to
shrink and as the number of multinational and cross-cultural coop-
erative efforts continues to increase both in scope and number.

Complicating the situation even more is that not everyone has the
same innate capacity for effective communication (e.g., language
deficiencies, etc.) and in other cases people are simply not recep-
tive to, or interested in, what has been communicated. Personality
conflicts or poor morale among employees may leave people feel-
ing disempowered, dissociated, and as a result, less receptive to
hearing what others have to say, thus further inhibiting communi-
cation before it even has a chance to start.

Here we tend to get at pre-existing structural, cultural, and person-
ality issues. For example, the simple scenario outlined above
represents an optimal situation where all parties involved in the
communicative pathway are trying to, or are at least open to,
communicating with one another—a situation that is often not the
case. In particularly toxic environments, attempts at communica-
tion often result in nothing but static.

Human relations are indeed complicated and rife with contradic-
tion. Competing agendas, family and domestic issues, emotional or
psychological problems, health issues, low job satisfaction, lack of
confidence, improper training, lack of respect for senior leaders,

and personality conflicts all work to further impede and even exacerbate an already tenuous situation. Still, even with all of these potential impediments, the need to communicate is very real and is absolutely necessary for the successful functioning of personal relationships, families, businesses, schools, and society as a whole.

Characteristics of Good Communication

Given what seem to be insurmountable obstacles, what can be done to increase the probability of effective communication occurring within organizations that are relatively healthy, and what can be done to implement more effective communicative and, hopefully, transformative strategies within organizations that are not? Schuttler identified two essential laws of communication that are necessary for developing and maintaining healthy organizations. He further identifies essential benchmarks and qualities relevant to high performing organizations and describes them as being both precursors to, and qualities of, healthy organizations. At the foundation of these healthy qualities is communication. Of particular importance are how supervisors communicate with subordinates and how the organization as a whole communicates with all employees and stakeholders. I suggest that how employees communicate with one another be added as an additional factor, which can be equally important.

The primary characteristics associated with what Schuttler identifies as being "best in class businesses," i.e., businesses that function at a very high level, include the following:

1. Open and renewed communication

2. Corporate citizenship

3. Continuous improvement

4. Customer-focused

5. Trustful environment

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6. Feedback is regular and constantly sought

7. Visible leaders

8. Shared strategic focus

9. Vision and mission lived

10. Low absenteeism

11. Little confusion

12. Active customer participation

13. Multiple vehicles of communication

14. Seamless influence

15. High morale

16. Entrepreneurial spirit

17. Two-way communications

18. Clear focus on priorities

Fundamentally, these characteristics represent the sum total of the relationships that exist between people within an organization. Indeed, relationships are the ultimate building blocks upon which an organization is built, managed, and ultimately maintained. Unfortunately, cultivating and maintaining good relationships can be difficult, because if we examine relationships in more detail we see that underlying any good relationship is an ability to effectively communicate. It is a circular relationship in that the seeds of one quality yield the fruit of the other and vice versa.

Closer examination of the list suggests that these qualities are not one-dimensional, but instead can be broken down into (at least) two separate categories. For the purposes of this chapter, I have

broken down the qualities identified by Schuttler into two major categories: 1) qualities that can be classified as attributes (i.e., qualities that are more structural in nature) and 2) qualities that can be classified as functional (i.e., qualities that are more process oriented). This is an important distinction because both attributes and functional qualities are necessary characteristics that most likely work in a synergistic manner within most, if not all, healthy organizations and relationships.

For the purposes of this chapter, it is helpful to think of attributes as being foundational qualities that provide a fertile structure upon and within which functional qualities have a *better chance* of taking root and ultimately propagating. As with most things in life, a strong foundation is essential to, and even pre-requisite for, proper and healthy functioning and stability. For example, if we take a healthy seed and plant it in soil lacking in the necessary attributes (e.g., sufficient levels of nitrogen and oxygen, moisture, etc.) the seed simply will not germinate. At best, the seed will remain dormant and may eventually decompose over time.

Consequently, having a strong foundation that lacks appropriate functional qualities will most likely lead to stagnation. For example, a healthy seed that is planted in fertile soil will still not germinate, and certainly will not flourish, without sufficient and appropriate levels of water and, after sprouting, sunlight. Even the "simple" act of seed germination is in actuality not so simple when the necessary attributes and functional precursors are lacking.

Taking this example a step further, once the initial attributes and subsequent functional qualities have been established, i.e., those needed to sprout and initially grow our seed, the resulting sprout still requires regular watering, sunshine, and nutrients if it is to grow into a mature and self-sustaining plant. Even then, a mature plant still needs regular watering and exposure to sunlight. Likewise, cultivating or reinforcing healthy behaviors and relationships within an organization is not a static process and represents only one-half of the process. Subsequent steps must be taken to ensure that a healthy dynamic, once established, is maintained.

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It seems important to note that attributes and functional qualities
are not mutually exclusive, and that there is most likely a great
deal of overlap between them. Nonetheless, there appears to be an
apparent delineation worth noting. For example, the characteristics
identified by Schuttler might be broken down as follows:

Table 21.1. General Attributes and Functional Qualities

General Attributes	Functional Qualities
Corporate citizenship	Open and renewed communications
Continuous improvement	Feedback regular and constantly sought
Customer-focused	Active customer participation
Trustful environment	Two-way communications
Visible leaders	
Shared strategic focus	
Vision and mission lived	
Low absenteeism	
Little confusion	
Multiple vehicles of communication	
Seamless influence	
High morale	
Entrepreneurial spirit	
Clear focus on priorities	

Notice that a majority of these qualities have been identified as attributes. Attributes can be thought of as representing structural components and foundational qualities, which are essential to the healthy and productive functioning of an organization, and which serve as prerequisites for more functional qualities. Functional qualities, on the other hand, can be thought of as dynamic processes that occur across an organization—i.e., they are the glue that holds everything together.

Remember, though, that it is a cooperative and two-way relationship in that the existence of strong functional qualities helps to establish strong attributes. Conceptualizing the characteristics identified by Schuttler this way will ultimately help to provide a framework for identifying and evaluating communicative gaps that exist within an organization, which is the first step toward helping the organization to improve by closing the gap between what is needed within the organization and what is currently in place.

I mentioned previously that both attributes and functional qualities are interdependent and are most likely dependent on having good interpersonal relationships within an organization—specifically, quality relationships between individuals within a department and between departments themselves. Having good relationships allows for an open exchange of ideas, concepts, and strategies.

Show me a friend, and there is nothing we cannot accomplish together. Show me my enemy, and there is nothing we can accomplish. If we dig deeper, we may find that there are other prerequisite qualities at a more micro level such as:

1. The ability and qualifications of individual employees,

2. The ability and qualifications of supervisors,

3. Job satisfaction among employees and supervisors, and

4. Individual motivation.

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Having identified some of the qualities associated with healthy or-
ganizations, what is the best way to evaluate an organization in or-
der to determine whether or not, or to what degree, these attributes
and functional qualities exist? Next, how do we define, operation-
alize, and ultimately measure their presence or absence? Even
more important, how does an institution effectively use the infor-
mation obtained through a detailed and honest self-evaluation to
actually effectuate real change?

There is, of course, no single or even simple answer. Complicating
this reality is the fact that there is, in actuality, no single set of at-
tributes and functional qualities that must exist within any particu-
lar organization. The truth is that organizations are diverse, with
each having their own sets of needs; however, the preceding list of
attributes and functional qualities can serve as a set of general
guidelines that are fundamental to *most* healthy organizations, and
may serve as an initial starting point toward developing and im-
plementing a comprehensive self-evaluation.

Steps Toward Evaluating and Assessing Communication

The first step toward improvement or change is to undertake an
honest and detailed self-analysis and evaluation of the organization
in order to identify the absence (or degree of presence) of the es-
sential attributes and functional qualities and to identify the pri-
mary communicative pathways that exist both within and between
departments and across the organization—at all levels. Careful and
honest assessment at any level—whether at the personal or institu-
tional level—is often a painful and scary process, and resistance
can be expected at almost every level. If not handled appropriately,
resistance can lead to further internal discord.

Then again, initial conflict and resistance, if managed correctly,
can lead to positive changes and a new organizational synthesis.
That is why the first step in any self-assessment or evaluation ini-
tiative is to formulate a well thought-out strategy for dealing with
resistance and conflict *prior* to initiating the process, and to also
acknowledge that a great deal of flexibility needs to be built in to

the plan. More than likely, an assessment will need to be done at both the micro (employee-to-employee and employee-to-supervisor) and macro (president and senior administrators to middle managers and front-line workers) levels. In fact, careful identification of both attributes and communicative pathways at both the micro and macro levels is necessary for identifying the gaps that exist in an organization's functional processes.

Although presenting a detailed and specific evaluation plan and assessment process for all organizations is well beyond the scope of this chapter, there are several benefits associated with doing so that are worth pointing out. For example, undertaking an honest organizational assessment and evaluation can be a first step toward helping an organization to achieve the following:

1. Establish and implement a formative review process for all functions and services offered.

2. Insure continuous improvement of service delivery and organizational operation.

3. Provide the organization with a clear and comprehensive picture regarding the impact of its services, both internally and externally.

4. Provide alternative criteria for making decisions regarding resource allocation and for judging overall organizational effectiveness.

Prior to achieving these goals, fundamental steps must be taken in order to lay the foundation for proper evaluation and toward developing a comprehensive organizational evaluation plan. First, a careful review of the organization's mission must be undertaken to ensure that the mission of the organization reflects both the ethos and intended goals the organization seeks to accomplish. Second, a set of measurable objectives that are tied directly to the organizational mission should be identified with each department identifying its own set of goals and objectives, which are likewise directly

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in line with the organization's goals and objectives. And, finally, a set of intended measures needs to be specified.

There are no magic bullets, but developing a well thought out evaluation plan can help an organization with the following:

1. Increase awareness of the consequences and impact of its services.

2. Improve planning and resource allocation at all levels of the organization.

3. Provide more accurate information to employees and customers.

4. Assist marketing departments toward building effective strategies during times of increased competition.

5. Demonstrate success and overall effectiveness of meeting the organization's goals and objectives.

6. Encourage overall organizational improvement.

7. Recruit appropriate staff and senior-level executives.

8. Serve internal and external clients by accurately conveying what can be expected.

9. Promote organizational accountability.

Below are several recommended steps toward developing and implementing a comprehensive self-evaluation to determine the absence of, or degree of presence of, both key attributes and functional qualities that have been identified as leading to a best practice business:

1. Establish a timeline for the initial self-evaluation.

2. Complete an inventory of the organization's operative statements of mission, goals, and objectives and identify the primary organizational purpose.

3. Ensure that the mission statement reflects, in specific terms, the primary organizational purpose.

4. Develop a set of primary organizational goals and ensure alignment with the organizational mission statement.

5. Set measurable objectives and goals; ensure that they are in alignment with the organization's mission statement.

6. Develop a conceptual assessment matrix for each department, including a set of key measurable indicators.

7. Set a timeline for the self-evaluation and target dates for measuring key indicators.

8. Specify a hierarchical set of goals at both the organizational and departmental levels.

9. Take an inventory of evaluation processes and self-monitoring activities that are already in place.

10. Evaluate how well existing strategies are working (or not working).

11. Conduct an honest evaluation of both strengths and weaknesses at both the organizational and departmental levels.

12. Evaluate how existing data is currently being analyzed.

13. Identify areas to be measured.

14. Decide how results are to be processed and effectively utilized.

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Summary

Evaluating the communicative structures and pathways within an organization is an essential step toward identifying existing problems and instituting effective change strategies within that organization. Lack of effective communication frequently underlies many organizational problems, as communication is a fundamental building block for promoting quality relationships, which in turn provide the foundation for establishing healthy organizational attributes and functional qualities that are integral components of healthy organizations and best-in-practice businesses.

Of course, before any solutions can be implemented at an organizational level, an honest and comprehensive evaluation of the existing culture, organizational structures, and communicative structures currently in place must be undertaken. Communication plays a foundational but difficult role within organizations. Establishing a general framework for developing and implementing a comprehensive self-evaluation plan is a fundamental precursor to further and more detailed analysis of an organization, including the implementation of surveys, focus groups, as well as other evaluative tools.