Chapter 9
Lucky #7 - Communication

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Communication occupies a solid top-three position in the 13 core competencies. If I had to choose the most important core competency, I would most definitely choose communication. It is the competency with the greatest determination to drive and fulfill a successful business career.

The ability to articulate effectively, engage in challenging conversations, and provide open and honest feedback can distinguish success from

failure. Conversations need to be straightforward and sincere, anchored in openness, honesty, and transparency, to be effective in a leadership role.

   Unlike fine wine, communication does not improve with age. The ability to communicate quickly has allowed me to stand out in my career. I made it a priority not to let bad news age, regardless of the subject matter. If someone expected to hear something from me, good or bad, I always ensured they did it promptly, clearly, and honestly. Procrastinating when it comes to communication will sour the

information that needs to be exchanged by and from leaders.

This serves as a huge confidence builder in the workplace. When things went wrong on a project, I immediately alerted the superiors who needed to know. I gave them a heads-up and attempted to communicate the impact on their bottom line through transparency, letting them know that my team still had the situation under control. I communicated using any and every means available: texts, emails, conference calls, and, my preferred method, in-person if possible.

System outages or end-of-month sluggishness in the mortgage business often translated into people being unable to close their home loans. In other words, they may have sold a house in the morning and planned to use that money to close on another house in the afternoon, with all their worldly possessions packed in a truck somewhere. And if they can't close on the new home because of a system issue, these people are forced to live in hotels or with relatives for weeks, while the moving truck becomes nothing more than a costly storage container.

If you connect to the mission, delays like this are as unacceptable to you as they are to the client. It's poor customer service and a damaging experience for people who depend on you.

But being able to deliver bad news, then deal with it usually results in people trusting you despite the setbacks. Bad news does not have to be a career-breaker if you can master transparent communication and prove the ability to deliver results in light of unforeseen obstacles.

Without a doubt, confrontation is an art form. Having the more difficult

conversations - the gut-wrenching, unavoidable discussions driven by mistakes and failures - necessitates removing emotion from the equation. Whether you're dealing with a superior or an employee or have a solid relationship, you must endeavor to leave emotion out of any conversation containing even the slightest chance of confrontation. Prepare for these interactions with coworkers with facts, data, and potential solutions. Sit at your desk and think it through before the meeting because once emotion creeps into confrontational dialogue, you've lost the ability to communicate

effectively at that moment. Whenever possible, strive to recognize and help others manage their emotions during difficult patches. I've seen it happen too many times to count. It resembles road rage: One driver rolls down a window and yells. The other driver yells. It escalates. Next thing you know, it deteriorates into an altercation shown on the evening news. Remove emotion from confrontation.

If emotion enters the equation, it will eventually master the art of de-escalating. If a conversation spirals into a stalemate due to emotion, you vastly improve the chances of

controlling the situation and influencing the outcome by actively de-escalating rising temperatures. Steer away from the subject matter by mentioning a shared personal interest. Ask about a family member's health or accomplishments. Crack a joke. Find something to abruptly halt the hostilities and turn the confrontation around in your favor. That alone is a practiced art form to develop. In NLP or Neuro Linguistic Programming, it's referred to as a "Pattern Interrupt."

   Keep in mind that having a tough conversation is not entirely about attitude. It's

about what you say and the consequences, not how you say it. I might tell you made a mistake, and you will not feel good about that, perhaps even feel belittled and become angry because I spoke disapprovingly. This is a perfect opportunity to demonstrate leadership in communicating the facts in a straightforward, open, respectful manner. When respect is offered in tense situations, respect, more often than not, is returned in kind.

Removing emotion and de-escalating emotions amid confrontation are analogous to carpenter's tools. A carpenter arrives at the job site with

hammers, screwdrivers, wrenches, tape measures, and a bag of nails and learns to instinctively use the correct tool in the appropriate situation through practice.

Leadership requires a similar tool belt with different tools at your disposal and the learned skills to utilize them confidently. If you wield an 8-pound hammer as your only leadership tool, you're naturally destined to be only a destructive force in communication and professional relationships. You whip out your ghastly hammer and bash down coworkers' egos and confidence rather than

productively controlling confrontation. When you demonstrate this type of false leadership, it permeates the attitudes of your team and can seep into the entire organization.

Equally important is a communication breakdown's impact on clients and others relying on the company. This goes back to believing and connecting with the mission of the company. As an IT professional for mortgage companies for a good portion of my career, issues in my department could impact people.

You must be able to influence and negotiate through transparent communication,

regardless of whom you're dealing with. Consistent openness and honesty are essential, especially when you understand that, from top to bottom in the team, individuals will have distinct agendas, thought processes, and approaches to communicating their ideas.

Good communicators are also good negotiators. Sometimes, coworkers won't agree on an approach to a task, so the goal in these instances should be to come to a mutually beneficial decision. Negotiating often happens in professional environments, and it is incumbent upon leaders to act as

the intermediary and voice of
reason.

Whether it's a more complex
issue requiring difficult
conversations or handling the
simplest of problems,
influencing and negotiating with
honest, straightforward
communication will more often
than not lead to reaching common
ground and ultimately finding
the right solution.

Communication can be so
crucial to success that some
companies have been known to
design their facilities to
encourage it literally. One of
the largest independent
marketing agencies in the
country constructed a building

with a multi-floor staircase explicitly designed to promote employee interaction. Located in Dallas, the Richards Group created their office building specifically to encourage the "walkabout" - running into someone while walking around the facility and engaging in quick conversations on the fly.

They built several floors connected by staircases that emptied into vast open spaces. While employees strolled from floor to floor, they inevitably encountered each other, sparking interactions that probably would not have occurred otherwise. The company's founder, Stan

Richards, designed the building to encourage those interactions.

While working with this company, I did witness conversations take place while taking the stairs, resulting in positive, productive business interactions. This tremendous architectural genius became part of the company's communication strategy and culture.

Consider that: Intentionally fostering an interactive environment became so crucial to Stan that he designed a workplace to encourage it! Incorporating those staircases inspired and instilled training and development into employees' days without intrusive, time-

consuming methods like daily meetings with too many people attending. I know what you're thinking; I work from home now... What staircase? Yet another book down the road.

   The above example establishes a vital piece of this competency: It's all too easy to conjure entertaining team-building activities or constantly talk about teamwork - but it must be done via concrete action. What could be more significant than an entire building designed to promote teamwork and collaboration actively every day?

   In contrast, I've encountered other companies where employees

remain locked in their offices for weeks, only to emerge for meetings, offer up an uninspired presentation, and return to their office hole for another month. No open conversation. No creative encouragement. No effective communication to advance the organizational strategy. Collaboration is the name of the game. There are tools now that didn't exist a decade ago to foster collaboration. Call me OLD, maybe my influence comes from songwriting with others, but the energy is just different with humans in a room.

      At one stop along my career path, while employed with EMC

Mortgage under John Vella, I had one of my employees make a critical mistake. This major blunder shut down business for several hours during a critical period. We fixed it in time to get on with business, but we needed to know what happened to prevent a recurrence. As it turned out, one of our guys made a stupid mistake. I was pissed. I hadn't been with EMC and John for long, and I naturally had concerns about how he perceived my team in light of such a major error.

I had no choice but to go to John and explain that operations had ceased due to a careless self-inflicted wound, reaching

levels of pure stupidity. I expected unfiltered rage in response. Instead, I received a belly laugh - an unconcerned, full-blown belly laugh. His reaction stunned me. I automatically assumed he might not care.

On the contrary, he recognized my ability to communicate openly and honestly as the leader and had complete confidence in handling the situation most appropriately. Furthermore, because he and I had established communication based on openness and honesty, he could explain this to me easily.

"Control what you can control. Fix what you can fix. We trust you," he explained. "You're always here telling me the truth. And you're in here telling me that some guy just did something stupid; you could have made up some wizardry shit."

The fact that I didn't soft-peddle the situation - which I could have done relatively quickly to cover for myself and the employee - earned me his confidence, respect, and trust. And since I had been consistently honest in my communications, he knew I had things under control regardless

of a major mistake or employees needing mentoring.

The experience enlightened me and validated that openness, honesty, and transparency in communications - particularly in a crisis - must be implemented as a critical component of success. Perhaps more importantly, it cemented how essential straightforward, transparent communication can be for career progression. I was always open and honest; it always served me well. But for some reason, I was always surprised when people responded well to the truth - even when it sucked.

A second example comes from an experience working for CashAmerica during a system clean-up project on a retail and loan system that hadn't appropriately operated for years. With previous efforts, the project had far exceeded time and cost expectations, naturally creating frustration within the organization.

So, they called me into a board meeting where I was asked how confident I was with the cost and timeline for resolving the clean-up problem. I responded point blank by telling them the truth based on raw experience.

"Guys, I've been doing this long enough to let you know that this shit takes twice as long and costs twice as much as anybody ever thinks," I told them. I explained how the process resembled remodeling a house with all the unexpected pitfalls and heartaches. Regardless of how prepared you believe you are, you don't know what you're getting into until you start opening walls.

I had ample experience and all the information I needed to predict with 50% certainty what would happen. Still, I assured them I'd have a solid timeline and cost report once we moved

through some of the project's subsequent phases.

In short, I told them their situation's reality rather than what they wanted to hear. I know this for a fact, as one of the board members approached me and said, "I've been on about eight boards. I've been CEO of a few companies. You're the first guy ever to tell me the truth."

That's validation. When you address a major company's board of directors with raw honesty and sincerity amidst a prior project disaster and receive gratitude, that is a validation of straightforward, transparent communication. They had heard numerous predictions of cost and

timing success, none of which panned out. From me, they heard the truth. Another key to communicating at the highest levels is pure simplicity. A boss once said, "Explain it to me like a fourth grader." This guy was far from remedial - but he wasn't a CIO. He didn't know or care to know the acronyms, bits, and bytes of my world. He wanted to be able to understand it - and communicate it forward in a simple way. Remember this no matter what your area of expertise is. People have different skills. All of your bosses may not know the level of detail you know as a subject matter expert. This puts them

in a position to have faith in you. You tell them something; they may not fully understand it - so they have faith. If you develop the ability to explain things simply so that people fully understand what you are saying, you move from faith to trust, especially if you deliver! Trust is critical - it buys you credibility and freedom in the workplace to be a decision-maker.

There exists no pure mathematical equation for effective communication. However, it would be best if you strived to reach a level of listening that exceeds your level of speaking vs. talking

when it comes to basic conversation. Knowing when to listen and when to talk comes from emotional maturity and possessing the self-confidence and self-awareness to hear the other person's point of view. Listening is a critical element of communication, and combined with responding clearly and sensibly will ensure your ability to influence others.

The back-and-forth process of influencing and negotiating with others can only work if an equilibrium exists in any discussion. After all, I'm not going to take someone else seriously if they won't listen to my perspective - why would

they take me seriously if that's reversed? Emotional maturity is the ingredient that allows you to both listen and talk in equal portions while maintaining sincerity and honesty.

   Feedback also plays a significant role in communication, especially when working with another individual. Feedback requires a constructive give and take and realization on both sides that it's not personal, even if it feels personal in the heat of the moment. Be conscious of offering thoughtful and insightful feedback; the result will likely be thoughtful responses. No one enjoys

working with someone who can't accept feedback - or that gives it destructively. If you're the person no one likes to work and communicate with, you will not succeed. This I promise you.

   Communication also boils down to the way messages are shared. Is it more effective and constructive to communicate in person or via email? Each situation dictates the answer, and based on any situation, a good communicator will ascertain when to pick up the phone or send a quick email or text message. Experience and common sense will ultimately guide you in this aspect of communication.

One of the most effective communication tools I used in my career was what I refer to as Town Halls.

The town hall can best be described as an all-hands meeting. In my case, they varied from hundreds to roughly a thousand participants on a conference call. We accommodated hundreds of people in a room every month or quarter, or whatever worked best, with an agenda and data to update the staff on the entire company's progress. It allowed everyone to see more than their everyday bubble while saving valuable time that smaller or individual meetings required. Video

enhanced the conference call by multiples. People enjoyed the town halls, looked forward to them, and had a clearer vision of the company's progress and strategy. The large meetings gave employees an event to look forward to and opportunities to be publicly recognized for their contributions. There are few ways to show employees how much their work is valued than to praise and reward them in front of peers.

It's essential to be flexible and, above all, straightforward when communicating. It will be the one skill that makes you stand out from anyone around you.

Finally, executing and following up are the last pieces of that communication equation—game over if you sincerely do not care about your team members and their professional success. Suppose you have no genuine desire to outperform beyond basic expectations, competition over. If doing the right thing because it's the right thing goes against your beliefs, game over. If you're lazy, game over. If you exist in a silo, unable or unwilling to openly communicate and collaborate, game over - next contestant, please!

It would be best to stay focused on flexible,

straightforward communication with every team member while consistently reinforcing whom the work serves at the end of the day. As a leader, you must focus on serving your team through effective communication, which naturally translates to achieving the goal of serving the client.