" A treasure chest of precious stories and ideas that will be of enormous value to all who read it for many years to come."
John Heaps, Chairman, Eversheds LLP

THE LANGUAGE OF LEADERS

feel on

How top CEOs communicate to Inspire, influence and achieve results

KEVIN MURRAY

2ND EDITION

Introduction: communicate to inspire

Inspiring leaders make us want to achieve more. They persuade us to their cause, win our active support, help us to work better together and make us feel proud to be part of the communities they create. They communicate tirelessly, and it is their skill at listening and talking that keeps us passionately connected to their vision.

If need be, great leaders get us to face ugly reality, and then they give us a new sense of direction and optimism. Along the way, they help us to see how what we do makes a difference. They listen to us and they respect us. We feel involved and committed. We watch them for cues, and we feel great when they recognize our efforts – and then we try even harder.

We follow leaders because of how they make us feel.

So, if we want to be better leaders ourselves, how do we communicate in a way that inspires? What do we need to think about when framing our own leadership communication? Is there a system that experienced leaders use, a framework for thinking? These were the questions I had in mind when I set out to interview people at the helm of many well-known organizations – leaders who had faced significant challenges and been through times of dramatic change.

The idea for this book had been at the back of my mind for ages, born of the coaching work I do with leaders. One day, instead of just thinking about it, I started voicing the idea to friends and colleagues. In the main I wanted to concentrate on business leaders, not politicians or public sector leaders. My career has been in business communication, and it was there I wanted to focus. My colleagues thought it was a great idea, encouraged me to do it, and opened their contact books. Together with my own contacts, we soon had a dozen meetings in the diary, then two dozen, then three.

By the time we closed off the interviews to start writing, I had been privileged to speak to 54 people who were chairmen and CEOs of businesses, charities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), as well as three military generals, a former police commissioner, a university vice-chancellor and a rugby world

cup-winning coach. Later, for the second edition of this book, I interviewed another dozen leaders, this time in the public sector. The list of leaders involved is at the end of this introduction, and their biographies appear at the end of this book.

Between them, these leaders are responsible for well over two million employees in a wide range of organizations, from airlines to water companies, from manufacturing businesses to service firms, from mining multinationals to global pharmaceutical companies, from banks to charities. The book includes views from the heads of huge global businesses and small local enterprises. It also includes leaders from the UK's National Health Service (NHS), the Health and Safety Executive, the Financial Ombudsman Service and the Met Office, as well as other public sector organizations.

Few leaders we approached for an interview turned us down. We achieved a 95 per cent strike rate with our requests. Why? Because all of the people interviewed were intrigued and keen to share their thinking on communication. For many, it was a subject they had not been grilled on before, and they all enjoyed the chance to articulate their views.

Sir Richard Branson was one who got away. When I asked him for an interview, he looked dubious and said: 'There are a lot of books on leadership. What will make yours any different?' Clearly, my answer wasn't compelling enough at the time, because I never got the interview. But it was a *great* question. It forced me to be crystal clear about my mission.

To manage your expectations, let me be explicit: this is not a book on leadership in general, and there are many aspects of leadership that are not dealt with in these chapters. My spotlight is on leadership communication, and my mission is to help you become a better and more effective leader, by helping you to be a better, more inspiring communicator.

Why is that important? Because good communication can make the difference between poor performance and great performance. Leaders who can inspire others to great things can do so much good. They create great places to work. They enable the people they work with to be better than they thought possible, to achieve more than they dreamed. They enable innovation. They deliver better, more cost-effective public services. They help businesses to grow and prosper. They help to create the wealth of nations. They build better businesses, and better businesses are good for everyone.

On the other hand, leaders who cannot communicate well, who lack the human touch, can create organizations which are toxic to work in, filled with turmoil and conflict, going nowhere, achieving little. In my career, spanning almost four decades now, I have worked with leaders who have been exceptional thinkers but somehow unable to persuade people to see the brilliance of their plans. Their ability to analyse a situation, quickly seize on the key issues and decide on the actions needed was breathtaking. But they lacked that vital skill that enabled them to relate to people in a way that created buy-in and, in the end, after a great deal of pain for all concerned, they failed. On the other hand, it has been amazing to work with leaders

who are more empathetic, and better communicators, who had a positive impact quickly in even the most disrupted of organizations.

'There's no point in having a vision or a strategy that you can't implement,' said one of the chairmen interviewed in this book. 'When selecting leaders, you have to decide whether they have good judgement, are clear thinkers, and will be able to take their people with them. That's all about communicating, communicating, communicating.'

Just about every leader in these pages identified communication as a top-three skill of leadership, if not the second most important. The ability to think clearly and strategically was inevitably placed at number one. (Clarity of thinking was also closely linked to effective communication.) Always, they pointed out, the best strategy was useless if people could not be inspired to help deliver it.

The Futures Company, which specializes in trends and future-facing research (and is part of the WPP Group), recently published the results of a poll that looked at the characteristics essential to being a good leader. 'Being a good communicator' ranked equal first with 'being willing to take responsibility for good and bad decisions'. In third place was 'identifying the most important actions needed by the business'.

Followers expect their leaders to be good communicators, and rate it a number-one skill of leadership.

Good communication, said the leaders in these pages, is about passion, empathy, simplicity, stories, conversations, great listening and compelling visions. It is about integrity and strong values, and a powerful sense of mission. It is about honesty. It is about building relationships, creating trust and enabling endeavour. Communication is what leaders do before, during and after decisions. It is what they do to achieve results. It is how they inspire us.

In the past few years the world has changed and the need for effective communication has never been greater. We live in a time of radical transparency and great uncertainty. Expectations of good corporate behaviour have been ramped up and empowered consumers and communities have changed the very nature of leadership.

The leaders in this book say the purpose of leadership communication is to influence and inspire in order to achieve great results. In that context, they talk about:

- why trust is essential to leadership, why that means you have to be authentic and why you have to learn to be more passionate in your communication;
- the need to articulate a mission that goes beyond profit as a motive;
- how they create leaders throughout their organizations by relentlessly communicating a framework of values that enable action and decision making;
- why they put into words a vision of the future which powers all their communication;

- how they bring external views of their organization into the organization in order to drive change;
- how they use conversations to engage and motivate people.

They say that if you want to be a more effective communicator, you have to:

- address the concerns of your audience *before* delivering your own messages;
- learn to listen better and master the most difficult communication skill of all;
- develop strong points of view on key issues;
- use more stories to capture hearts and imprint messages on memories;
- be aware of the power of unintended signals;
- prepare properly when appearing on public platforms;
- keep reviewing and honing your communication skills.

In the following chapters I will explore each of these themes, and share the dozens of stories these leaders told me. And yes, there is a framework in what they say, which you will be able to use to guide your own leadership communication.

This book is for all leaders. It is for leaders of large businesses, divisions of those businesses, and small teams in those businesses. It is for people who aspire to be leaders in any organization, big or small.

Dictionaries describe 'language' as 'a system of communication used by a particular country or community'. This book, then, is about the system of communication used by leaders. It describes... *The Language of Leaders*.

told colleagues just before the end of the year that the Foreign Office, which funds the organization, was 'heading for an underspend' and urged them to come up with ways of spending the cash.

His e-mail was leaked to the media and it triggered outrage that the department appeared to be fabricating ways to spend money unnecessarily while the rest of the country faced mass spending cuts. The Treasury reacted by saying it would dock the Foreign Office's budget by £20 million – a fine to set an example to the rest of Whitehall and warn all ministers and the civil service that any unspent funds should be returned to the Exchequer. That was a pretty expensive e-mail.

Most leadership communication is not fit for purpose

Dame Amelia Fawcett, chair of the Guardian Media Group, one of the UK's leading media organizations, says this new environment makes leadership much harder. 'Most communications are just not fit for purpose in the Facebook, Twitter, blog and 24/7 news world. News is now being produced by professionals and non-professionals working together – in what we call the mutualization of news. One correspondent on the *Guardian* has a following on her blog of 750,000 people. The *Guardian* has a circulation of 365,000. If you know how to engage with that sort of network it can be very powerful.'

This is why many leaders feel that they are operating much closer to the precipice. Reputation has always been important but today, they say, you can lose your reputation in seconds. Lord Mervyn Davies (Baron Davies of Abersoch), former chairman of Standard Chartered plc and a former government minister, argues that communication has assumed crucial importance in a world 'where news travels so fast; where bad and good news can move across continents in milliseconds. This has changed the nature of politics and changed the nature of business.

'It means that whatever you're doing, wherever you are, there is a chance that because of CCTV, YouTube, cameras on mobile phones, somebody is watching you. We live in a world where a small action can cause a big result.'

Kevin Beeston, who is chairman of Taylor Wimpey, one of the largest British housebuilding companies, and a former chairman of global support services group Serco, says: 'These days, everybody's got a camera with them. Everybody's got a mobile phone with a voice recording system or a video camera, so you cannot drop your guard. Make one mistake and you will not get away with it.

'But,' he adds, 'the opposite is also true – if you manage this environment well you have more ways of getting your message over and building your brand. And a strong brand is probably one of the most significant competitive

advantages a company can have. So if you manage it effectively, it could be a big driver of shareholder value.'

Julie Dent is chair of Torbay and Southern Devon Health and Care NHS Trust and prior to her retirement was chief executive of South West London Strategic Health Authority. This NHS Trust is the NHS organization responsible for providing community health services in Torbay and Southern Devon in the UK. It also provides and commissions adult social care in Torbay. She says: 'It does seem to me that in the modern world we are all playing catch up with the speed of communication. Leaders have really got to understand a generational issue. For the younger generation, texting, tweeting and blogging are now in their lifeblood. We all have to be aware that things people say about your organization can go viral within milliseconds. Any damage limitation that you used to be able to do is a luxury long gone. Everything matters now because of the speed.'

Baroness Sally Morgan of Huyton is chair of Ofsted, which is the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. Her organization inspects and regulates services in the UK that care for children and young people, as well as those providing education for those of all ages. She says that the dramatic effect of 24-hour news coverage has forced the pace of decision making to potentially dangerous levels. 'The problem is that you have to speed up decision making before you have had time to think things through properly. This isn't just a problem for public sector organizations, it is a problem for everyone. The danger of taking a decision before all the facts are known and properly understood is clear. These hasty decisions can lead to even more severe problems'.

Businesses are like open democracies

Graham Mackay, chief executive of SABMiller, one of the world's largest brewers, with brewing interests and distribution agreements across six continents, says that the modern world places much greater demands on leaders. 'Businesses are much more like open democracies. People expect to be communicated to much more and see themselves as part of a democracy where they consent to being led. As well as the need to communicate more with employees, there is increased regulatory scrutiny, the rise of global NGOs and 24/7 media. You have to represent yourself and explain your company and your actions all the time.'

Philip Rutnam is permanent secretary for the Department of Transport in the UK. The department provides leadership across the whole transport sector in the UK, working with regional, local and private sector partners to deliver many of the required services. Philip says that the increasingly networked nature of today's world means that there is a far greater expectation on leaders to be more visible, more transparent and more available.

'Leaders today are expected to constantly engage with their people and to be able to communicate well on all of the challenges they face.'

Under such constant scrutiny, and criticism, leaders in the private sector are only too well aware that business needs to be seen as a force for good and not just for profit. They have to have a much higher purpose than the simple profit motive.

Paul Drechsler, chairman and chief executive of the Wates Group, a family-owned enterprise that is one of the UK's largest construction services companies, says: 'A decade ago I would have talked about the business in terms of sales, profit, market share and competitors. When I stand up to talk about this business now, I talk about how many jobs we have created, what we are doing to reduce our carbon footprint and what positive effect we are having on society. We have had to broaden our storyline substantially. You've got to learn to tell your story in a way that will attract customers, attract employees and attract investment.

'It isn't that trust and reputation are more important today than they were before – it is that they are more vulnerable in today's world. I say to my colleagues in Wates that my number one concern is that, through their actions and behaviours, a brand and reputation that took 114 years to build up could be destroyed in an instant.'

Rupert Gavin is CEO of Odeon and UCI Cinemas, the largest chain of cinemas outside the Americas. Rupert believes that you cannot be a good business leader without also being a good leader in the community in which you live and operate. 'You cannot have a healthy business in a bankrupt society. In this regard the demands on the CEO are much more complicated than they were 10 years ago.'

Leaders must create leaders

Traditional command-and-control methods of management are simply not appropriate in this world. Leaders cannot leave themselves exposed to situations where employees are unable to make decisions because they cannot get hold of you. They have to be empowered to do the right thing when the critical moment arrives, and an angry customer needs to be placated or a mistake rectified. Leaders have to know what the minimum standards of behaviour are.

I regularly heard CEOs talking about the need to create leaders throughout their organizations, in order to be able to operate in this world. This thought resonated strongly with the military idea of creating leaders throughout the army. In fact, the idea that leaders must create leaders was among the strongest themes emerging from all of the interviews.

Key to creating leaders is creating a framework of well-understood values within which leaders can operate. The objective is to ensure that people

throughout a company understand what the company expects of them, not only in terms of what they need to do, but how they should do it. Leaders need to spend a great deal of time trying to ensure that everyone understands what 'doing the right thing' really means.

Radical transparency needs radical thinking

Jeremy Darroch, CEO of BSkyB, the largest pay-TV broadcaster in the United Kingdom, with more than 10 million subscribers, believes you have to go further than simply embracing life in the fishbowl. You should invite people into the fishbowl with you.

'Everything is so transparent, you might as well invite people in to see what you do. Say: "We'd like you to come and have a look." This is because trust is going to be one of the great themes of business over the next decade and those companies that aspire to long-term success have to make building and maintaining trust an important part of their agenda. To trust you, people have to know you. They have to get a sense of who you are and what you stand for and what you believe in – inside and outside the company.'

Jeremy believes that this world of radical transparency has placed a burden on business to communicate more. Business has to get itself on the front foot and lay out the case for why business is good for society, in a much more compelling way. Winning trust isn't just a single-company issue, it is an issue for all businesses. And, he says, every leader must realize they are simply a steward of the organization they lead, destined to move on at some point. With that in mind, the job is to improve the long-term viability of the organization – to leave it in an even better state than it was when they inherited it.

Lord Victor Adebowale is chief executive of Turning Point, a health and social care organization based in London which provides services for people with complex needs, including those affected by drug and alcohol misuse, mental health problems and those with learning disabilities. Lord Adebowale believes that the transparency and scrutiny of the modern world has made many more leaders conscious of their legacy. 'Even the wealthiest people are left feeling empty because they have left behind the wrong legacy. Transparency and scrutiny exposes leaders to more challenge. Through no direct fault of their own, they can be held to account for wrongdoings in the organization which could then taint their legacy forever, and leave them in a very sad state.'

Jane Furniss, chief executive of the Independent Police Complaints Commission (IPCC), which oversees the police complaints system in England and Wales and is entirely independent of the police, government and complainants, says that leaders have often got to think about whether or not their decisions

will pass 'the newspaper test'. This means, when subjected to the editorial views of a newspaper, will your decisions stand the test of public scrutiny? 'Living in this fishbowl can actually lead to poor decision making because this test can be a very quixotic test. The only way to avoid that is to have a strong moral compass and to say that irrespective of how certain newspapers might play an issue, you have to make sure that you are doing the right thing and that you can stand up and defend it in public.'

Unanimous agreement, then, from the 70+ leaders I interviewed: leadership has been transformed.

They said some of the same things that military leaders said, agreeing on the need for a clear mission and values, and about the need to ensure everyone knows what they are. They talk similarly about the importance of mission and values in creating leaders everywhere, and the need to drive speed and agility into the organizations they lead. But they also talk about a world in which there is an even more pressing need to inspire people, to lift employees to greater achievement through powers of persuasion. This is because people believe they work in an open democracy where their discretionary effort is their choice to give. In this environment, where trust and relationships are the engines of success, there is an increased demand for excellence in communication.

In addition, leaders today have little choice but to embrace transparency and work with the raised communication expectations of a digital age. It means they have to put reputation management at the top of their agenda, right up there with the need to build relationships of trust. To do that, leaders must communicate more clearly, more often and with the idea firmly embedded that communication, today, is about rapidly evolving stories and conversations.

Leadership is now more complex, demanding and stressful, but more rewarding and more meaningful if you can get it right. Leaders increasingly feel that they are only stewards of the businesses they lead, and have to make sure that those businesses are improved while they are in charge, and have an even better future ahead of them when they leave. This means thinking longer term about building a sustainable business, part of the communities in which they operate.

The communication demand on leaders is far greater today, requiring them to address a wider array of audiences and use an even wider array of channels. But, as Kevin Beeston says, if you manage this environment well, you have more ways of getting your message over and building a great business where everybody wins.

KEY POINTS FROM CHAPTER 2

- Radical transparency has radically changed leadership.
- Consumers, citizens and journalists are in a partnership where news and views travel the world in seconds.
- The sheer speed of modern communications, on a global scale, combined with the staggering increase in channels of communication and rapidly shifting patterns of influence, means that leaders have to build much more agile and speedy organizations in order to cope.
- Leaders must create leaders in order to build more agile organizations.
- Organizations are now much more like open democracies.
- People expect to be communicated to much more and see themselves as part of a democracy where they consent to being led.
- As well as the need to communicate more with employees, there is increased regulatory scrutiny, the rise of global NGOs and 24/7 media. You have to represent yourself and explain your company and your actions all the time.
- Every enterprise needs an articulation of a higher purpose than profit.
- Sustainability is the watchword. It applies to the organization's longevity as well as the social and physical environments within which a leader operates.
- Leaders must make trust a strategic goal.
- People want leaders that they can believe in.
- Life in the fishbowl requires leaders to speak to their beliefs and have a clear point of view.
- The scrutiny is intense. It won't go away. Learn to live with it.
- Leaders must embrace the digital age of transparency. The risks are higher, but the rewards are greater.