





*Conversations, discussions, meetings, messages, and presentations have long-term consequences.*

◆ DIANNA BOOHER, BOOHER RESEARCH

**LEADERSHIP**

# Communicate strategically

**T**he caller, early Monday morning, identified herself as the CEO of a large commercial real estate firm. I listened as she introduced herself again, reminding me that we had met a year

earlier when she had accompanied her daughter, who had just finished graduate school, to our training centre—to be groomed for her rise to executive management in the family business.

“I need to meet with you today,” the caller said. “Preferably this morning. Can you come here? Or I can come there if I have to. . .”

“What can I help you with? Can you tell me a little more about what the issue is?”

“My life is falling apart. I have to talk to somebody. Now. This morning!” Her voice broke. She sounded like an exhausted young mom with triplets who had just kept her up all night with a bad virus.

“Is it a communication issue specifically or a more general management concern?”

“Everybody who comes through the door has a problem... Either some deal has gone south and they want help, or they do not like some policy. Nobody is happy! Nobody gets along!

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My daughter—they will not listen to her. They all still come to me for every little decision. To settle every little dispute. I cannot get away for one minute. I have got to talk to an outsider to get some perspective on all this.”

“Are you talking primarily about work or your family?”

“Both. I just need to talk to somebody now. So do you do that kind of coaching? Can you help?”

“If it is a communication problem with your staff, I can help you with that certainly. I am not a psychologist, and you sound very upset. But I am very willing to rearrange my work schedule and come out to meet with you today.”

“Then send me a proposal... and I’ll get back to you—either later today or tomorrow. Or next week.”

At that point, I did identify the management problem at her organisation!

Micromanagers rarely recognise themselves, they see others as the problem. Eleanor represents the long-tenured entrepreneur

or professional who has become a senior leader without the necessary leadership communication skills. Unintentionally, they have moved from buddy to bully—either because they lack the necessary skills and fear losing control, or they have created a culture of distrust.

But seasoned leaders who have mastered foundational management skills may also need ‘the finishing touches’ to move to the executive ranks. Such was the case with Mitch’s newly formed leadership team. A past client and executive vice president of a large telecom, Mitch, stopped by my office one day to discuss his needs: “I have got bad news and good news.”

“The bad news: I was laid off a few weeks ago—along with our entire division. But the good news... A couple of partners and I just got some venture capital and bought a small telecom—basically a spin-off of the entire division I used to manage.”

“Well, everything sounds like good news so far,” I said.

“Right... Well, I have hired about 40-45 technical experts who got laid off from our old division in leadership roles at my new company. They are brilliant at their individual jobs—do not get me wrong—but they have had only limited experience at the executive level. They have the technical know-how and the basic management expertise. But now they need to communicate at a strategic level—with the public, with customers and suppliers, the executive leadership team, and the board of directors.”

“They are communicating at about this level,” he gestured with a wave of hand at about the height of a small child. “And I need them to start thinking and communicating from this perspective,” he gestured at the top of his hairline, as if giving a crisp military salute.

Mitch had aptly described the difference between maintainers and leaders—those who can communicate ‘strategically’ with all



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audiences up and down the chain, inside and outside the organisation in all settings.

### What is strategic communication?

Strategic communication forms the very core of leadership. When you as a leader speak, meet, negotiate, write, or network, you either clarify or confuse, motivate or demoralise, engage or enrage employees. The dictionary defines strategic as 'pivotal,' 'essential,' or 'relating to long-term importance to achieve a plan or

goal.' That is how I use the term strategic in my book, *Communicate Like a Leader: Connecting Strategically to Coach, Inspire, and Get Things Done*.

As I selected topics to address in the book, I considered the past three decades of consulting work and coaching assignments. What do clients struggle with most often? What messages, meetings, conversations, discussions, or

presentations have pivotal, long-term payoff or consequences?

Here is my list of the frequent communication challenges the most successful leaders master:

#### ■ Develop top talent

They recruit, evaluate, hire, and develop top talent for their team. The first few steps of that process prove to be most difficult, yet the most important—assessing the emotional intelligence of those they hire in strategic positions. That means you need to make hiring decisions based on information other than gut instincts and first impressions. You would want to discover the complete package you are getting: personality traits, self-awareness, true attitudes and values, emotional stability, motivations and intentions, and interpersonal skills. Psychologists insist that asking candidates how they handled past situations provides far more valuable insights than asking them about hypothetical situations:

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Not: "Tell me how you feel about cold-calling inactive clients."

But: "Can you tell me about three inactive clients in your last job that you discovered in your organisation's database and what steps you took to turn them into active customers again?"

Interviews require well-planned questions that solicit answers that reflect genuine attributes, opinions, and skills.

#### ■ Become a coach, not a critic, as you converse one on one

Ask any dieter which approach works best, coaching or critiquing, and I guarantee they will select the coach every time. Ditto for the workplace. Help staffers identify their strengths, communicate the goal, any specific expectations, and clear standards to measure success, provide resources, build confidence and offer encouragement, give clear feedback, and finally celebrate wins.

Granted, being a commander may take less time upfront. But if you are building a team for the long term—a team that can exercise judgment, to act independently, and innovate—then you want to lead them as a coach.

Consider the 'mentoring moment.' Ask a staffer to step into your office while you phone a vendor so they have 'background on the situation.' The staffer will understand that you are investing in their career growth.

#### ■ Negotiate with the second deal in mind

As a leader, you negotiate every day both in your personal life and at work: interpersonal conflicts, project or delivery deadlines, travel and vacation packages, salary increases, job responsibilities, etc. A common success principle in each of these—negotiate as if a more important opportunity will rest on the relationship developed in the current interaction.

The failure to operate by this principle underscores why many mergers fall apart at the last minute. One or both parties distrust the

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other because of how they have been treated throughout the negotiations. The breakdown results from the 'heart of the matter.' So when one party or the other needs a little extra flexibility in implementation, they get absolutely no cooperation. All goodwill has been sucked out of the relationship.

■ **Speak to engage: dump data to a storyline**

Data typically helps you build your case—but only if you present it in a coherent storyline. First, determine what story you plan to tell with your facts, statistics, reports, surveys, tests, or case studies. Only then should you decide which points need data support. Like the novelist who knows a lot more about the characters than the novel presents, you typically have much more data than you will ever use. Be selective, use data sparingly or your audience will remember nothing.

Consider your storyline carefully. Who is the audience? What is the bottom-line message to

that person or group? What do they already know? (Do not tell them that!) How will they use your information? Let these questions guide your data selection. Your goal is to present either an informative briefing or a persuasive case—not necessarily a comprehensive case.

■ **Make meetings matter: know your ROI**

Let us start with the idea that you need a functional agenda—not a list of topics in your head. A functional agenda means laser-focused questions that jump-start the group into focused discussion. That agenda should include allocated time for each item, format, expected preparation, and expected deliverables. As the meeting leader know the cost of typical meetings and communicate that to your team so together you can evaluate the ROI of key meetings. And find better ways to share information for those meetings that have a low ROI.

If your communication—in any of these forms—impedes rather than improves a situation, it has become problematic, not strategic. **IM**



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Dianna Booher** is CEO, Booher Research, and author of 47 books, including her latest *Communicate Like a Leader*.



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