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LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNICATION

Principles and Pragmatics

In This Chapter

- What is the strategic value of communication?
- What is the difference between the informational and relational dimensions of communication, and why is this distinction important?
- What principles of strategic communication are particularly relevant for leaders in higher education?
- How can strategic communication provide a foundation for a leadership problem analysis and problem-solving rubric?

Communication Basics: The Foundation for Strategic Leadership

Communication is an essential human process—what Lee Thayer (2003) describes as the *sine qua non* of social life. As he observed, “The essence of being human is . . . communicating-to and being communicated-with” (Thayer, 1968, p. 18). Communication is so natural and fundamental—not unlike breathing—that we think of it as a very simple process, if and when we think about it at all. Communication may be verbal or nonverbal, face-to-face or mediated, accidental or intentional, planned or unplanned, and it plays a central role in interaction between people—in interpersonal, group, organizational, community, as well as international contexts. An analysis of communication dynamics and outcomes across settings provides a wealth of evidence regarding how important but also how difficult the process can be. Some might go so far as to suggest that there is no greater challenge in life—personally, professionally, organizationally, and internationally—than effective communication.

American colleges and universities provide myriad examples of the wonders and the difficulties of human communication. Higher education institutions bring together a collection of bright, highly educated, and independent thinkers, all equipped with interests and expertise in a wide variety of fields and professional affiliations. The success of the institution and fulfillment of its varying missions all depend on communication—with students and colleagues and members of many vital external constituencies. Any thought that communication would be easier for particularly bright and well-educated people is quickly dispelled by observing a few months of campus life. In fact, it sometimes seems that precisely the reverse is true: One's technical and disciplinary expertise often increases the difficulty in sense-giving and sensemaking, particularly when interacting with those who have different disciplinary orientations, educational experiences, cultural identities and affiliations, work roles, or situational goals.

Across any number of higher education contexts, as in so many other personal and professional settings, communication problems can be costly, often leading to one or more of the following outcomes:

- confusion and misunderstanding
- mismatched expectations
- errors
- wasted time and resources
- personal conflicts
- blame and defensiveness
- loss of confidence in colleagues and leaders
- disengagement and low morale
- dissatisfaction and reputational damage among external constituencies

Because communication is such a basic and pervasive activity, it is uncommon to be deliberate or methodical when engaging in the process. In this chapter, we advocate doing just that as a way of attempting to minimize undesirable or unintended outcomes, and we urge leaders to engage in what can be termed *strategic communication*. We use the word *strategic* in this context to imply thoughtful, goal-oriented planning and implementation in communication efforts, and also thorough “after-action” analysis as to what worked as planned, what didn't, and what lessons can be applied in future situations. After an exploration of some basic principles of leadership communication, we will describe a pragmatic rubric and step-by-step process designed to help leaders become more strategic in communication.

The Perfect Laboratory

Colleges and universities offer a great setting for observing a broad range of individual, social, and organizational activities, and there may be no more interesting laboratory for those interested in learning about the dynamics of leadership communication.

Consider the following example:

After a yearlong search to fill one position allocated to the department by the dean, the unit is informed that it can hire two individuals from the finalist list instead of just one. The dean was expecting joy and jubilation from members of the department. Contrary to this expectation, however, the dean's unanticipated sharing of this news at a department meeting is not met with delight or celebration, but rather with silence and indifference.

An outcome that one would presume to have been quite logical, and that would have led the department, search committee, and chair to express gratitude, evoked quite different reactions. Moreover, what might be an occasion for celebration and gratitude for the validation of the good work and future needs of the department instead became an incident that drove a deep wedge between the dean and members of the department and its leadership. How and why did this happen?

The explanation for this seemingly improbable outcome can be traced to inadequacies in leadership communication strategy. While leaders at all levels are elected or selected to guide and coordinate an expansive array of interests and perspectives of individuals and groups for which they have responsibility, this is seldom a simple assignment, and almost never one in which the outcome can be achieved without careful planning and attention to the details of communication in execution. In the pages ahead we explore some of the factors that explain outcomes such as those reported in the vignette and then revisit the example in some detail after reviewing key issues related to communication and leadership strategy.

Considerations in Formulating and Implementing Strategy

Use of the word *strategic* is meant to underscore a point made earlier in this volume: Effective leadership is not about being authentic or intuitive, acting instinctively, or simply "being yourself." No matter how small, each of the many leadership moments and challenges matters, and an element of strategy

can be critical to one's leadership during these circumstances. Think of strategy not as a deceptive or manipulative practice, but rather as a thoughtful decision about how best to handle a particular situation employing the most appropriate approach available from among the many one might consider. The selections one makes are not simply about what will work or produce the desired outcome, but also about relationships and values. The way each situation is handled makes a statement about who you are and what matters to you. Each creates precedents, strengthens or diminishes the quality of connections with others, and shapes the history and legacy in terms of which your future actions will be judged.

The Importance of History

A leader's impact is fundamentally shaped by the ways in which messages, actions, and behaviors are understood and responded to by followers. The most fundamental component of strategic leadership in an organizational setting, therefore, is the formulation and enactment of communication behaviors that simultaneously take account of the perspectives of the leader and their goals, and also those of their colleagues. For this to be done effectively, it is essential to pay attention not only to the present moment and the purposes at hand, but also to the history of communication among those involved.

Communication events consist of a sequence of verbal and nonverbal messages, behaviors, and actions and responses to them. The sequential message sending and receiving between individuals creates a process, and that process, over time, creates a history—one that often has a profound impact on the delivery, reception, and interpretation of any event. Simply stated, communication history shapes the way individuals attend to, interpret, and react to particular messages. Given this reality, in addition to being ethnographers, leaders must also be historians, and leadership strategy must focus on the current communication events and challenges *in the moment*, but in a manner that also takes account of the background relevant to the situation at hand. Doing this effectively requires an awareness of the current circumstance and perspectives at play, an understanding of the relevant history, and a clear sense of how one's actions will contribute to the evolving history of relationships and the organization.

From the perspective of leadership strategy, the following three points about communication are particularly important: First, while communication events are far more tangible and visible than communication histories, an understanding of the latter is essential to making sense of the former.

Second, current actions contribute to an unfolding history that will affect future encounters as well as the evolving culture of a group, organization, or community with which future members and leaders must contend. Third, every decision or action contributes to the perceptions of a leader and the broader context in which that individual's leadership actions will be understood and remembered.

In the faculty hiring vignette described earlier, the history of interaction between the chair and department members and the dean played a central role in the way the "good news" to create an extra position for the department was interpreted. Very salient to that history from the perspective of the chair and department members was the fact that the candidate the department recommended as its first choice—pursuant to an extensive search, interviews, and multiple meetings devoted to comparing candidates—was initially rejected by the dean with the explanation that he did not feel the candidate was as strong as some others. No detail was provided.

Without meeting with the department chair, search committee, or members of the department to discuss his thinking or to hear the rationale for their preference, the dean went ahead and extended an offer to another candidate—the one he most favored. The department and chair were left wondering about the rationale for the dean's decision and action and were annoyed at not having been involved in a discussion with the dean on any of these issues. Did the dean have a vision of what was needed that differed from that of the department? Was the job description that had been collaboratively developed and approved by the dean and department now deemed no longer relevant? Did the dean mistrust the ability or motives of the department in its analysis or recommendation process? All these questions were being discussed among department members.

Of significance is the fact that this series of events closely followed two previous search cycles where the dean's role in the final selection process had also been viewed by the department and chair as mysterious, intrusive, dismissive, and disrespectful to the department chair and its faculty. This concern had been brought to the attention of the dean, who seemed puzzled by it but assured all involved that the process would be improved as they headed into the current search. So, quite clearly in this instance, the message as received by the chair and faculty about the news of an additional hire was not the message that the dean expected. Rather than speaking to the dean's generosity or desire to reaffirm his regard for the department by offering a second position, it was interpreted as yet another insult to the faculty, a challenge to their ability to render meaningful personnel judgments, and an affront to traditions of shared governance, leadership transparency, and collegial decision-making.

As the example so clearly indicates, the ways in which leadership messages are interpreted depends on a great many factors, over which a skilled leader has some control, many of which are historical, and all of which can be enhanced by thoughtful reflection and analysis. In this case and others, enhancing the predictability of communication outcomes requires one to begin by taking account of the current perspectives and relevant history of all key parties, establishing and conveying clear expectations for the present situation, monitoring communication as it progresses, maintaining open lines for feedback, and being prepared to refine messages, processes, strategies, and structures as may be necessary in pursuit of the intended outcome as events unfold.

Leadership Communication Principles and Pragmatics

Translating communication theory and core concepts into practice is a fundamental challenge for leaders. In the following section, six principles that help with this process are presented, and the implications of each are discussed.

- Information Flow and Relationships
- The Antigravity of Information Flow
- Process and Content
- Arrows and Waves
- Leadership and Followership
- Hearing What You Want versus Hearing What You Need

Information Flow and Relationships

“Communication is important” is a familiar refrain in many organizational settings and circumstances. But what does that mean, exactly? Write and speak clearly. Choose words carefully. Be succinct in presenting the main point of the message. Repeat key points but avoid being overly repetitious. Listen attentively. Ask questions for clarification. Pay attention to nonverbal as well as verbal messages. All of these tactics are important and helpful to the effectiveness of communication in any setting. However, these considerations are really just the tip of the communicative iceberg.

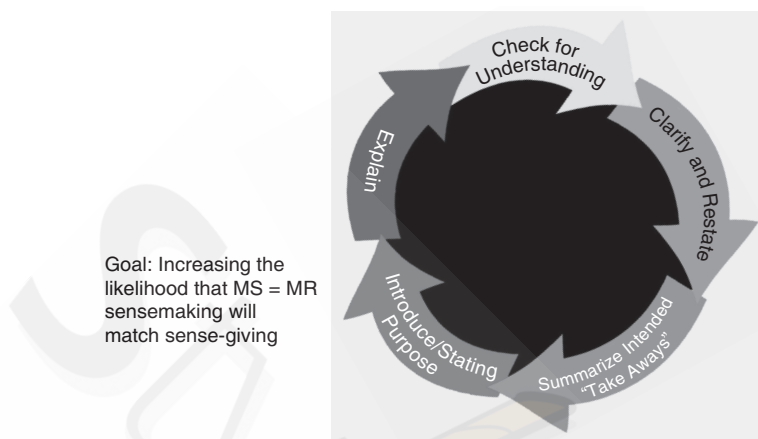
It is easy for a leader to assume communication is effective—and strategic—as long as messages are articulately delivered. Thinking of the example of the dean who conveyed the positive news about the two faculty hires, for instance, it is likely that the dean assumes his communication was clear, appropriate, and effective. However, as discussed previously, in addition to the personal and organizational factors that are involved in any

communication situation, history, content, and relational dimensions of communication are also important to the process and outcomes (Watzlawick et al., 1967).

Every communication encounter has the potential to convey information and also to shape or be shaped by relationships. As a leader, it is therefore critical to continually remind oneself of the informational–relational duality in communication planning, action, and analysis. Thinking about what to say is only the beginning; in addition, one needs to consider how and when to say it, to whom and in what setting to say it, and how the message is likely to be interpreted and reacted to. A second category that needs careful planning and analysis relates to how this communication event is likely to influence and be influenced by the relationships and histories among those involved. All of these questions serve as a reminder that the interpretation and impact of leadership messages are fundamentally shaped by recipients and the communication context. As a consequence, much of one's success in leadership communication depends on effective strategy. The goal of this planning is to enable the leader to better understand and predict, and to guide their messaging and actions such that they have an increased likelihood of resonating in intended ways with colleagues and potential followers (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b).

Efforts to convey information involve the negotiation and coordination of meaning among the parties involved. Successful outcomes require an iterative process with a number of vital steps, including establishing goals, creating and transmitting messages, listening to and observing whether one's messages are attended to, discerning how these messages are interpreted, noting what actions result, and carrying forth this process while making necessary adjustments along the way. Thus, when a leader's purpose is to promote the sharing of knowledge, an idea, a perspective, or a point of view, the steps identified in Figure 10.1 can be helpful: Introduce/state purpose, explain, check for understanding, clarify and restate, and summarize the intended takeaways. The goal, of course, is to increase the likelihood that the message sent equals the message received, or, put another way, that the sensemaking outcomes for potential receivers match the sensemaking intentions of message initiators. The linear progression from the statement of purpose to the summary of intended takeaways may seem to be a simple enough prescription for effectively sharing new information; in practice, however, the dynamics and outcomes involved are complex, not necessarily sequential, and neither the process nor the outcomes are as predictable as the model might seem to imply.

An important theoretical insight—alluded to in the previous discussion—is that every interactive event involves not only *information*-related, but also

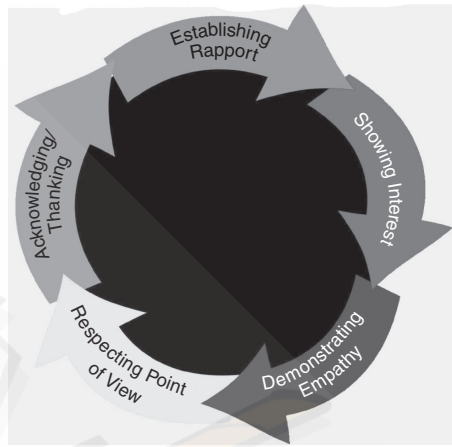
Figure 10.1. Focusing on the information dimension.

relationship-related dynamics. Every message that is sent and received has the potential to initiate, reaffirm, or change the relationship between individuals involved. And as they are formed and evolve, relationships influence the interpretations of messages, reactions to new ideas, and also the emergence, reinforcement, or decline of trust and credibility. More generally, relationship-building aspects of communication are vital to the creation of what might be termed *leadership capital*—which translates into support and respect for a leader that are accumulated when things are going well and a willingness to be more patient, tolerant, and supportive of a leader when difficulties arise.

The relational aspect of any communication exchange is often more difficult for leaders to understand and analyze than the content—or information—dimension. Several points are helpful in this regard: First, most relationships are formed initially based on self-interest. Second, first impressions can have a significant impact on the way relationships are likely to develop. Third, and perhaps most important for present purposes, relationships must be nurtured and maintained over time.

The relational communication cycle involves a sequence of steps, as depicted in a simplified form in Figure 10.2. The process includes the following elements: establishing rapport, showing interest, demonstrating empathy, respecting point of view, and acknowledging/thanking. These stages do not necessarily occur in a linear sequence, nor are all present in every communication encounter. The model is not intended to be prescriptive; rather, the depicted stages capture some general dimensions of communication focus when one's explicit goal is creating, shaping, and reinforcing relationships.

Figure 10.2. Focusing on the relationship dimension.



Other beneficial communication behaviors, which generally contribute to relational—and, often, also to informational—goals include the following:

- listening attentively
- clarifying/establishing common goals
- conveying mutual respect and support
- valuing diverse perspectives
- clarifying expectations and boundaries
- maintaining consistency
- being transparent with information, ideas, and processes
- displaying empathy and perspective-taking
- promoting a sense of teamwork—sharing the glory and the pain
- recognizing the accomplishments of others
- using inclusive thought and language (“we,” “us,” “our,” vs. “I,” “me,” and “my”)
- avoiding self-preoccupation and self-promotion—the “it all began when I became your leader” syndrome—and the temptations of “narcissistic leadership” (Chatterjee & Hambrick, 2007)

Other behaviors, such as those listed in Box 10.1, generally detract from and weaken relationships bonds.

In the hiring vignette discussed previously, there seems little doubt that relationship dimensions of the communication process were critical to the eventual outcomes. Absent any information on the dean’s rationale or

BOX 10.1**Communicative Acts That Weaken Relationship Bonds**

Just as relationships may be enhanced through communication strategies, relationships may also be weakened through communication. Porath's (2015) research on incivility in the workplace captures various communication behaviors that are regarded as "rude" and potentially damaging to relationships in the workplace. Porath identified the following as among the most often cited rude behaviors by bosses, in descending order of frequency:

- interrupting people
- being judgmental of those who are different
- paying little attention to or showing little interest in others' opinions
- taking the best tasks and leaving the worst for others
- failing to pass along necessary information
- neglecting to say "please" or "thank you"
- talking down to people
- taking too much credit for things

When asked to consider the rude behaviors that people most often admit to seeing in themselves, the following items were frequently cited:

- hibernating into e-gadgets
- using jargon even when it excludes others
- ignoring invitations
- being judgmental of those who are different
- grabbing easy tasks while leaving difficult ones for others

thinking about the process or candidates, and coming on the heels of other problematic search processes in previous years, faculty members felt ignored and disrespected, and the chair felt undermined—all outcomes that were quite predictable from a relational perspective. This situation led to faculty meetings and multiple email exchanges that questioned the dean and the dean's motives and contemplated an appropriate response. Although the hiring decision had already been made, the department decided to demand a meeting with the dean to discuss the process and its consequences.

The dean agreed to meet after a number of requests from the chair and senior faculty. When he arrived at the meeting, he assumed the role

of meeting chair and began with a speech, explaining that a dean always knows things by virtue of their position that often can't be revealed to chairs or faculty. He then indicated that it had been his intention all along to hire the person the department recommended in addition to offering a position to the candidate he preferred. So, the "good news" was that the department was receiving an extra faculty line, and he went on to announce that he had already extended an offer to the department's preferred candidate.

The dean expressed his unhappiness at the way the chair and faculty had disrespected his authority and failed to understand that he was operating in the best interests of the department throughout the entire process. The chair and faculty sat rather silently in disbelief. The chair had had no prior knowledge of the decisions or the decision-making, nor did the search committee. The dean seemed quite surprised that there was anything short of jubilation within the group.

The meeting ended on a somber note. The vignette provides a classic example of a leadership failure—a failure that could have been a significant success, adding to the dean's credibility, respect, leadership capital, and leadership legacy, had the dean understood and applied basic concepts of strategy and focused on both informational and relationship dimensions of the communication process.

The Antigravity of Information Flow

Process complexity and outcome unpredictability are increasingly problematic as the number of individuals involved in the communication process increases. This is the case, for example, when a communication flow begins with a senior leader in one part of the university and progresses to a series of other leaders in other units, such as a dean, chair, committee chair, graduate program director, faculty members, and perhaps in some cases eventually to students. The message initiator may mistakenly assume that information will flow logically through the formal channels of the organization. Unfortunately, the flow from the top level to others in the organization is problematic in many cases. This can be a particularly difficult circumstance if individuals in some units receive the intended information or reports while others do not. Similar communication dynamics can occur across units, leading some individuals to feel they are valued and connected and others to be frustrated or resentful because they are out of the loop. Even when the conduit works reasonably well, the message received may well be lost or distorted through negligence or by uninformed, recalcitrant, or oppositional colleagues—or simply as a consequence of the multiple handoffs among the many involved individuals in the communicative chain.

Referring once again to the hiring vignette, discussing expectations relative to the candidate search and the selection process was a critical but neglected activity for the dean and the chairs of the department and search committee. Issues that could have been clarified through more carefully designed information dissemination and follow-up discussion include the following: Was it the expectation that the department would put forward one candidate or several? Should finalists be ranked by the department in order of preference? Was the dean committed to following the department's recommendations, or did he view these merely as advisory? Particularly given the troubled history relative to recruitment and hiring, endeavoring to be as clear as possible about the process was a critically important step. The department thought they had addressed these issues thoroughly, having discussed and agreed on the type of faculty member needed, collaboratively developing the job description within the department and soliciting the dean's input and approval, engaging the dean fully during campus visits of candidates, and chatting informally with the dean after each visit. In none of these information events had members of the department or chair come away with a sense that there were major differences of opinion or brewing problems.

In situations where multiple individuals are involved in the review and approval process, as is typically the case with new employee recruitment and selection, intentionality, careful planning, and thoughtful follow-through are vital from the perspectives of both information flow and relationships. In this case, as in so many others, effective leadership requires formalized communication planning along with attention to message clarity, repetition, careful selection of channels, appropriate dissemination, and feedback loops to help ensure the fidelity of messages as they flow through the organization.

Process and Content

In any communication situation, the focus is most naturally on the intended message and its content. This is the "what" of communication. Equally important, however—often even more important—is the "how." *Process issues*, as they are often termed, relate to how the message content will be conveyed, what organizational channels will be employed, who will be engaged in the event and in what sequence, what will be documented and in what form, and how this process will be monitored and refined as needed.

Particularly in higher education contexts characterized by relatively loosely coupled systems and personal autonomy, the way things are done is as important as substance. As a result, even great ideas may not be accepted if ample opportunities are not provided for colleagues to be engaged in review,

discussion, and decision-making. This is a helpful reminder that being taken account of, included, listened to, valued, and respected can matter as much as achieving one's preferred outcome.

From a leader's perspective, there is often a concern that extensive engagement and analysis will be time-consuming, and of course it certainly does require more time and energy than simply making a decision on one's own. However, it is also often the case that one either dedicates the necessary time up front for an appropriate level of engagement and consensus-building or pays a higher price later in dealing with a predictable array of questions, challenges, and resistances.

Not only is the "pay-later" approach often more time-consuming in the end, but it also increases the risks of failing to garner the support necessary for acceptance and successful implementation. Any veteran college or university administrator can point to a number of great ideas or initiatives that ran into significant roadblocks from faculty, staff, students, or other stakeholders. In many cases those impediments could have been avoided with more balanced attention to the communication process as well as content. These topics will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 15, which focuses on organizational change.

Arrows and Waves

Communication is not like archery. That metaphor suggests an activity that involves skillful crafting of a message, taking careful aim, and then sending it on its way toward the intended target hoping—expecting, really—that the message sent will be the message received. In this view, communication situations are instantaneous and well-bounded events, potentially very predictable and controllable based on the skills of the archer. Unfortunately, due to the complexity and nuances of human communication, the most carefully crafted arrows, sent by the most skilled archers, aimed at precise targets, often fail to land as intended, and more often than not the outcome does not coincide particularly well with the archer's intentions.

A better metaphor to capture the nature of human communication is that of waves rolling in and breaking against a coastline—well-defined cognitive and emotional personal coastlines shaped over many years for each of us by the constant ebb and flow of messages. Over time, these messages, like waves against a beach, shape the contours of our individual shorelines. It is unlikely that any single wave will have a dramatic impact, as it is unlikely that any single message will have a transformative effect on a message recipient. In the case of shorelines and communication there are exceptions to this rule, as with a tsunami or a single life-changing message, but these are rare.

The implication is not that communication and message sending are without value or impact. Certainly, this is not the case. But the wave metaphor helps us shift our thinking to a more constructive view of communication and the dynamics of influence. It helps to explain why a single communiqué about a great new idea may well have less impact than the initiator of the message anticipated—if the great new idea even makes it to the cognitive shoreline rather than dissipates as it rolls in. As one poignant example, think about cigarette usage and the numerous messages about the risks of smoking through various channels, from multiple sources, often over many years, that generally are required to change the behavior of a long-time smoker. Another example has been provided by the relatively slow uptake and resistance to social distancing and mask wearing in spite of extensive communication efforts advocating the importance of these behaviors.

The implications for a leader are many. These are particularly profound when it comes to communication about new or changed decisions, policies, ideas, or directions. They are also important for a leader in thinking about and planning routine day-to-day communication. The wave and shoreline metaphor also offers the following guidance: Anticipate the impact of individual cognitive and emotional factors, along with the cultural, historical, and relationship dynamics discussed previously; don't expect any single message to achieve the effect you hope for; recognize the need for multiple messages, redundancy, and the use of numerous message sources and channels; and be prepared to draw on your leadership competencies related to patience and perseverance, among others.

Leadership and Followership

As critical as leadership is, various authors note (Collinson et al., 2017; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b) that there is a risk in overly romanticizing the concept and attributing too much power to leaders when it comes to controlling outcomes. It's important to remind ourselves that leaders have limited influence (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b). Indeed, as Benjamin Hooks and others have stated, "If you think you are a leader, and turn around to find no one following, you're just someone taking a walk." In point of fact, a great deal of influence over "leadership outcomes" rests with the choices made by "followers." Followers decide who and when to follow, support, work with, and/or endorse, or they may choose to do none of these. It is in the act of choice to engage as a follower that the leader has the power of influence bestowed on themselves (Platow et al., 2015; Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b).

A critical implication of these perspectives is that aspiring leaders need to pay close attention to the sensibilities, sensitivities, needs, and goals of

potential followers. These insights also point to the importance of creating messages, strategies, processes, and structures that advance the aspirations of a leader but will also resonate positively with would-be followers (Ruben & Gigliotti, 2019b).

Hearing What You Want Versus Hearing What You Need

Hearing how effective one is as a leader and the extent to which colleagues support and agree with your ideas, plans, and approach is always reassuring. But those messages are only helpful if they are authentic, and for the leader the consequences of “fake news” can be very problematic.

The most important feedback consists of information that you *need* to hear—information that candidly and constructively speaks to potential risks, barriers, or problems related to your plans and intentions, along with suggestions for how to best address these concerns. The key point is that what a leader genuinely *needs* is not commentary that simply complements them or reinforces presumptions about the wonders of their leadership, but rather information that will help them be successful in their role.

As a leader, one’s goal should be to create a culture of trust and nondefensiveness, where openness to candor, critique, and constructive criticism is always welcome when these options support core values and the greater good of the organization. Toward this end, it is vital to personally display an openness and receptivity. The goal is to cultivate the understanding that to you, loyalty is about colleagues who will share information that will make the organization more effective and feedback that will help you become a better leader.

A Rubric for Strategic Leadership

Colleges and universities, as noted throughout this text, are incredibly dynamic and complex places. The multiple missions, stakeholder concerns, decision-making processes, and potential areas of strategic focus present faculty and staff leaders with a seemingly endless number of choices as they endeavor to translate challenges into opportunities. For all these reasons, leadership extends beyond doing what comes naturally. It is not simply about being yourself. Rather, strategic leadership and communication involve systematic and intentional planning and execution.

All leaders encounter a number of challenging circumstances on a daily basis: Some are complicated and nuanced, such as the case study discussed in this chapter; others may be more routine and easily addressed. Every leadership action—no matter how significant or insignificant it may seem—is an

important one in many respects. Each has consequences for the organization, for the leader and for colleagues. Each action sets precedents, contributes to an impression of the leader, and strengthens or diminishes the quality of the leader's relationships. Each decision also contributes to the foundation in terms of how a leader's future actions will be judged, and each will ultimately contribute to their lasting legacy. The following rubric for strategic leadership outlines five critical steps that can be extremely helpful in addressing the multiple challenges a leader faces:

1. Analyze the situation.
2. Define the audience(s).
3. Clarify goal(s).
4. Select and implement a plan of action.
5. Debrief.

Using this framework, as described in the next sections, requires conscious effort initially. Over time, however, its use becomes a matter of habit—one that can greatly enhance one's effectiveness across a variety of circumstances. Each leadership situation can be viewed as a teachable moment and an opportunity to apply, test, and further refine one's skills.

Analyze the Situation: Determine What Is at Stake

The first step involves a careful assessment of the circumstances confronting a leader. The critical questions to ask are these: What is at stake in this particular situation? Is the issue related to a program, department, or the institution as a whole, or to students, faculty, or staff members? Alternatively, is what's at stake the credibility, identity, or reputation of the leader? Being clear on the nature and significance of the issue(s) involved and what is at stake provides a necessary starting point for developing a thoughtful strategy. Keep in mind that a leader's handling of mundane as well as challenging situations can be important in the short run and can also shape the long-term identity of an individual or organization.

The following list should be helpful in identifying issues that may be at stake in any situation.

For the program/department/institution:

- core purposes or aspirations
- critical values or principles
- a problem to be addressed

- consistent practices
- organizational climate, culture, or morale
- critical regulations or policies
- fair and equitable treatment
- personal and professional standards and practices

For others in the organization:

- resources
- status
- pride
- recognition

For you as a leader:

- clarifying your role
- establishing your voice
- upholding personal values or principles
- setting or maintaining a precedent
- maintaining your credibility
- defining your personal/leadership style
- demonstrating consistency in how you treat colleagues, students, or problems

Define the Audience(s): Who Needs to Hear From You if You Decide to Respond, and Why?

This step allows the leader to determine the intended audience(s). It is far too easy to omit careful consideration of who you need to reach with a particular message, thereby missing an important stage of the strategic communication process. The following are some possible audiences to include:

- a specific individual or individuals
- broader groups
 - the individual(s) directly involved in a situation
 - all those present or aware of the situation
 - the entire department
 - the individual(s) to whom you report
 - specific groups (students, a committee, alumni)
 - senior colleague(s)
 - a friend, partner, or confidant
 - others

Clarify Goal(s): What Exactly Do You Hope to Accomplish?

The third step calls for a leader to clarify goals. Building on your assessment of what is at stake and your decisions regarding those with whom you should communicate, it is essential to determine *exactly* what you want, need, or hope to accomplish. Recognize that it is impossible to determine what would be an effective or ineffective plan of action—the next step—without deciding what your intentions will be. A strategy that is perfect for one goal can be problematic or disastrous when viewed in terms of other goals. Perhaps the most obvious examples are the potential problems that occur if you are not clear as to whether your objective is listening to and learning what others are thinking versus informing or persuading them of your point of view.

A myriad of communication goals may be appropriate in any situation, including, but not limited to, any of the following:

- gathering information
- providing input
- clarifying facts
- solidifying relationships
- persuading or influencing
- assuring that your position, reaction, or perspective is clear
- soliciting input for decision-making
- being on the record
- conveying interest/concern
- displaying expertise

Select and Implement a Plan of Action: What Do You Do, When, and How?

The fourth step involves reviewing options and selecting a plan of action. The issues to consider here are as follows:

- What *action* should be undertaken—if any—and what is the most appropriate *timing*, and why?
 - Do nothing special (e.g., when not much is at stake, benefits versus costs of response are not clear, the problem will likely take care of itself).
 - Respond immediately, addressing the most pressing issue(s).
 - Think further about the situation (e.g., give the matter more thought, then revisit options).

- What is the *message* to be conveyed, and why?
 - informative (e.g., historical, factual, defining/clarifying problem, or citing other sources)
 - persuasive (e.g., evidence-based, values-based, vision-based)
- What *channel(s)* or *venue(s)* will be most effective, and why?
 - one-to-one (e.g., “spontaneous” informal or scheduled appointment)
 - group (e.g., meeting, town hall gathering, or focus group)
 - mediated (e.g., telephone, email, text, or social media)

The first decision is whether it makes sense to respond to the situation at all, and if so, what timing is most appropriate. This decision requires leaders to carefully identify the potential costs, benefits, barriers, and sources of resistance before selecting a course of action. This stage is often where leaders are inclined to begin. It should be apparent, however, that moving to action without first being clear about what’s at stake, who the appropriate audience is, and precisely what the goals are is a mistake.

A second decision involves determining precisely what message you hope to convey and how best to frame that message. Finally, decisions need to be made about the best way to deliver the message. Is a one-to-one discussion best? Or perhaps a group meeting? Or a mediated interaction using phone, email, text, or possibly social media?

Debrief: How Did It Go?

The final stage of this process, and perhaps the most frequently overlooked, consists of personal reflection and “after-action” debriefing and analysis. This stage leads one to consider how well the plan and execution worked, using feedback when it is available. The following questions can be useful in this stage:

- Did your strategy achieve the outcome you intended? Were there unanticipated consequences?
- How would others involved in the process describe the way things went?
- Is further follow-up needed? (If so, repeat previous four steps iteratively.)
- What might you do differently in the future to *address* this kind of problem if it were to occur again?
- How could you *prevent* this kind of situation from developing (e.g., set clearer expectations, stay closer to the process, request periodic progress reports, or assign several people to collaborate on the task)?
- What personal and/or professional leadership lessons can you take away from the situation?

The decision to address a particular situation—and how to do so—often carries enormous consequences. This model for making strategic communication choices can be useful to all leaders in approaching the numerous challenges they encounter. The model emphasizes the value of moving systematically through the first four stages prior to developing a strategy and taking action. In so doing, the rubric provides a structured approach to help leaders apply the assessment and communication competencies discussed in the chapter to evaluate a situation, clarify their goals, and focus on individuals with whom they will be interacting. The overall aim is to consciously select a strategy that is best suited to the circumstance at hand.

While a strategic leadership rubric does not guarantee desirable outcomes, the framework can certainly increase their likelihood. The discipline required to employ a strategic approach might be cumbersome at first. When implemented regularly, however, it will become quite natural. Like other topics presented in this book, this framework is intended to be applicable across a broad range of settings and circumstances. In applying the rubric in any particular context, a leader should give consideration to relevant nuances and subtleties, but the basic steps and their purposes remain constant.

Strategic Communication Insights

This chapter concludes with a set of tips and tactics related to strategic communication. These thoughts highlight a number of the leadership communication principles offered throughout the text. In particular, leadership is a process of social influence that is achieved through communication that might be verbal or nonverbal, planned or unplanned, intentional or unintentional, used for good or for evil. Importantly, the messages, processes, strategies, and structures are enacted by a leader in collaboration with colleagues, supporters, or followers. As noted, leadership is not possible without followership, and social influence is possible only with collective buy-in. These principles, like others offered in this chapter, are not meant to be a prescriptive list for influencing others; rather, they are offered as helpful guidance for leaders endeavoring to enhance their strategic competencies.

Nothing is more important than being clear on your communication goals, your audiences, and your messages. The five-step strategic communication rubric allows you to enhance your analysis of problems and strategies available for addressing them. Emphasis is placed on defining

what is at stake in a situation, identifying relevant audiences, thoughtfully selecting goals and messages, and methodically implementing the plan of action. Once these steps have been implemented, debriefing and reflecting on what transpired in order to learn from your successes and failures is a final step. This model emphasizes the importance of clear communication goals, which we view as one of the most essential facets of strategic leadership and communication.

Colleagues won't know or care as much about your plans, priorities, or rationales as you do. Remember how long it has taken you to reach a point of understanding and a readiness to act on a major initiative, and the many experiences that brought you to your present view of what needs to be done. To help others reach this same place, you need to recreate a similar process or set of experiences for them, recognizing that these steps will need to be more compressed than those you went through. As a part of this instructional process, leaders must do all they can to create a compelling and descriptive vision of challenges and opportunities, what is possible, what should be done, and why, tailoring messages to the various goals and interests of the specific audience. Asserting one's authority to advance a particular position might work in the short term but will not build a base of trust and understanding, nor necessarily motivate action.

A single message seldom has much impact. Remember that effective communication requires repetition. As discussed previously but is worth repeating in this list of key principles is the idea that one message seldom motivates a change in behavior or opinion. Recall the metaphor related to the waves on the shoreline, whereby communication and social influence are understood to be parts of an ongoing process through which messages wash over individuals—roughly analogous to waves repeatedly washing against a shoreline. Over time these messages shape the sensibilities and responses of receivers, much as waves shape the contours of a beach. In practice, do not count on your messages (meeting minutes, comments at meetings, etc.) to flow downward to colleagues in your organization in a logical, unadulterated way. Plan for and learn to appreciate the need for repetition. Expect to be bored with your messages before they get to the people you are trying to reach.

The simple message is the one that is remembered and retold. Let the elevator ride be your guide. Have a simple story about vision, benefits, and challenges ready to share—one that can be told on an elevator ride going up or down three or four stories. The use of concise but powerful language can help to leave a memorable impact on those with whom you interact in your formal and informal leadership roles. Be prepared to

elaborate if questions are asked and if you can be certain there is a genuine interest in learning more.

Don't count on getting agreement on what really happened in the past, who did what, who's to blame, or why it was done this way and not that way. Each of us has a huge stake in our perceptions and interpretations of events and their significance. Communication events have a history—one that is important to reflect on and understand—but public discussions aimed at clarifying that history often serve as a trap or obstacle to forward movement. Effort is generally better spent going forward than dissecting history to determine who did what that led to what problem.

In communication, less is sometimes more. More communication is not necessarily better communication. Flooding channels with too many messages—including social media posts, texts, and emails, and engaging in too many meetings and interpersonal interactions with colleagues and others—can be problematic when it comes to ensuring your contributions receive close attention. Related to this strategy, it is essential for leaders to invest substantial time in activities that allow colleagues to share their views and feel listened to and valued.

Finally, in some instances, clarity and full disclosure are not the intended goal of communication; rather, ambiguity can be used strategically and purposefully by a leader to avoid making a definitive commitment on a particular issue or course of action at an inopportune time or circumstance (Eisenberg, 1984). All of these observations point to the potential importance of making strategic choices about what's at stake, and given that, how much information to share and with whom.

Think carefully about the best leadership architecture in any situation. There are a number of alternatives for structuring a leadership team. Give careful consideration to the design and appropriate use of leadership architecture, taking into account the circumstances, goals, leader's communication style, the capabilities of colleagues, the unit culture and climate, and other relevant factors.

The following information sharing models are available:

Mass communication (top-down, one-to-many) model: With this model, the leader deals with everyone in public, through shared forums, or through publicly shared messages to the entire organization. The advantages include the following: Everyone has equal access to information and the approach takes less time, less customized messaging, and less investment up front in communication activities. However, this approach can overload individuals

with information that is not pertinent to all, lead to inattention to particularly important messages, and result in messages being directed to everyone when only certain individuals need to receive the information (e.g., rules pertaining to particular programs, individual reprimands, or new procedures).

Interpersonal (one-to-one) model: The leader communicates directly and personally with each individual on a one-to-one basis. This model, which is only viable in smaller organizations, or in work groups within larger units, allows for spontaneous, interactive, and customized communication. The interpersonal model allows leaders to gather personal perceptions, build coalitions, and plan strategy without public commitments. However, the lack of a systematic approach results in the uneven dissemination of information, leading to some individuals' perceptions and reality being privileged and others marginalized.

Intermediary/mediated (gatekeeper) model: Using this model, a leader forms and uses a layered architecture. This model allows a leader to form structures based on particular needs or interests, such as program-centered or topical area committees, communities of practice, or task forces, or the formation and utilization of an executive committee. Note that this model may be used in a way that purposefully includes or excludes particular formal or informal leaders or individuals. Considerations include time available, the effectiveness of existing communication channels, appropriateness of group segmentation, or levels of resistance or support, needs for customized and topically focused interaction. Limitations include the potential exclusion of interested individuals from particular groups and the challenges of effectively conveying information across groups. These limitations can be overcome to some extent through formalized and systematic planning and follow-up.

Combinations: Each of these designs can be used in any combination for particular purposes or for specific periods of time.

A leader won't be successful with everyone—nor with any one person all the time. Leadership roles in higher education can be incredibly consuming and exhausting. To avoid burnout, always keep in mind the institution's best interests and consider changing messages, processes, strategies, and structures in a way that makes sense for your audience, your institution, and for you. Be persistent, but remain grounded and open to concluding that you have

reached a point of diminishing returns in your efforts with some potential message recipients.

Do not underestimate the power of powerless language. Leaders are often taught to use assertive and direct language; however, leaders must also recognize the value of powerless language in certain situations. Expressing vulnerability, asking questions, talking tentatively, and seeking advice are all communication tactics that can allow one to influence others. As Grant (2013) acknowledges, what is often described as powerless language can be incredibly influential in building rapport and trust and gaining the admiration of others.

Plan to be pleased and surprised when colleagues acknowledge or thank you for your work or accomplishments as a leader. Some colleagues can be counted on to notice and express their appreciation for your efforts on behalf of the organization; many others cannot. More likely than praise or complements are messages that identify problems, failures, or gaps colleagues identify in your leadership, pointing to ways you can better meet their needs. This is especially true for those who have not occupied roles similar to yours. Despite this predictable and sometimes frustrating pattern, there is likely to be useful information in the complaints and suggestions of your critics. Also, because of their scarcity, compliments and expressions of appreciation and support will be particularly appreciated.

It may be useful to structure a periodic organizational debriefing session, where colleagues are asked to list and discuss things that are going well and things that can be improved. These discussions can provide useful information on organizational and leadership needs and can also remind colleagues that it is important to focus on strengths as well as areas for improvement.

Conclusion

The importance of strategic leadership communication cannot be overstated. It is far too easy to assume that one has become an effective communicator based on life experiences or professional or educational accomplishments. In reality, the demands of academic and administrative leadership in higher education can present a host of challenges for even the most accomplished faculty and staff leaders. For everyone, becoming a skilled strategic leader is a work in progress. The five-step rubric presented in this chapter, along with the related principles and insights related to strategic leadership and strategic communication, focus a spotlight on communication behaviors that will be particularly helpful in each of these endeavors.

For Further Consideration

Vignettes

Read through the following vignettes. For each, consider how the five steps in the strategic leadership communication rubric, and the insights, tips, and tactics discussed throughout the chapter, apply. Specifically, how might the rubric and insights from the chapter be helpful in addressing and potentially preventing each of these situations.

1. A particular staff member on a committee you lead is consistently resistant to points you raise and initiatives you propose at meetings. The pattern has become quite predictable. It seems to you that whatever ideas you introduce, the individual finds problems with the suggestion, and the problems are generally voiced in meetings in a way that stalls discussion. What guidance would the rubric provide?
2. A colleague in your department went over your head as chair and obtained from the dean additional resources for teaching that you denied based on equity considerations. You were unaware of the meeting between the dean and faculty member. How might you best deal with the situation at this point?
3. A student comes to you to express confidential concerns about what he believes is a romantic relationship developing between one of your faculty members and a student in the class. He reports that this is extremely awkward for others in the class and requests that you address the problem immediately. How should the situation be handled?
4. In your capacity as department chair, you assigned a faculty member the task of developing a core course for the department, based on input from everyone who would like to contribute. A semester has passed, and the deadline for the approval of new courses is fast approaching. Three days before the faculty meeting at which new courses are to be reviewed and approved, the colleague assigned to the task of developing the course distributes what looks like a final draft of the syllabus. At the meeting, various faculty members complain that this was supposed to be designed with broad input to reflect the perspectives of the entire faculty, but clearly this approach was not taken. The author of the syllabus explains that he had been disappointed to have received no input or suggestions during the

previous semester. No one recalls any input being sought. What should you do?

5. You are one of four members appointed to a committee to develop a first draft for a new program to be implemented within your department. No committee leader was appointed, and you find yourself adopting the leadership role. One of your colleagues seldom attends meetings, and when she does, she has only negative input. Clearly she is opposed to the idea of the new program and does not seem to appreciate your efforts to move the group forward. How might you best handle the situation?
6. Your school, composed of four departments, was formed based on some common interests and what the central administration viewed as interdisciplinary potential. To most faculty, however, the merger was understood to be a matter of administrative convenience. In the 4 years since the unit was formed, there have been some grassroots efforts to develop a unifying rhetoric and future vision, but none of these have been enthusiastically supported. Word has come to you that the administration believes it has becoming essential for the school to develop a unifying narrative and a more collaborative rather than divisive attitude. You have been asked to head up the group to develop this shared narrative. What principles and pragmatics from this chapter will be particularly helpful?