

# The Voice of Authority

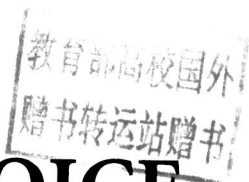
*10 Communication Strategies  
Every Leader Needs to Know*

Dianna  
Booher

BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF

*Communicate with  
Confidence*

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*10 Communication Strategies  
Every Leader Needs to Know*

**Dianna Booher**



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*Dianna Booher*

# **THE VOICE OF AUTHORITY**

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# There Is Just No Communication around Here

*How people talk to each other  
absolutely determines how well the  
organization will function.*

—LARRY BOSSIDY, CHAIRMAN,  
HONEYWELL INTERNATIONAL

**D**o you have a boss who demands rather than asks? Do you have suppliers who promise but don't deliver? Do you have a spouse who growls rather than responds? Do you have a child who explodes rather than expresses feelings?

Whether at home or in your workplace, poor communication is often the culprit. A common complaint: "There's just no communication around here!"

What could people possibly mean by that comment? With paper swirling on every desk, e-mail in-boxes overflowing, a cell phone in every hand, what do people mean by "no communication"? What does your boss, coworker, or mother-in-law mean by that comment? What do *you*



mean by that comment? But wait. Before you answer that question, consider the following situation:

Jorge walks out of a big presentation to the senior executives and turns to his boss, who is leading the project team. “Well, how did you think it went in there?”

The manager says to him, “Nice job. You nailed it.”

A month later, Jorge is terminated. Reason stated: Lacks understanding of big-picture goals and how his projects align with those goals. Where did the miscommunication happen? Did Jorge’s manager just not give him the straight truth about a bad presentation? Was Jorge’s manager off base in her understanding of the meeting dynamics and feedback? Or had the executives failed to communicate their goals clearly from the beginning?

Companies lose employees and customers every week because they can’t teach people to communicate clearly and candidly with each other. Period. It’s that simple. And that complex.

### *Your Opportunity to Lead*

This is where you come in—that is, your answer to the earlier question: What makes people complain, “There’s just no communication around here”? If you can answer that question—and do something about it—you can be heard. You can create conversation. You can change things.

The answer is not about technology. Blogging, instant-messaging, text-messaging, smart phones—all, just like e-mail and faxes, will be passé after a few years. New technology appears and disappears from the scene. The one constant is *human* communication.

Your career opportunity is your ability to use the principles of effective human communication to create connections and make things happen.

How do you know if you're any good as a communicator? By the results you get—or don't get. You either clarify or confuse. You either motivate or demoralize. You either gain buy-in or generate distrust.

### Symptoms of Poor Personal Communication

Most of us think we're excellent communicators. Unfortunately, our own understanding or response is not the best measure of effectiveness. Everything we say is clear to us—or we wouldn't have said it that way. So when we look outward for clues of poor communication, these symptoms often surface:

- ▶ Feeling that everyone agrees with and supports what you say, feel, and do most of the time
- ▶ Lack of input, questions, or feedback on your ideas presented in meetings
- ▶ Few or no ideas contributed in your meetings
- ▶ Inability to influence others to accept your ideas or change their viewpoint or behavior
- ▶ Seeing little or no behavioral change in people you've coached for improved performance
- ▶ Confusion about what you're supposed to be doing
- ▶ Lack of understanding the "why" behind assigned projects and goals
- ▶ Thinking that what you do or say doesn't really "change things" in the long run
- ▶ Nervousness or hesitancy about presenting new ideas to your boss, client, or strategic partners
- ▶ Ongoing conflict with peers or family
- ▶ Frequent rework

- ▶ Constant reminders from you to others to take action, meet deadlines, or send information
- ▶ Frequent requests for more information about topics or issues that you think you've already addressed sufficiently
- ▶ Feeling of disconnection and discomfort in one-on-one and small-group interactions
- ▶ Lack of positive feedback about your presentations or documents (from those not obligated to give it)

### Symptoms of Poor Communication in Your Organization

Again, ask executives if their organizations communicate well and chances are you'll hear a resounding yes. But ask those a little lower in the ranks and you may hear otherwise. These symptoms crop up:

- ▶ Conflicting goals and objectives (Susan wants to cut costs; Sam wants to increase revenue.)
- ▶ Conflicting priorities (Su Lin wants her sales staff trained before they get in front of customers; Dupree wants his staff in front of customers as soon as possible, with or without all the obligatory training.)
- ▶ Conflicting schedules
- ▶ Left-hand, right-hand blindness (Division A doesn't know what Division B is doing and often duplicates—or complicates—their work.)
- ▶ Turf wars
- ▶ Unclear values
- ▶ Low morale; people doing just enough to “get by”

- ▶ Lack of coordination of routine tasks; details “falling between the cracks”
- ▶ Rework
- ▶ Gossip, rumors
- ▶ “Us” against “them” attitudes and conversations
- ▶ Poor team “chemistry” (either open expressions of hostility or silent withdrawal and cynicism)
- ▶ Jargon and “double-speak” between departments

### *How Did We Sink to This State of Affairs?*

#### The “Spray and Pray” Mentality

One of the three biggest communication challenges, according to directors of communications, is getting senior executives to pay more than lip service to the idea. Shellye Archambeau, CEO of a technology firm called Metric-Stream, uses the “spray and pray” phrase to label executives who shower people with information and hope they can make sense of it, thus creating the illusion that everyone is informed.

In my own consulting practice, I’ve yet to discover a senior executive who doesn’t say that “people are our most valuable asset” and “communication is vital to our success.”

But when feedback from an employee survey reveals communication breakdowns, these same executives scratch their heads: “What are they talking about? We bombard them with information! It’s on the intranet. It’s on the Web. We had a teleconference on that issue last Thursday. They have an 800 number to call. We have monthly staff meetings. I don’t see how we could possibly give people more information. What do they want?”

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*Information is not communication. Information is not a message. Information is not a connection. Information does not translate to execution. Information does not drive sales or profits. The difference between information and communication is the difference between an X-ray and surgery.*

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Information is not communication. Information is not a message. Information is not a connection. Information does not translate to execution. Information does not drive sales or profits. The difference between information and communication is the difference between an X-ray and surgery. Leaders understand the difference between the volume of communication and its significance.

### Gurus Repackaging the Old as the “New”

Professors, consultants, and others out to make a name for themselves by selling new “models” have to repackage ideas continually. We humans come by the habit naturally. Check any collection of quotations and you’ll find that what Aristotle, the Apostle Paul, or John Adams said has been rephrased by rock stars, pro athletes, and corporate leaders through the years.

The problem: Repackaging typically calls for more complex labels and language. So people tune out with “heard it all before.”

### “Spin” Spotting

Our psyche filters out messages that first come to us. We’re schooled to “sniff for the stink,” “wait for the other shoe

to fall,” “wait until the dust settles,” or “wait for the air to clear” before getting the true story.

Here is how we typically respond to what we hear:

1. Hear the situation and/or facts.
2. Wait for the spin.
3. Download the intentions.
4. Decode the spin.

To make the process faster, we tune out until step 3. In short, we listen defensively, skeptically—as if everything we’re hearing is half-truth with a hidden motive behind the spin.

Risk-Averse Culture: “Not I,”  
Said the Little Red Hen

Nobody wants to claim responsibility or be accountable for actions or decisions. The situation has worsened during the last 25 years that my company has been offering training in business writing. In the 1980s, as part of a two-day workshop, we taught participants how to respond to customer complaints. Only occasionally did we encounter a company that didn’t allow their service agents to respond to complaints at all—but instead, because of liability concerns, required them to pass that task on to supervisors. Today, the task is handled almost universally by managers. Why? Fear of having service agents say, “We made a mistake.”

The same thing happens internally in the most minor situations. People create an unending number of obscure e-mails to avoid saying, “I’m accountable, and I made a mistake.”

## Turning Communication into a Template

Another communication killer is the overuse of templates, which turns people into drones and clones without personality or voice. Templates remove the thought process. Templates tend to dehumanize and generalize communication.

Of course I'm speaking metaphorically. But I'm also speaking literally.

There's a growing trend to standardize all presentations so that everyone using PowerPoint must use the same template (typically with the heading in the same spot, bullet points, and a "take-away" at the bottom). At trade shows, meeting planners often send out templates to conference speakers, suggesting that they dump all their slides into the standard template so they all have the same "look and feel." Often, corporate communication directors mandate such in the name of "branding." Is it any wonder we're now hearing complaints about "death by PowerPoint" as if the tool is the problem?

Customer relationship management (CRM) software systems generate template e-mails and letters to respond to customers—responses that rarely answer the customers' specific questions.

The whole world is trying to communicate by template. The call center hears "Problem X," so they send e-mail D response. The doctor hears symptoms Y and Z, so the pharmacy spits out the printed warnings and side effects along with the prescriptions. The customer from the food service industry calls, so the sales team delivers Standard Sales Presentation ABC.

Result: No one connects. Everything is general. Nothing stands out. All seems irrelevant. Most gets ignored.

## Obnoxious Behavior—Courtesy of Anonymity

Have you ever had someone keep you waiting to continue a conversation while they repeatedly answered their phone? Or how about “no reply” bravado when you e-mail someone with a direct question: “Can you have the report to me by Friday before Bill’s retirement get-together at 3:00?” They respond, “Good thing you reminded me of the party. I’ll see you at 3:00.” They never answer the question about the report—intentionally.

Thanks to the Internet, people feel anonymous as long as they’re not eyeball-to-eyeball with you.

## Political Correctness

Similar problems occur when people are afraid that direct communication may hurt someone’s feelings. People will put up with bad language, bad attitudes, and bad performance from their team members, clients, and coworkers all in the name of political correctness. They fear being labeled prejudiced against a certain ethnic group, age group, or gender. Managers often rely on e-mail notices or the Human Resources representative to have the tough conversations with their employees.

In fact, some people dread a straightforward conversation so much (whether because they themselves are uncomfortable or because the other person is defensive or easily crushed) that they hire an outsider to deal with the problem. People can even hire anonymous individuals on the Internet for a small fee ([www.GentleHints.com](http://www.GentleHints.com)) to let a coworker, boss, or neighbor know they wear too much perfume, make lousy presentations, or have parties that are too loud.



Executives and boards of directors hire consultants to have similar conversations.

### The Herd Mentality

Bad models—leaders, documents, presentations, speeches, meeting agendas, facilitators—exist everywhere. People feel safer if they communicate “like everyone else.” Different draws attention. Same is secure.

### *Your Golden Career Opportunity: Clear Up the Communication Clutter*

According to the late Peter Drucker, writing in the *Harvard Business Review*, summarizing his 65-year consulting career with CEOs, one of the eight key tenets of effective executives is taking responsibility for communication. Leaders lead; they take responsibility for the communication culture. Managers maintain; they go with the status quo.

Leaders become the face or human connection of an organization. They “connect” with other people—coworkers, clients, partners, each other—to get things done. Specifically, they communicate values. They act consistently with those values. They communicate respect and concern. They tell the truth.

What’s the payoff to the organization?

The latest annual Watson Wyatt Communication ROI Study substantiates that companies with effective communication practices have a 19 percent higher market premium and a 57 percent higher shareholder return over five years than companies with ineffective communication practices. That potential payoff is too promising to ignore.