

When it Comes to Leadership Everything Communicates

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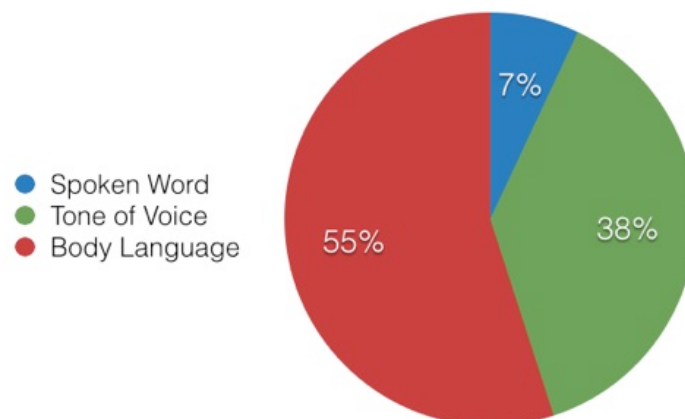
Communication is critical for effective leadership. Without communication leaders are unable to share their vision, convince people to follow and to inspire the action that they want people to take. When it comes to leadership communication the motive and intention behind the message is as important as the message itself. Unless leaders are to emotionally engage with their audience and are seen to be trusted people will be reluctant to follow or take action.

Leaders are constantly being observed and watched. All they say and all they do is constantly being analysed and interpreted. Everything a leader says and every action a leader takes is amplified, assessed and examined. So how do leaders ensure they send the right messages? What can leaders do to improve the effectiveness of their communication?

The 7% – 38% – 55% Rule

Research by Professor Albert Mehrabian described in his book entitled “Silent Messages” found the following three elements that contribute to effective face-to-face communication:

- 55% of the meaning in communicating attitudes and feelings is in the facial expression.
- 38% of the meaning in communication of attitudes and feelings is in the way that words are said.
- 7% of the meaning in communication of attitudes and feelings is in the words that are spoken.



As can be seen from the above illustration the majority of meaning in communication comes through the *nonverbal* elements – tone of voice and body language. Professor Mehrabian’s

contention is that effective communication requires that the spoken word, tone of voice and body language be *consistent* with each other. That when there is inconsistency between these three elements the person receiving the message will tend to rely more on the *nonverbal* elements – tone of voice and body language – than the verbal elements in determining the meaning of the message. When the verbal and nonverbal elements of a message are incongruent we tend to accept the nonverbal elements as being the real message.

For example if a person says “*I did not break the glass!*” whilst they avoid eye contact, look nervous and constantly look downward, etc. it’s likely that we will believe that the person is lying.

To produce effective and meaningful messages our words, tone of voice and body language all need to support one another. If not people are more likely to interpret the meaning of message based on the tone of voice and body language rather than the actual words.

This model is useful in that it reminds us of the importance of nonverbal elements – tone of voice and body language – in communication. Whilst the exact percentages may vary when it comes to communicating feelings and attitudes words alone are not sufficient. When interpreting leadership communication people tend to believe it when they see it!

Implications of The 7% – 38% – 55% Rule

Before we unpack the implications of Professor Mehrabian’s findings it’s important to point out that many people have misinterpreted the professor’s findings and use them to support their own ends. The findings are only relevant when people communicate messages that relates to how someone understands the feelings, attitudes and the intent of the message. This is not the case when communicating facts and objective data. The findings describe how the three elements account differently for our liking for the person who is communicating a message concerning their feelings and attitudes – with the nonverbal communication accounting for the biggest impact on how the message is received and understood.

Manage Your Nonverbal Communication

As leaders we need to take a step back and re-examine the way we communicate and the impact of the “7% – 38% – 55% rule”. We need to be aware that the meaning of our communication will be interpreted both by the words we use and in the way that we deliver our words. Unless our words, tone of voice, body language and more broadly our actions align people will walk away conflicted.

As humans we are “*meaning making machines*” – that is we seek meaning from our relationships and life experiences. Therefore it should come as no surprise the influence that tone of voice and body language has on our interpretation of communication. We are

constantly interpreting, assessing and framing that which we hear and see to help us makes sense of life experiences. The audience interprets the messages we send and unless our message is congruent – that is our verbal and nonverbal messages align – we risk our message getting misinterpreted. The audience will interpret the message and its meaning to fit with what they see. As leaders we cannot rely on words alone to communicate our motives and intentions. We need to ensure our words, tone of voice, body language and indeed our behaviours are congruent. When our words, tone of voice and body language is out of sync it's unlikely that the audience will be persuaded by our message. *We need to live our message for people to be persuaded.*

Everything Communicates

For leaders *everything* communicates. Everything you say and do as a leader is closely watched and *amplified*. Leaders are always communicating. They communicate in what they say, their tone of voice, their body language and in how they choose to behave. *Example is the most powerful form of communication.* Often what we *do* as leaders speaks so loud that people cannot hear what they're saying! Leaders are always communicating whether the mean to or not! Leaders are always sending a message.

How you communicate reveals a lot about who you are and what you stand for as a leader. What are you communicating in what you say, how you say it and how you act? Have you taken control of the messages you're sending? Is your words, tone of voice, body language, actions and your example consistent?

Listen Constantly and Seek Feedback

Leaders constantly seek feedback, they listen to ensure that their message is being received and understood. Leaders listen to see how their message is received and if it's acted upon. Lack of action means your message was misinterpreted. Leaders are always listening to ensure their message is understood. They constantly seek feedback and do not leave interpretation of the message to chance.

Leaders take responsibility for their communication and always seek to confirm that the audience received their intended message. They listen, seek feedback and make adjustments.

Don't Say What you Don't Believe

Tone of voice and body language is a reflection of your emotions and it's important that it supports the content of your message. Don't deliver a message that you're not committed to or that you don't personally believe. People will pick up any inconsistency between your message and your nonverbal communication. This will undermine your integrity and trust.

Leaders are involved in high stakes communication, encouraging people to take risks to bring about change. Central to this is trust. People need to see that a leader is committed to their message. They look for evidence of that commitment in the leaders words, body language and actions. Only when they're convinced the leader is committed will they embrace the process of change. Until that time the status quo will remain.