

Maximize your leadership potential: CREATE & COMMUNICATE VISION

Communication

Communicating Mission, Values, and Vision

Leaders face a range of challenges when it comes to communicating effectively—and engaging in proactive communication can help address many of those challenges. In simplest terms, proactive communication means letting people know about issues, decisions, etc., early and often. However, to the engaged leader or manager it also means communicating about the “big picture,” helping employees to understand how their work fits within the broader organizational context.

This is an area in which many leaders struggle. Some leaders haven’t invested the time, energy, and attention to understand and define these strategic “big-picture” issues themselves. In other words, they themselves haven’t clarified mission/purpose (“Why are we doing what we’re doing?”), vision (“Where are we going?”), and values (“How are we going to conduct ourselves?”). This strategic thinking is an important aspect of leadership and requires leaders’ deliberate involvement.

Even when they have worked to clarify their own individual thinking on these issues, though, many leaders are at a loss for how to effectively communicate them. To put it bluntly, they don’t communicate about these issues often enough and when they do, they do it poorly. As John Kotter notes, most leaders are guilty of “undercommunicating” the change vision by a factor of 10 (or 100 or even 1,000).” Moreover, he notes, they do it in the least effective ways—meetings and memos. So, how does a manager or leader communicate effectively around “big picture” issues like mission/purpose, vision, values? The following guidelines, based on Kotter’s work and our experience with leaders and organizations at UF, will help.

#1. Seek feedback, input, involvement

As noted above, leaders need to devote time, energy, and attention to clarifying strategic issues such as mission, vision, and values. It’s a leader’s responsibility to think these issues through as well as to engage the team and other stakeholders in that process. This is critical when a team is working to identify or clarify these strategic components, but just as significant even after those components have been defined. Do people understand the vision? What questions or concerns do they have about it? Do they understand what the values mean or how they may impact their actions? Do they see how their day-to-day work is informed by the values and reflects the mission? Creating two-way dialogues around strategic issues is a great way to ignite shared understanding concerning them.

Why it matters?

Strategic issues like mission, vision, and values are important because they create a shared context to align efforts in a common direction. They can also inspire and motivate teams...but only if they are understood! It’s not enough to have values, a mission, or a vision. Leaders also have to be able to communicate proactively in a way that helps team members see how their day-to-day work is directly connected to the big picture. Then, items like mission, vision, and values become real and powerful shapers of team behaviors.

#2. Live it, model it

One of the fastest ways to kill efforts at understanding mission, vision, and values is for the leadership to behave in ways that contradict the stated mission, vision, or values. If I say that building collaborative relationships is an important part of our vision, but then behave in ways that prevent effective collaboration, my team (and others) will—rightfully—see that vision as hollow. On the other hand, if I work hard to foster a collaborative relationship in spite of political games and difficult personalities, I demonstrate to the team that the vision is real and guiding our efforts here and now. As a bottom line: the leader’s actions will be a determining factor in whether people see the mission, values, and vision as real or as empty words on a page or web site.

#3. Keep it clear and concise

As Kotter notes, if you can’t communicate your vision in five minutes or less and get a reaction that signifies both understanding and interest, you’ve got more work to do. In fact, we often challenge our leaders to describe the vision in a compelling way in about two minutes. The same principle applies to other “big picture” issues like mission and values. We often challenge teams to distill the mission/purpose to one sentence that gets right to the heart of why they exist. People don’t remember long statements with lots of jargon; people remember vivid descriptions and compelling pictures stated in a straightforward way. Henry Ford’s vision was powerful and simple: “Democratize the automobile.” Likewise, everyone could easily remember John F. Kennedy’s vision of putting a man on the moon by the end of the decade.

#4. Use stories and examples

As noted above, people don’t remember long statements with lots of fancy-sounding terms that are posted on a web site. Often, the best way to help people truly envision and connect with things like mission, vision, and values is through the use of stories and examples. Don’t worry, though, as Dan and Chip Heath point out in *Made to Stick*, you don’t have to be a creative storyteller—the best stories and examples are *spotted*, not created. Every day members of your team are doing things that reflect the mission, embody the values, and create movement toward the vision...they just don’t realize it! It’s the leader’s job to remind people, to point out the ways in which they are doing these things. When someone demonstrates a commitment to one of the values, thank them and point it out—to them and others on your team. If they’ve done something *really* impressive that reflects the mission, incorporates the values, or propels the organization toward the vision, don’t just point it out: tell the story and make it clear how this action embodies one or more of those big picture components. Then, tell the story again...and again....

#5. Refer to the mission, values, and vision often

We will often work with teams to develop a mission and vision or clarify values. The team is engaged and the discussion is thoughtful and passionate. Unfortunately, the next time the team talks about these issues will be when they call in a year for another retreat! And folks are surprised that nobody remembers the mission, vision and values! It would actually be more surprising if they *did* remember them! It’s the leader’s responsibility to start these conversations *and* continue them on a daily basis – one phone call, one weekly meeting, one brainstorming session at a time. If mission, vision, and values are going to be meaningful, leaders need to talk about them in relation to the work. When giving feedback, leaders should explicitly refer to these items: “I really appreciate your patience with that difficult customer, John; it really models our team value of service.” When you have to make decisions, make them explicitly with reference to these strategic components: “I chose this approach because I think this is most in line with our mission of facilitating research and improving health.” Or, when making decisions together, ask the team to consider what aligns most with the mission or moves the group closer to fulfilling the vision.

Strategic issues like mission, vision, and values can be powerful tools in aligning and motivating the work of the department or team, but only if they are understood! Leaders can help their teams connect these “big picture” items

with the day-to-day work by creating dialogue around them, modeling them, keeping them simple, using examples and stories that illustrate them, and referring to them often.

References

Heath, Chip and Heath, Dan. 2007. *Made to Stick: Why Some Ideas Survive and Others Die*. New York, NY: Random House.

Kotter, John P. 1994. *Leading Change*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.