



***Executive IdeaLink* - December 2010**

Published monthly for Executive Management Section members

Six Communication Techniques of Credible Leaders

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Think for a moment about your favorite friends, the businesses you repeatedly patronize, and the organizations to which you belong. What do all of these have in common?

You trust them, and we like to associate with people and organizations we trust. In the wake of recent dramatic financial and business scandals, being perceived as trustworthy is now essential for any organization to attract the customers, members, volunteers, and others who can make it successful. This is especially true for associations, which rely on voluntary participation.

Why is being trusted so important? Studies suggest that being perceived as trustworthy yields many advantages: stronger brands, enhanced relationships and loyalty, increased risk taking and innovation, opportunities for partnering with others, and improved employee retention and recruitment among others.

The [United Nations Global Compact-Accenture CEO Study 2010](#) reinforces these findings: 91 percent of consumers indicated they had bought a product or service from a company they trusted while 77 percent indicated they had refused to buy a product or service from a company they distrusted.

Maintaining a trusted reputation can be a vital competitive advantage for businesses and associations alike. While an association and its leadership can do every right thing to ensure their actions are trustworthy, establishing a respected reputation requires more. You

also need to demonstrate congruence between actions and words. Congruence shows others that you are trustworthy: You mean what you say, and you say what you mean. Credible leaders use six communication techniques to do this.

1. Communicate clearly. This is how many of us perceive much of the communication we see and hear: blah, blah, blah, blah. With so much information cluttering our eyes, ears, and inboxes, clarity is essential for messages to cut through and engage people.

In order to trust you, people need to have a clear understanding of what it is that you're doing and saying. According to the 2010 [IMD/Burson-Marsteller Corporate Purpose Impact Study](#), "a strong, strategically coherent and well communicated corporate purpose is associated with up to 17 percent better financial performance and builds trust with stakeholders." Similarly, by clearly and consistently articulating the purpose, values, and brand promise of your association, you can acquire a significant competitive advantage.

Communicating clearly also requires tailoring individual communications to the intended recipients. Who is our audience? What do these people expect from us? What is the relevance of this information to them? What do we want them to feel or do as a result of receiving this communication? Trusted leaders understand the particular needs and expectations of stakeholders and communicate targeted, clear messages.

2. Communicate broadly. If you wanted to find a credible source of information about an organization, where would you look? According to the 2010 [Edelman Trust Barometer](#), articles in business magazines (44 percent) and conversations with employees (41 percent) were considered to be among the most credible sources. Less credible were radio news (38 percent), conversations with friends and peers (37 percent), TV news (36 percent), online search engines (35 percent), newspapers articles (34 percent), and corporate communications (32 percent). The least credible were social networking sites (19 percent) and advertisements (17 percent). To understand and believe a message, we rely not just on content (what is being communicated), but also on visual, verbal, and oral cues (how it is being communicated). Since each communication

channel (in person, video, phone, email, text, and so forth) has the ability to convey these cues to varying degrees, for information to be believable, you need to consider the strengths and weaknesses of each channel in relation to your message and your audience. Trusted leaders use multichannel communication strategies comprising media their target audiences consider credible.

3. Communicate frequently. The sound of silence is not a good thing in our Tweet-speed workplace. To many people, no news is bad news. If they are waiting to hear from someone about something they believe is important, in the absence of communication, they will jump to their own, often negative, conclusions. Thus, responsive leaders are considered more trustworthy.

Moreover, people tend to be skeptical when they hear something for the first time. To believe that information about an organization is likely true, people generally need to hear it three to five times.

Communicating frequently meets these expectations of responsiveness and repetition. Trusted leaders therefore reinforce messages by delivering useful information on a regular basis.

4. Communicate competence. Would you trust someone who is sincere, but incompetent? That's not likely. Demonstrating competence is essential to establishing trustworthiness. Trusted leaders showcase their competence by sharing with stakeholders something of value—ideas, insights, facts, knowledge—within their area of expertise.

This could involve communicating research findings, contributing articles, commenting on issues of relevance, conducting workshops, or participating in expert panel discussions. Trusted leaders seek communication platforms that enable them to demonstrate their personal competence as well as that of their organizations.

5. Communicate integrity. With apologies to comic and satirist [Stephen Colbert](#), being a proponent of truthiness (and demonstrating a lack of regard for evidence, logic, or facts) does not help to build a reputation for trustworthiness. In fact, according to the 2010

Edelman Trust Barometer, transparent and honest practices are now considered to be the most important factors influencing reputation.

Trustworthy leaders focus on doing the right thing, even under difficult circumstances. This includes addressing – rather than avoiding -- challenging or uncomfortable topics. Communicating with integrity also requires establishing a dialogue (versus a monologue) with stakeholders. People expect to be provided with all of the information they need to understand an issue and for leaders to be receptive to how they respond to that information.

6. Communicate likability. We like to support people and organizations we like. This is a simple concept, but it's not so simple to convey likability when much of our communication today is conducted in virtual environments rather than in person.

According to [The Likeability Factor](#) by Tim Sanders, you can enhance your likability by integrating four elements into your communications:

- § Relevance. Addressing the audience's needs and interests;
- § Empathy. Relating to their feelings and experiences;
- § Friendliness. Being welcoming and positive;
- § Realness. Being genuine.

Helping people feel confident and comfortable encourages them to like you. When people find you likable, they can make an emotional connection and start to trust you.

Leaders who apply these six communication techniques will be rewarded with supportive relationships that drive success for them and their associations. Trust me on this.

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