

Ask the Expert

Q: Do you have any tips for working with a leader who thinks he's great at communication, doesn't think he needs to change, but is actually not as good as he believes? He doesn't listen very well. He thinks the problem with communication sits with his people and not him!



A: It's the rare leader who *doesn't* fancy himself a great communicator. This comes as no surprise. People at work genuinely seem interested in the leader's thoughts, laugh at his jokes, agree with his positions, jump at his suggestions. After a while, he begins to feel special, believing he has a knack for generating consensus and spurring action. "If only everyone had my communication skills," he reasons, "there wouldn't be so many communication breakdowns."

How do you tell a leader that all is not what it seems? Should you even try? It's a tough call.

Changing one's communication style – largely made up, as it were, of hard-wired attitudes and behaviors – is easier said than done. What's more, the physical evidence suggests you don't know what you're talking about. No one complains about the leader's communication style. In fact, just the opposite.

Gently does it

So what do you do? My advice is to start by noting the behaviors you consider damaging, and then analyze why these behaviors trouble you. Keep your thoughts to yourself at this point, but gently broach the topic with a few trusted co-workers. Are you alone in your beliefs or do others seem to share your concerns? If others agree, you are probably on to something.

Now comes the tricky part: figuring out how to confront the leader on the offending behavior. The best approach likely depends on your accountabilities and relationship with the leader. Are you seen as having credible insights on the effects of this behavior? Are you responsible for giving the leader honest feedback? Is the leader's behavior stopping you from doing your job? Is the leader likely to act on your feedback or just resent you for offering it?

Only you can judge the right thing to do. But in the spirit of “miserable loves company,” let me share with you some of the common and annoying characteristics I’ve seen leaders exhibit over the years, with tips on how to correct them. (Full disclosure: I have never actually followed these tips myself – I have a family to support – but you might give it a whirl.)

1. The leader who is tone deaf to symbolism

Characteristics: Sends a clear message, though not always the one she had intended to send. I once watched a leader who, after speaking at a large group meeting for more than 2 hours on a Friday afternoon, brought up at 5:20 p.m. the importance of maintaining work-life balance. It was the second-to-last topic she covered, right before she mentioned the value of diversity.

Remediation: Help the leader understand that both her words and her actions loudly communicate what’s important to her. Obvious inconsistencies rarely go unnoticed.

2. The enamored-of-jargon leader

Characteristics: Quick to say nothing. Fond of urging people to do things like seamlessly integrate proactive solutions to drive cutting-edge innovation and revenue growth.

Remediation: Work with the leader to break down in plain English what the company needs to accomplish, why it’s important and the implications for employees. Make it clear that people can’t act on suggestions they don’t understand.

3. The easily distracted leader

Characteristics: Glances around the room when speaking to you. Always acts like he’s running late to catch a flight. I worked with an executive who would look past you and into the hallway whenever you met with him in his office. Whatever the topic, he was always more interested in whoever happened to be walking by.

Remediation: Try to make eye contact when speaking with this leader, ask clarifying questions and paraphrase his words (he’ll enjoy hearing them).

4. The “I am fascinating” leader

Characteristics: Regales others with tales of her precocious children. Enjoys telling personal anecdotes. Believes everyone shares her self-absorption.

Remediation: Convey to the leader, in the kindest way possible, that employees look to her for guidance and insights on the business, not child-rearing tips. She needs to focus her thoughts and attention on what others may be thinking and feeling – and pull the spotlight off herself.

5. The leader who is “on” all the time

Characteristics: This guy is damn glad to meet you. He has a firm handshake and a far-away look in his eyes. You don't feel much of a connection with him, and you question his motives, but, man, is he smooth.

Remediation: Get him to loosen up. Encourage him to speak candidly and use self-deprecating humor. People will support and feel more loyal toward a leader who comes across as sincere.

Too scared to confront your leader directly? You might try casually showing him this list. Maybe he'll see himself in one or more of the behaviors and change his ways. Maybe.

Andy Szpekman is president of [AHS Communications, LLC](#), which provides human resource management and communication research, strategies and tools to improve business performance. His clients include Alharma, Bank of America, BC Hydro, Cardinal Health, McKinsey & Co., Microsoft, News Corporation, Russell Investment Group, Scholastic and Wachovia. Earlier in his career, Andy held positions at Bank of America, Warner-Lambert and Brecker & Merryman, Inc. (an HR and communications consulting firm).