

Modeling and developing authentic leadership in soft skills training

By Jean Mitchell and Mary Wilson

There are a million definitions of leadership. Google brings us everything from Harry S. Truman's stern idea: "*My definition of a leader . . . is a man who can persuade people to do what they don't want to do, or do what they're too lazy to do, and like it*" to Peter Drucker's much less pugnacious definition of a leader as someone with followers. Many definitions focus on leadership as the actions of the person at the top – communicating a vision, making decisions and all the other skills associated with upper-level management.

Of course there is a place for direct, from-the-top, leadership – but we don't think it is the only kind. When we talk about leadership, we're thinking of a skill that everyone in an organization can demonstrate. We're thinking of leadership as the ability to influence others to agree to a particular course of action, and to actually follow the course of action they have agreed to.

What does this kind of leadership look like in action?

Think about the day-to-day work of support staff at a college as you consider this leadership definition.

- The receptionist takes a call, knowing that the Dean is expected at an important meeting in fifteen minutes. She knows the caller. He tends to talk for a long time,

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and though his call may be important, it is not really urgent. Rather than putting the call through, she says, “Mr. Talker, if you call back at 3:00 this afternoon, I know Dean Busy will be able to devote his full attention to your concern.” Mr. Talker thanks the receptionist and agrees to call back at 3:00.

- The admissions clerk meets with a student who has arrived to register for a continuing education course in economics. The course description talks about the math prerequisites that are beneficial. “This course looks like it will take a lot of mathematics,” he comments. “Yes, and I’m pretty nervous about it. I haven’t taken math for years,” says the potential student. The admissions officer suggests, “You might like to sign up for this math refresher course, too... you can take it at the same time, and it might really set your mind at ease.” The student signs up for the extra course.

- The administrative assistant arrives at the technical support desk with an explanation of a problem she is having with the database software. To her the problem is straightforward – she can’t get the software to do what it needs to do to finish the task her manager is sure she should have completed this afternoon. The three people at the support desk begin an animated discussion about the software itself – there are apparently easier, more elegant programs that will easily do what she is looking for, and that could be in use if the college wasn’t behind on its upgrade schedule, and perhaps somewhat old fashioned anyway.... She listens politely for about a minute, then says, “Right now, my problem is with the system we have. My deadline for this job is 3:00 this afternoon. What can I do now to perform this task with what we have?” The technicians return to the task at hand.

Leadership? Yes. The caller calls back at a more convenient time, the student takes an additional course to prepare for success, the technical support staff provides the fix necessary to complete the data base task. In each case, someone has agreed to a new course of action, and taken steps to achieve it. Each of these cases is an example of the kind of leadership we hope support staff, and everyone in the organization, will exercise every day – leadership that both serves others and facilitates action.

But where do the soft skills come in?

Soft skills include all those skills that aren't technical in nature: interpersonal skills of all kinds such as teamwork, conflict resolution, creativity and, yes, leadership. Communication is at the heart of soft skills. Although it is often listed as a soft skill in its own right, it is difficult to imagine the value of other soft skills without communication as a significant part.

To be effective, communication needs to be clear and sensitive to the needs and probable reaction of the person receiver of the communication. It is this combination of clarity and empathy that makes leadership possible. To see what we mean, think back to those three situations again:

- Imagine that the receptionist doesn't say, "Mr. Talker, if you call back at 3:00 this afternoon, I know Dean Busy will be able to devote his full attention to your concern." Instead she sighs, and says, "Will this take long? I know Dean Busy has something important in just a few minutes."

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- The admissions clerk doesn't say, "This course looks like it will take a lot of mathematics." Instead, he says nothing – or maybe snaps, "Hope you're whiz at math, because you'll sure be swamped if you are not! You'd better take a remedial math class too!"

- The administrative assistant doesn't say, "Right now, my problem is with the system we have. My deadline for this job is 3:00 this afternoon. What can I do now to perform this task with the equipment I have?" Instead, she rolls her eyes and says, "Guys, you can redesign the college any time! You are wasting my time! I've got a deadline here! Can you help me, or do I need to find someone who knows the software?"

Ouch. We've all been on the receiving end of comments like this, and it isn't comfortable. When hear them, we are bit interested in doing what the other person suggests – in fact, we're usually inspired to do exactly the opposite. The late communications expert and organizational development guru Jack Gibb began writing about this phenomenon in the early 1960s. He considered approaches to communication based on whether they would be perceived as supportive or unsupportive by the hearer. The unsupportive approach provokes a defensive reaction. For the listener, it can be difficult to accurately hear the content of the message. It is felt as an attack. For the listener the focus shifts from the problem at hand to self-defense. Chances of the speaker successfully influencing the listener decline and sometimes vanish altogether. Often enough, an unsupportive comment is the first step on the path to an ongoing conflict.

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It isn't the difference of opinion that causes ugly conflicts in the workplace – more frequently, we believe, it is awkward and unsupportive communication around that conflict.

In every case, the supportive approach is the approach of leadership: the approach that will encourage the listener to do what the speaker suggests. Table 1 provides definitions and examines the examples we looked at earlier.

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Unsupportive and Supportive Communication		
Unsupportive Behaviours	Supportive Behaviours	Explanation and Examples
1. Evaluation	1. Description	An evaluative message tells the other person why they are doing what they are doing. It is inevitably judgmental. Remember the administrative assistant? “You are wasting my time!” A descriptive message is just that – a description of the situation or the problem. (“My problem is with the system we have. My deadline for this job is 3:00 this afternoon.”)
2. Control	2. Problem Orientation	A control message imposes a solution to the problem. The way the message is phrased suggests it is the only possible solution. (For instance, our clerk’s statement: “You’d better take a remedial math class, too!”) Problem orientation identifies the problem and makes it possible for the listener to have a voice in solving it. “This course looks like it will take a lot of mathematics.”
3. Strategy	3. Spontaneity	A strategic message can sound innocent at first, but it withholds information. (“Are you doing anything special for lunch today at noon?”) It’s a message that conceals a hidden agenda – a “gotcha” that will only become obvious after the listener responds. (“Because I’d like to go for lunch with Louise at noon, and I thought you could cover my phone for me and then go later.”) A spontaneous message presents the facts immediately, giving the listener the ability to respond to the request, not to what they think they’re going to hear. (“I’d like to go to lunch with Louise today. She can only go at noon, and I usually cover the phones from noon to one while you’re at lunch. Could you fill in for me today?”)
4. Neutrality	4. Empathy	People expect those they confide in to take their side and will respond defensively when they don’t. Imagine this conversation at technical support: “This is just a disaster for me. All my data!” “Right.” By contrast, a supportive technical support person might say, “That’s awful! Let’s see what we can do.”
5. Superiority	5. Equality	A message of superiority implies finality and emphasizes the power of the sender (e.g. “You got a failing grade. There’s nothing you can do about that.”) A message of equality acknowledges the power or discretion of the receiver (e.g. “In the instructor’s opinion, you did not do enough to pass this course. If you disagree, you may appeal.”)
6. Certainty	6. Provisionalism	Messages of certainty imply that there is only one possible outcome for the matter at hand. (e.g. “That will never work!”) Provisional messages allow that there is more than one possible solution or outcome (e.g. “I tried it that way, but it didn’t work for me.”).

Table 1: Unsupportive and supportive communication. Based on Gibb (1961) and adapted from a handout used in BCIT Call Centre of Excellence training, entitled “The communication climate”

What does this have to do with training, and participation in training?

Our soft skills training focuses on communication, and the importance of interpersonal communication in customer service, conflict resolution, problem solving and sales. We don't believe there is a "magic bullet" for communication, nor do we think that the same approach will work in every single situation. Instead, we believe that staff members themselves are in the best possible position to understand their customers, whether those customers are students, fellow staff at a college or university, members of the general public or callers in a call centre. When people analyze communication in a particular situation, they become more aware of patterns that hinder their ability to communicate effectively. By doing the analysis themselves, and choosing situations that are drawn from their own work, the message takes on more meaning.

In our training sessions, we often ask participants to think about their customers – their needs, and what it is that the participants need to communicate to them to help meet their needs. We ask them to focus on the specifics of communication. In our sessions, you can't get away with saying, "I would tell them it isn't available." Instead, we'll push you to explain exactly how you would deliver that message. There's a world of difference between, "Oh, we don't stock *that* any more – it's really out of date," and "We're recommending an upgraded version of that product, and our customers are finding it very effective. We don't carry the older version now."

Although we don't often use the word, we feel we are encouraging our participants to take leadership in their work roles – to use their soft skills to frame

communication with their customers in a way that will influence those customers to accept proposed solutions, see the wisdom of possibly inconvenient policies and general feel that they have been respected by those who are serving them. By involving participants in the training and relying on their expertise with customers to determine the best possible communication approach, we model and develop enhanced leadership skills for all our participants.

References

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