



The Communicating CEO

The power and reach of the internet means that leaders now have to answer to a multitude of critics, not least their own staff. Kevin Murray, Chairman of The Good Relations Group, explores how CEOs can become more savvy communicators in order to build trust

The CEO is the brand that leads the brand. The reputation of the CEO is more important than ever, because stakeholders need to be able to trust their leaders to do the right thing. An omnipotent internet has undoubtedly made the job of the CEO tougher and has put them under a great deal more scrutiny.

Leaders must now be adept at communicating with a variety of audiences – the internal one, naturally, but also the media, customers, politicians and local communities. It's intense; it's visible - it's like living in a fish bowl.

Of course, companies also have more direct access to the audiences that they want to reach than ever before, without having to rely on the intermediary of the media to gain access, which presents a great opportunity for those leaders that are adept at communicating in this intense scrum of conversations. But they must build their leadership credentials while avoiding infamy - without becoming a celebrity. The example of ex-CEO of BP, Tony Hayward, has made many leaders painfully aware of their proximity to oblivion. Every leader is one step from a hothouse

of competing agendas and having their licence to operate removed.

The multiplier effect of online conversations means that the individual wields the power to bring big institutions to heel. So leaders appreciate the need to be more media savvy and to manage the whole media communications better than they've ever thought necessary. Whether it's face-to-face or across the big platforms, leaders must be acutely aware of the context through which they are communicating. Addressing the public is not the same as communicating ►

internally – if you go into a media interview and you're having fun, you're probably in real trouble. Leaders recognise a more disciplined approach is now needed and they also recognise they have to speed up their organisations to be able to deal with a world that demands instant gratification.

So how can leaders build their reputation both internally and externally? How can they build trust and confidence with their employees, colleagues and key external relationships? As the voice of the organisation, they need to appreciate how to frame the context of the conversations for different audiences. But how can they inspire their workforce to do more, to make them feel involved and respected? How can they galvanise employees through change so that everyone understands what they have to do to make a difference?

There are three key areas that leaders should consider:

1 BUILD A CREDIBLE REPUTATION

Leaders are becoming evermore aware of the power of reputation and communication, because it all comes back to trust and respect. Trust is like cashflow, and to foster trust leaders must listen – and be seen to be listening – so that they understand what's really going on and are visibly engaging and including people in the decision-making process.

Naturally, it's the leader's job to make eventual decisions on the direction they wish to take the company, but they must also understand the need to involve people in discussion about how to get there. Once a decision has been made, then it's about asking how do we get there faster, better, smoother and more profitably?

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When helping their internal audiences to understand change, for example, leaders need to set the context so that people understand why the change is necessary. They need to help to crystallise and define the challenge in ways that really resonate with people: if they have already listened to what their audience deems important and necessary, they will know the things that they want to say in order to relate to them and engage with them.

And once the decision is made, it's actually about choice, not change – what choices do we have to make to meet this new challenge? People resist the idea of change, but they embrace the idea of choice. The more people feel like they're involved in making choices, the more likely they are to buy-in to the conversation and give that discretionary effort. To offer choice, leaders must make sure that they leverage all of their internal corporate channels to show that they're out and about and that they are listening, engaging and responding. This makes people feel that they have been respected in the process.

The leader that achieves respect is usually a strong communicator – someone who is able to make people feel that they are valued and listened to, but who can also make people understand why they need to be different and what benefits come

from being different. The great skill of the best leaders is to help to frame and encourage conversations on the right subject. These leaders can articulate 'what's in it for me' for their employees.

Essentially, communication is what leaders do to change people's behaviour; to inspire people to think and behave differently. If a leader hasn't achieved this then, while they might have talked to employees, they won't have communicated with impact.

2 PAINT A PICTURE OF SUCCESS

The best communicating CEOs are very audience-centric. They are always seeking to ask: Who are you? What are your needs? How do I relate to you and your needs and talk to you in a way that matters most to you? It's about being able to listen, resonate and inspire - painting an emotional and a rational picture of success in order to bring about change.

But when I speak to leaders to uncover how they communicate effectively there seems to be a gap between an awareness of that need and what organisations actually do to make leaders improve. They tend to talk about the tools they have been equipped with in order to become better 'broadcasters', but few mention that they have received good, wellrounded strategic communications skills.

So what makes them good communicators? Are they natural-born speakers or is it indeed something they've learned. Many talk about skills picked up in other professions: I did acting, I was a debater, I was a politician or I was a policeman.

Characteristically, leaders talk about the difference between presenting facts ▶

and presenting stories. They are very aware of the need for a mix of the two. Naturally, you must have the facts and you must have a good rational argument for doing things. But you must also create that emotional engagement, to appeal to peoples' 'hearts and minds', and stories are the best way to do this.

Sometimes it's about finding the right stories to tell. For this to work effectively leaders must be willing to hear stories without a blame culture. Again, this goes back to trust, and encouraging an environment in which people will talk about mistakes they've made and what they could have done better. The outcome will be: what do we need to do to fix it, improve or achieve that result? It's especially powerful internally because it sends the message: we can change.

Finding the heroes in the organisation and communicating their success is always a popular way of bringing the phrase 'people are the lifeblood of our organisation' to life. Stories by the people, for the people will always resonate, and stories that bring to life the values of the company, are the most important of all.

3 LIVE AND BREATHE YOUR VALUES

When leaders think about 'values' the conversation often starts with defining the organisation's culture. But 'culture' is often a word that fails to engage. What you really mean is 'the way we do things around here' – 'how we do it' and 'why we do it'.

And to engender real values, and inspire trust and authenticity, leaders must live and breathe them. It's not just about visibly showing their passion, but believing in it too. That means more emphasis on the values of the organisation, but also

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making sure that these values are anchored in the leader's own beliefs. That's when valuesbased leadership becomes effective.

Of course, to be the epitome of what an organisation stands for, and so helping everyone to be clear about what they stand for, is something that leaders need to consider carefully. Leading by example is never easy. To prepare to stand up and be counted, leaders must define what their own beliefs are, why they believe the things they do, be able to draw on seminal experiences they've had that explain why they think the way they do, and then focus everything they do on bringing those beliefs to life. That's why those 'our people' stories are so effective.

Leaders who manage to inspire their people typically gain their respect because they stand for all the things that matter to them as individuals. Such leaders are also passionate about what the organisation does and what benefits they bring to the communities they serve.

During the credit crunch, many leaders thought areas such as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) would be hard-hit. In reality, CSR is now seen as a must.

Indeed, there's now an acute awareness of the need to be seen as a force for good.

The more proficient communicating CEOs realise they have not actually been very effective in this area and that there is a pressing need to close the gap.

Similarly, in the arena of regulation and intervention, leaders have recognised that a loss of licence with your public causes governments to act.

Trust is a currency that few can do without, so there has been a seminal shift in attitudes towards communication. Leaders can't please everyone, all of the time. But by listening to their audience, framing the context of the conversations, then communicating with real passion, they may bring about change.

And by clearly defining what it is they want to stand for and being transparent about their motives, they may emerge as a leader of substance and, ultimately, enjoy a sterling reputation. ■

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Kevin is Chairman of PR consultancy The Good Relations Group, which is part of Chime Communications Plc. For his book, The Language of Leaders, Kevin interviewed over 60 chairmen and CEOs from some of the world's leading businesses and charities, examining how leaders communicate to inspire.

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