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Daniel Boone once said, "I can't say I was ever lost, but I was bewildered once for three days." Of course, being a real 'he-man,' he would never ask for directions!

Many leaders are bewildered about communication problems in their organizations. A well-known line uttered by a desperate sailor in Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" is, "water, water everywhere, nor any drop to drink." Many people in today's organizations feel like there's "info, info everywhere, but not a drop of communication to drink."



When we discuss this growing problem, I'll often ask workshop participants to raise their hand if they feel their organizations need much better communications. Almost every hand goes up. I'll then ask how many people would like to increase the number of e-mails they get. Few hands go up. Yet what happens when managers hear people ask for more communications? That's right, they send more e-mails. Like confusing activity with accomplishment, most managers confuse information with communications.

The first post in this month's issue focuses on the communications confusion confounding so many leaders. We live in the information age with more communication tools and channels than ever before. Yet true communication is getting worse. Water, water everywhere...

As you'll read below, I've been gathering input and researching my latest book. That brings me back to reflecting on a few timeless leadership principles. Communication breakdowns are complicated. They have many causes. Losing touch with these underlying leadership principles creates or adds to communication failures:

- **No quick fixes.** Lasting effectiveness comes from moving beyond bolt-on programs to built-in processes. Many people are looking for what's new in quick-fix communication tools, technologies, programs, or workshops. Communication problems are often symptoms of deeper, interconnected culture or leadership issues.
- **Constant improvement.** Like housework or staying in shape, communication is a continuous effort. You need to keep working *in* your job, team, or organization while you also work *on* your job, team, or organization. High performers develop the discipline to continually look at whether they're doing the right things in the best way.
- **True to You.** You can't get "them" to communicate better while you keep doing the same thing. There must be alignment between your own development and where you're trying to take your organization or team. A leader with stunted personal growth rarely grows a team or organization to higher effectiveness.
- **Leadership as action, not a position.** Outstanding leadership action often comes from people who aren't in key leadership (management) roles. Too many managers are bosses, bureaucrats, or "snoopervisors."

They're often not leading. Highly effective organizations are brimming with leaders at all levels and in all positions.

- **Laughter and fun.** You may have missed that study showing suppressed laughter goes back down to spread the hips and produce gas! Communication and openness often thrive in an environment of humor, fun, and playfulness.

This issue also deals with another big challenge of our time: overload. When disconnected and undisciplined senior leaders demand way too much of middle managers and their teams, it's a communication problem. Successful middle managers face their fear and have courageous conversations. That can be a CLM (career limiting moose), but strong leaders refuse to be infected with the Victimitis Virus.

This issue also deals with meeting madness. Meetings can dramatically enhance communication and time management. Or not. Too many meetings suck the energy and effectiveness from many participants. How are yours? How do you know?

Today's technology can compound misunderstandings at higher speeds to more people. Effective leaders build community and communion with conversations for deeper understanding and connection. And their actions ensure people see them loud and clear.

Communications Conundrum: Eight Interconnected Causes of Breakdowns

Is "we really need to improve communications around here" a common refrain in your workplace? It's a very common frustration and complaint. **Increasing Communications was the highest voted topic** by nearly 500 readers who completed our "reader sourcing" survey on key topic areas for the new book I am working on.



Given the importance readers placed on communications, I've invested quite a bit of time in the past months reading the many thoughtful comments, suggestions, and ideas on improving communications in a **follow-up reader survey**. **Click here** if you'd like still like to provide me with your feedback. You can also **join my Book Advisory Panel** with or without completing the survey.

I've been reviewing reader perspectives on increasing communications while looking much deeper at the growing reservoir of research on this broad topic. Like a doctor hearing a complaint of a headache, communication problems are often signs of deeper issues. There's rarely a quick and easy solution.

Reader feedback and my research have led me to diagnose eight common causes of communication breakdowns. These intertwine with entangled cause and effect relationships unique to each situation:

1. **Trust Matters: It Will Make or Break Your Leadership** -- What's the trust account balance of your personal, team, or organizational relationships? If you're overdrawn, you'll have a tough time communicating with each other.
2. **Reduce the Moose: Cultivate Courageous Conversations to Put Key Issues on the Table** -- Moose-on-the-table (or elephants-in-the-room) are topics that people avoid discussing. They're often politically or emotionally charged.

3. **Truth to Empower: Be Open and Direct to Connect and Respect** -- Bosses are often told what everyone thinks they want to hear. Silence kills. Lack of honesty and candor cultivates a culture of cowardly communications.
4. **LOL (Leading Out Loud): You Gotta Walk and Role** -- Everyone sees the message loud and clear. The clearest communication is behavior. Leaders must model what they mean.
5. **True to You: Keep It Real with Authentic Leadership** -- Who you are overpowers what you say. Your values are showing. Do people think you're me-deep in hypocrisy and egotism? How do you know?
6. **Out of the Loop: Faulty Feedback Impairs Everyone's Learning and Development** -- Their perceptions of what you're saying -- and doing -- are your reality. Feedback and genuine two-way communications are collaborative conversations.
7. **Listen Up: What We've Got Here is a Failure to Communicate** -- They won't listen to you if you're not hearing them. Conflict, turf wars, and destructive gossip are symptoms of people talking at and not with each other.
8. **Skilling It: Tools and Techniques to Boost Communication Effectiveness** -- Making emotional connections, influencing strategies, persuasion through logic on fire, emotional intelligence, taming The E-Mail Beast, stopping the meeting madness, harnessing feedback, and tapping into the yield of dreams. Building these skills significantly elevates communications.

These eight points can be both symptoms and causes of communication breakdowns in various combinations. How are you, your team, or your organization doing?

You might rank order these from the biggest to smallest problems. Which is the most critical area that might unlock your door to stronger communications?

Dealing with Stupid Busy Leadership Teams Overloading Their Organization

I had an exchange of messages with a reader about my blog post **Stupid Busy: Is Your Leadership Team Overloading Your Organization?** The reader, who we'll call George, wrote,

"As a middle manager who is on the receiving end of this, you are hitting the nail squarely on the head. Unfortunately, there is no way in the world I would dare share this on my LinkedIn feed as any critique of senior management is a huge risk to my job. Maybe when I give notice after finding another job!"



Too many senior leadership teams are like me in a buffet line: loading up their plates with more than they can eat. The overload problem often stems from a combination of urgency about all the change needed today, being out of touch with what their organization can deliver, too many **moose on the loose**, and failure to make tough choices. Both Steve Jobs and Warren Buffet have said that saying no to all the demands on a leader's time was critical to their success. Jim Collins finds that a laser focus and disciplined priority setting is a critical factor separating great organizations from good ones.

George may be victimized by undisciplined senior leaders, but he refuses to be a victim. He's developed **upward leadership strategies**. He says,

"Sometimes I get senior managers to think that our ideas are really their ideas (which has worked quite well but comes with its own costs). Other times, I build such strong support with other key leaders, that they present my ideas for me."

George also observed that the roots of many poor behaviors are fear.

"...fear of being accountable for others' work, of having to clean up messes, or of things not going well. Senior leaders can still get results with many poor leadership approaches, but it's hard on people. Fear is something we all deal with. I am no exception. It is one of the biggest obstacles leaders have to overcome."

I agree. Fear is at the root of many poor management practices. A culture of fear is a major reason senior leaders can get so stupidly off track with their plans and projects. When teams aren't having **authentic communication or courageous conversations**, leaders don't know what they don't know.

An online survey by Crucial Conversations found respondents compared their failing projects to "slow-motion train wrecks." Tellingly, over 80 percent said, "approaching a key decision maker about the project is nearly impossible."

Ironically, leaders who create fearful workplaces don't know they've done so because people are afraid to tell them. Mid-level leaders like George refuse to let fear infect them with the "Victimitus Virus." Strong leaders know there are **three choices**:

1. Live with the status quo (too many people who do, then jump on the Bitter Bus with lots of criticizing, condemning, and complaining).
2. Quit.
3. Provide strong leadership within your own team or area while practicing upward leadership.

What would you do if you weren't afraid?

Do Your Meetings Suck? How do You Know?

Raise your hand if you're an above average driver. According to the American Automobile Association, 73% of drivers feel they're better than average -- a statistical impossibility.

How's your meeting leadership? You likely feel that many meetings you attend suck. That's because...many do. Too often meetings suck time and energy out of everyone. And most meeting leaders are blissfully ignorant about how wasteful attendees feel their meetings are. How do you know what attendees think of your meetings?



This month's *Harvard Business Review* features an article by Steven Rogelberg, professor and author of a new book on the science of meetings. In "Why Your Meetings Stink -- And What to Do About It," he reports that 8 out of the average 23 hours a week, executives spend in meetings are unproductive. That's a day a week wasted! That truly sucks.

Are you contributing to meeting madness? Rogelberg reports a survey of managers showed they feel that 79% of the meetings they drive are extremely or very productive. But, they report, that just over half the meetings they

attended as passengers are as effective as their own. So many managers are driving their meeting attendees crazy with mediocre meetings while believing "I am not the problem, they are."

Here's a big clue about what's going on; Rogelberg cites research showing that "the attendees who are the most active are the ones who feel that meetings are the most effective and satisfying? And who typically talks the most? The leader."

Rogelberg's solution for boosting meeting effectiveness:

- **Assessment** -- reflecting on meeting effectiveness right after the meeting, regularly checking in with participants, and getting candid feedback.
- **Preparation** -- what are your meeting goals, process, and agenda?
- **Facilitation** -- set and follow meeting ground rules (such as distracting screen time), asking more questions, fostering true debates, agenda time management, polling the group live or with technology, and "brainwriting" rather than brainstorming conversations. Click on "**moose hunting**" for an example of those last two suggestions.

I continue to be astounded and mystified why so many leaders accept poorly run, time-sucking meetings as if it's an unavoidable price of doing business. The only explanation seems to be ignorance -- of their own meeting leadership effectiveness and that meetings can be soooo MUCH better. Rogelberg points out that 75% of managers responding to a survey said they had no training in how to run a meeting. So, they don't know what they don't know about meeting effectiveness.

Meeting misery or mastery depends on the leader. I've been beating the meeting drum so long my arm's getting sore. If you suspect you might be able to improve how you drive meetings, do a self-assessment with our **Ten Essential Vitamins to Avoid Meeting Indigestion** or these **meeting process and ground rules checklists**. Better yet, get your attendees to rate your meeting effectiveness.

You might find the chart showing how **meetings showcase organizational culture** useful. Are your meetings symptomatic of deeper team and organizational issues?

Be part of the solution, not the problem. Straighten up and drive right.

Tweet Reading: Recommended Online Articles



This section summarizes last month's LinkedIn Updates and Twitter Tweets about online articles or blog posts that I've flagged as worth reading. These are usually posted on weekends when I am doing much of my reading for research, learning, or leisure. You can follow me on Twitter at

<https://twitter.com/JimClemmer>

My original tweet commenting on the article follows each title and descriptor from the original source:

How a company can benefit the world and have a huge impact on employees' sense of purpose.

A new kind of capitalism needs a new generation of inspired -- and inspiring -- leaders, Sebastian Buck, *Fast Company*

Companies that scored in the top 50% on work/life balance metrics have earned an average annual return on equity of 19.4% over the past five years

Why Investors Win When Companies Treat Workers Well, Ryan DeRousseau,
Fortune

Six keys steps toward more integrated leadership/organization development.

Individual Leadership Development Versus A Company's Leadership Development, Jack Zenger, *Forbes*

Read *The Leader Letter* in Weekly Installments



The items in each month's issue of *The Leader Letter* are first published in my weekly **blog** during the previous month.

If you read each blog post (or issue of *The Leader Letter*) as it's published over twelve months, you'll have read the equivalent of a leadership book. And you'll pick up a few practical leadership tips that help you use time more strategically and tame your E-Beast!

Feedback and Follow-Up

I am always delighted to hear from readers of *The Leader Letter* with feedback, reflections, suggestions, or differing points of view. Nobody is ever identified in *The Leader Letter* without their permission. I am also happy to explore customized, in-house adaptations of any of my material for your team or organization. Drop me an e-mail at **Jim.Clemmer@ClemmerGroup.com** or connect with me on **LinkedIn**, **Twitter**, **Facebook**, or my **blog**!

Live, learn, laugh, and lead -- just for the L of it!

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Jim Clemmer". The signature is stylized with a large loop at the end.

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