# 8 Strategic Communications and Relationships – Curated Video Series

Crucial Conversations for Women in Management

1. **Topic**

Most managers can identify a powerful speaker who is a great leader, in part, due to their uncanny ability to communicate. They may be a political leader, an actress, or someone in your family, such as a grandparent who is a superb storyteller. The ability to communicate - and to listen deeply to others - is often the difference between being a good leader and being a great leader. Fostering communications skills helps build strong relationships in the workplace.

The word “communicate” is derived from the Latin word “communis,” meaning to share words and your reality in common. Communicating is a **two-way process**, not simply broadcasting outwards. By definition, good communicators are great listeners! Employees or clients will not follow you if they don’t know what you want or where you are going. Clear communications are crucial, as is your own credibility when you communicate your expectations to others. Be prepared to model key behaviours and to ‘live’ by your own actions, when you are asking others to act similarly. The **higher you go** in the organizational leadership hierarchy, the **more time** you spend in generating, receiving, and acting upon conversations. Before you communicate a message, you should analyze what you know about your audience, what needs to be accomplished, and seek to understand what questions may arise. **Simplicity and clarity** are your best friends when you communicate well. Because leaders get things done through others, you must have the ability to communicate well, listen attentively, and inspire and motivate, guide and direct other human beings. This entails thinking about your employees’ and clients’ needs and desires, **meeting people where they are**.

Dr. Stephen R. Covey cites this ability as **“seeking first to understand”** the other person’s viewpoint, before trying to be understood yourself. Rather than projecting your own ‘home movie’ onto other people, try to understand **their reality** first. Empathic or **deep listening** stands in stark contrast to those engaged in a monologue, telling their ‘autobiography,’ or interrupting you before you finish speaking. Speaking to other people’s ‘listening’ allows you to arrive at shared actions and commitments. If you practice face-to-face communications consistently, employees learn that you are a leader who cares equally about both results and people. People volunteer their advice, truths and efforts only when they find themselves in quiet, inviting and trustworthy conditions. Parker Palmer notes that, “the soul is not responsive to subpoenas or cross-examinations.”

If you do not clearly communicate your expectations as a manager, and equip each member of your team to perform their role well, employees will send emails tweets, in viral fashion, about what you have said or done, or not said or done. Secrecy and control are your enemies as a leader. Listening to hallway conversations in organizations reveals very quickly, “this is the way it is around here.” Your way of being, body language, facial expressions, and non-verbal
cues, signal whether you are genuinely open to other people’s self-expression. Ask yourself: “what do my communications and listening habits say about me as a leader?”

2. Assignment

Peter Drucker argues that traditional organizational models were derived from military chains of command. By contrast, today’s information-rich society more closely resembles a symphony orchestra where the ‘musical score’ must be shared with, and improved upon, by the musicians and conductor. The group’s performance depends upon the ability of each musician to play their pivotal role. As the “conductor” of your particular team, analyze how your communications are ‘landing’ with those who report to you, with your peers and supervisors. Some of the most influential leaders in the world are also the best listeners. John Maxwell vows that Oprah Winfrey’s deep ability to listen has been “a chief characteristic of her life,” as she absorbed the wisdom of numerous authors and interview subjects, “learning about how other people feel and think.” It is also useful to have a non-interruption policy in meetings so women’s ideas are not overlooked or attributed to men.

Ask yourself the following questions:

a) As I interact with people, am I listening between the lines for emotional as well as factual content? Am I observing non-verbal cues?
b) Am I listening with my heart as well as my mind, respectfully and deeply?
c) Have I asked my team members about their thoughts and feelings?
d) Do colleagues and team members feel they can openly share their views with me and with one another?
e) Do I know from listening to my employees and peers where we can find common ground, in order to advance a key priority?
f) Am I silencing the views of others or making them feel their ideas are unwelcome? Inadvertently going to ‘silence or violence’? As opposed to using non-violent communications?
g) Do I thank people for their ideas, even when I disagree with them? Or, do I engage in ‘already listening,’ thinking I know it all?
h) Do I encourage divergent or dissonant voices in my workplace?
i) Do I start to formulate another point I want to make in a meeting, even before someone has finished speaking?
j) Am I maintaining a climate of mutual respect and safety?
k) Do I seek to clarify or test assumptions, or, do I leap to judgement?
l) When I give feedback to employees, can I give constructive feedback in a way that is values-based and non-threatening?
m) What would my employees, peers and boss say about my inner leader and the extent to which I am self-aware in what I say and do?
n) Do I ask openly for feedback, as well as give feedback to others? Do I acknowledge positively the feedback and act upon it?
o) Do I remain composed and non-emotional when challenged? Can I handle emotional reactions well?
By answering these questions, you can harness the positive power of your communications and interactions with employees and colleagues. Thomas Davenport proposes, in his book, *The Attention Economy*, that leaders should communicate with the “ownership principle” in mind. By this, he means that people pay most attention to the things that affect them personally, so employees need to be engaged in organizational decision-making and communications at every turn. He notes that we are “biologically predisposed to pay attention” to the co-creations of our own making. Internet sites often translate this into what they call “sticky” communications that are customized to the interests and search habits of viewers online. Psychologist Ellen Langer brought the terminology of “mindfulness” into Western spheres, where it is applied as an excellent strategy by managers who communicate well and secure the attention of their clients and employees. It also recognizes that most employees seek acceptance, autonomy and admiration as they commit to performing a task for an organization. Inherently negative and critical communications are not welcome.

3. **Video Descriptions and Instructions**

If you live in an organization where you are bombarded with electronic information, a constant stream of emails, and, text and voice mail communications, you may also be feeling that no-one is listening to you. This is considered an **organizational attention deficit disorder**. If you have diminished time for reflection on important issues, or, find it difficult to secure time and attention from your colleagues, you may wish to strengthen your management role as a communicator and promote a humane work climate.

Paying attention to your employees and clients - the essence of bonding and sound relationships – is highly beneficial for all parties. This social cement connects people to the larger world and to a higher purpose. The following videos speak to the importance of cutting through the Tower of Babel that is the workplace today, where good communications skills, deliberate listening, meaningful conversations, and getting onto other people’s wavelengths, creates intimacy, belonging, and, organizational attachment. How your employees feel about the organization is determined by how they feel about you, as their boss, and about their colleagues. Dean Rusk notes, “One of the best ways to persuade others is with your ears – by listening to them” (*Crucial Conversations*).

The first video you will view is by Celeste Headlee, a journalist and host (TED Talk, May 7, 2015), entitled, “*How to Have a Good Conversation,*” and it is 12 minutes long. Headlee suggests that **conversational competence** may be “the most important leadership skill” for the 21st century. She notes that successful managers achieve a balance between talking and listening. Providing **10 basic rules** for communicating, Headlee offers pithy and humour-filled strategies for every manager. You can access this video here: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6n3iNh4XLI](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H6n3iNh4XLI)

The second video, by Dr. Sherry Turkle, “*Connected, but alone?*” explores how modern technology can serve as a barrier to meaningful communication and human attachment. Turkle
analyzes workplaces that substitute human caring and conversations for brief intervals of fleeting connection in the e-world. The video is 19 minutes long. She argues that our “plugged-in lives” are so powerful that they change not just what we do but who we are. Managers must learn to strike the right balance in their in-person communications and listening, as well as in their multi-media messaging. The link to the video follows: https://www.ted.com/talks/sherry_turkle_alone_together?language=en

4. Follow-Up Activities and Application

After you view these two videos, you are asked to reflect upon the following issues:

a) Are you able to set your judgments aside and listen for another person’s intent, without engaging in censoring, seeing the world through their perspective?
b) Can you see how listening to your employees and encouraging open communications is a prerequisite to achieving change and progress?
c) Are you able to relinquish your control over conversations and be willing to interact with whatever shows up in the moment?
d) Can you think of a time recently when you followed Headlee’s rule of keeping an open mind, keeping your “mouth shut” and “preparing to be amazed”?
e) Can you identify five things that you will do differently in your approach to communicating, to deep listening, and to giving and receiving feedback?
f) Are you using e-communications, electronic devices and overall ‘busyness’ as an excuse for avoiding challenging communications and interactions?
g) Is your “plugged-in” communication leaving enough time for in-person interactions?
h) When you communicate achievements, do you take credit for the work done or do you give others the spotlight for work they have performed?
i) Do you invite new ideas and challenge status quo thinking?
j) Do you avoid taking comments from others personally?
k) How do you deal with interruptions when you are speaking?
l) Do you observe and respond to non-verbal cues as you seek to develop strong relationships?
m) Have you actively invited the introverts in the room to make a contribution or to raise a key point, when they are being overtaken by their extroverted colleagues?

Assessing your communications style, weaknesses and strengths, will empower you to improve relationships and will challenge how you relate to others and to yourself. Refusing to take offense when others challenge your ideas, being genuinely respectful, and constantly searching for mutual purpose in your communications, creates a high-performance and high-trust climate.

5. Expert Knowledge

Dawn Nicholson-O’Brien is the President and CEO of Celtic Oracle, an executive services consulting firm. A former executive in the Government of Canada, Dawn served in executive level roles during three and a half decades. She also served as the Vice President of the Institute on Governance, has developed and delivered advanced leadership programs for
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6. Key Words

Key words include: strategic communications; great listeners; seek first to understand; deep listening; non-verbal cues; non-violent communications; ‘already listening’; constructive feedback; ownership principle; self-awareness; sticky communications; mindfulness; organizational attention deficit disorder; meaningful conversations; connectedness; attachment; conversational competence; plugged-in lives; judgments; censoring; introverts; mutual purpose; humane work climate; invite new ideas; strong relationships.

7. Additional Resources and Reading


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