"Effective Leadership is still largely a matter of Communication": A study

Sohini Datta

Assistant Professor, Institute of Engineering & Management

Bishal Chandra Roy

Dipanjan Ghosh

Rahi Mukherjee

Department of Management, Institute of Engineering & Management

Abstract

Despite the obvious importance of "Communication" it is at times a lightly regarded discipline in the theory and practice of "corporate leadership". There is indeed much enduring truth to the lean principle that the discipline is seldom among the top priorities of corporate leaders. The principal reason for this seems to be that they regard communication as too "soft," lacking well-defined, tangible parameters and outcomes.

To be specific, communication is a unique area of expertise among traditional business skills, and clear measurement of its value to organizational performance is at best very difficult. Understanding its significance requires a high tolerance of ambiguity, contradiction and subtlety. Whether a company succeeds or fails in navigating a crisis, completing a merger, avoiding regulatory blunders, or executing everyday operations, everything however depends strongly upon skillful and effective communication.

Managers spend most of their day engaged in communication; in fact, older studies of how much time managers spend on various activities show that communication occupies 70 to 90 percent of their time every day (Mintzberg, 1973; Eccles & Nohria, 1991). With cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, if that same study were done today, it would yield even higher percentages. The sheer amount of time managers spend communicating underscores how important strong communication skills can be for the manager desiring to advance to leadership positions; thus, mastering leadership communication should be a priority for managers wanting their organizations or the broader business community to consider them leaders.

Introduction

"Effective leadership is still largely a matter of communication."

- Alan Axelrod. *Elizabeth I, CEO:*

Strategic Lessons from the Leader Who Built an Empire.

Researchers seldom agree completely on how best to define leadership, but most would agree that leaders are individuals who guide, direct, motivate, or inspire others. They are the men and women who influence others in an organization or in a community. They command others' attention. They persuade others to follow them or pursue goals they define. They control situations. They improve the performance of groups and organizations. They get results. These individuals may not be presidents of countries or the CEOs of companies, but they could be. They could also be employees who step forward to mentor less experienced or younger employees, managers who direct successful project teams or vice presidents who lead divisions and motivate their staff to achieve company goals.

Through effective communication, leaders lead. Good communication skills enable, foster, and create the understanding and trust necessary to encourage others to follow a leader. Without effective communication, a manager accomplishes little. Without effective communication, a manager is not an effective leader.

In fact, being able to communicate effectively is what allows a manager to move into a leadership position. An early Harvard Business School study on what it takes to achieve success and be promoted in an organization says that the individual who gets ahead in business is the person who "is able to communicate, to make sound decisions, and to get things done

with and through people" (Bowman, Jones, Peterson, Gronouski, & Mahoney, 1964). By communicating more effectively, managers improve their ability to get things done with and through people.

The Barriers to Effective Communication

Communication is the transmission of meaning from one person to another or to many people, whether verbally or non-verbally. Communication from one person to another is commonly depicted as a simple triangle consisting of the context, the sender, the message, and the receiver (Exhibit 1).

Exhibit 1: The Communication Triangle
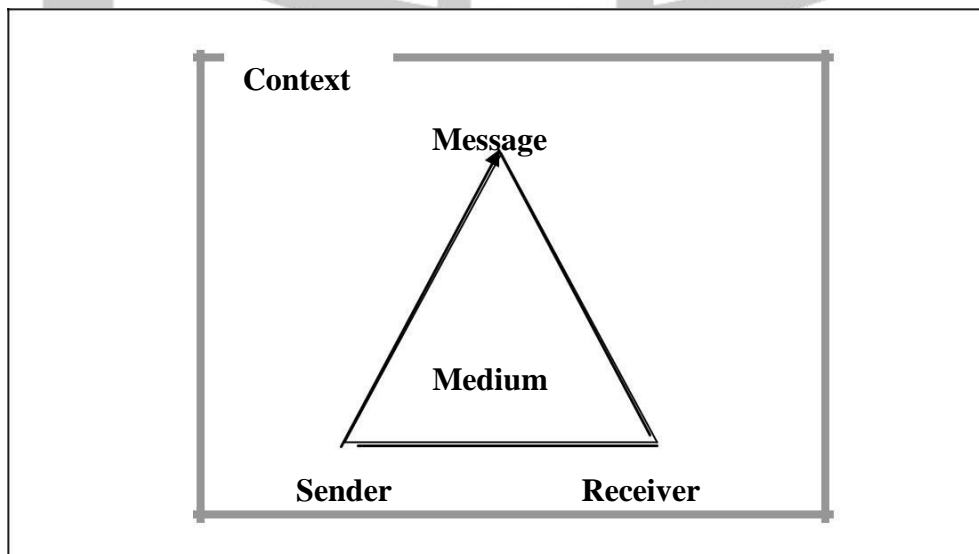
This exhibit shows what would be very simple and ideal communication. There would be no miscommunication or misunderstandings. The sender would understand the context and the

audiences (receiver), selects the right medium, and send a clear message, and the receiver would receive and understand that message exactly as the sender intended.
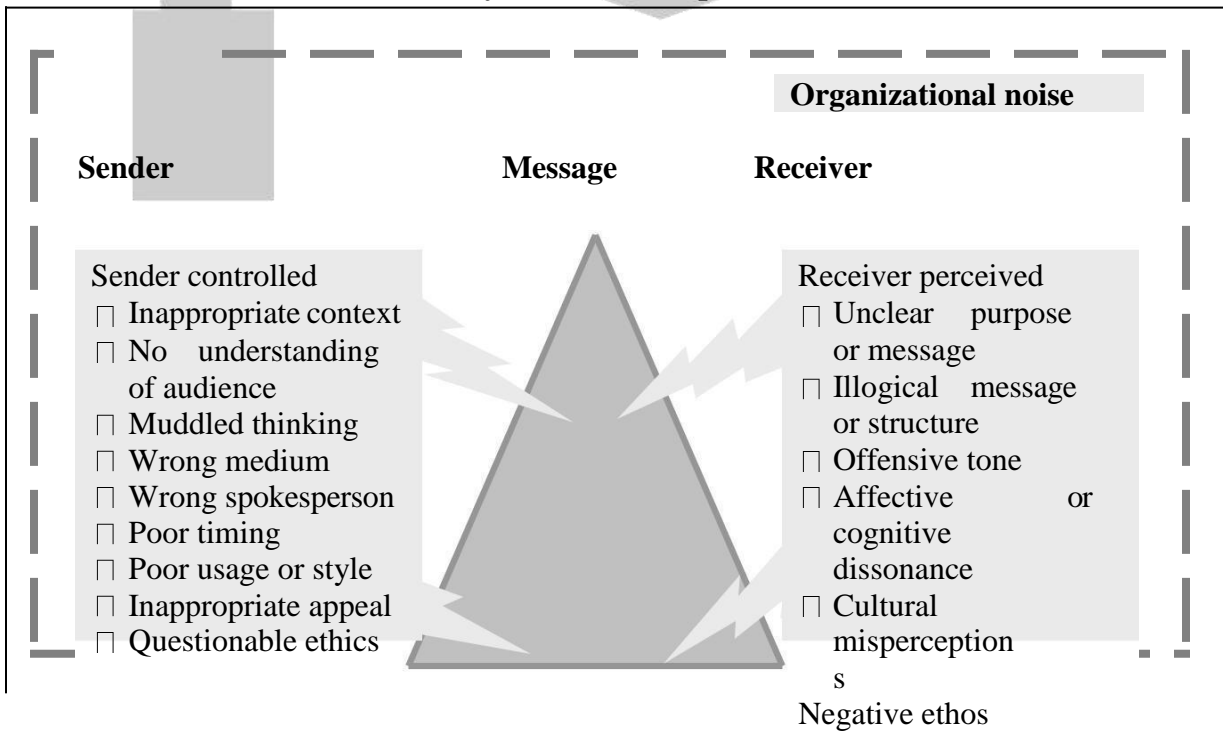
The complication in communication comes from the interruptions or interferences in that transmission, whether the sender causes them or the receiver. The context in which the information is sent, the noise that surrounds it, the selection of the medium, the words used in the message, the image of the speaker, etc., all influence the meaning traveling successfully, or as intended from one to another.

Learning to anticipate the interruptions in the rhetorical situation, to appreciate the context, to understand the audience, to select the right medium, and to craft clear messages that allow the meaning to reach the specific receiver as intended is the foundation of effective business communication. In reality, communication more likely resembles some variation of the diagram in Exhibit 2:

Exhibit 2: Communication Reality or the Interruptions to Communication

Organizational noise

| **Sender** | **Message** | **Receiver** |

Sender controlled
- Inappropriate context
- No understanding of audience
- Muddled thinking
- Wrong medium
- Wrong spokesperson
- Poor timing
- Poor usage or style
- Inappropriate appeal
- Questionable ethics

Receiver perceived
- Unclear purpose or message
- Illogical message or structure
- Offensive tone
- Affective or cognitive dissonance
- Cultural misperceptions

Negative ethos

The goal of mastering all aspects of leadership communication is to move prospective leaders as close to the ideal communication situation as possible. Leadership communication necessitates anticipating all interruptions and interferences through audience analysis and then developing a communication strategy that controls the rhetorical situation and facilitates the effective transmission of the message.

Definition of Leadership Communication

Leadership communication is the controlled, purposeful transfer of meaning by which leaders influence a single person, a group, an organization, or a community. Leadership communication uses the full range of communication skills and resources to overcome interferences and to create and deliver messages that guide, direct, motivate, or inspire others to action. Leadership communication consists of layered, expanding skills from core strategy development and effective writing and speaking to the use of these skills in more complex organizational situations. As the manager's perspective and control expand, he or she will need to improve the core communication skills to become effective in the larger, more complex organizational situations. Leadership communication consists of three primary rings (1) core, (2) managerial, and (3) corporate (Exhibit 3).

The higher up in an organization a manager moves, the more complex his or her communication demands become.

The core communication ability represented in the center of the framework below expands to the managerial communication ring and then further to the communication capabilities included at the broader corporate communication ring (Barrett, 2006).

Exhibit 3: The Leadership Communication Framework
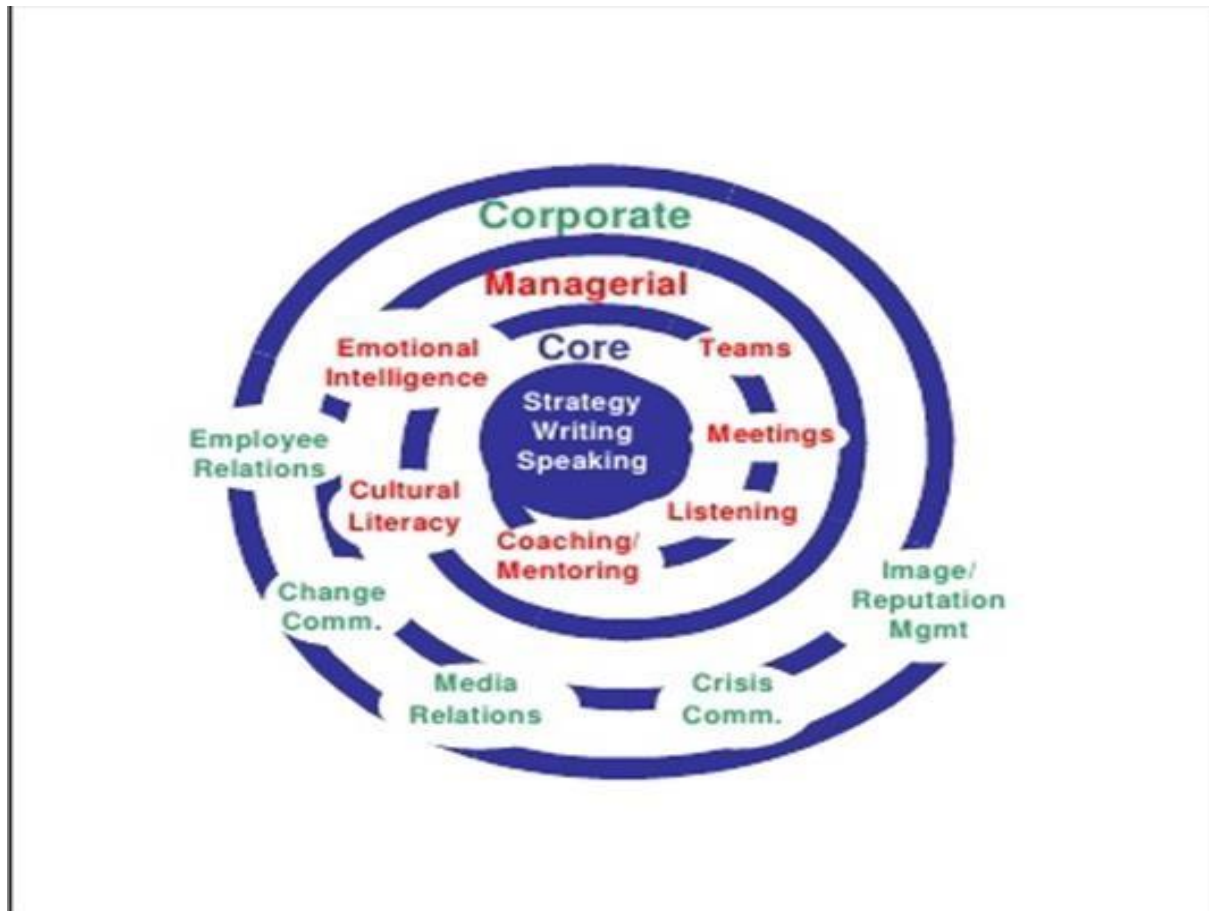
The framework is not meant to suggest a hierarchy, which is why it is depicted as a spiral. All effective communications depends on the core skills at the center of the spiral. These are the more individual skills. Leaders in any organization must master the skills at the core (strategy, writing, and speaking), but they also need to expand their skills to include those needed to lead and manage groups, such skills as emotional intelligence, cultural literacy, listening, managing teams and meetings, and coaching and mentoring. Eventually, particularly when they move into the higher-levels of organizational leadership, they will need to develop the capabilities in the outer circle, the corporate communication skills – employee relations, change communication, media relations, crisis communication, and image and reputation management.

1. Core Communication. Communication strategy is included in the core, but managers will find they always need to take a strategic approach to be a master of leadership communication.

Strategy is the foundation on which any effective communication depends. Leaders need to be able to analyze an audience in every situation and develop a communication strategy that facilitates accomplishing their communication objectives.

Managers need to be able to structure and write effective simple and complex correspondence and documents, from e-mails and memos to proposals and reports. They need to be able to write and to speak in the language expected of business leaders, language that is clear, correct, and concise. In addition, they need to be able to create and deliver oral presentations confidently and persuasively, using graphics that contribute to delivering your messages. These are the capabilities at the core of all business communication. Success in managerial and corporate communication depends on mastering these core capabilities.

2. Managerial Communication. Managerial communication capabilities build on the core abilities. They are the capabilities that more directly involve managing others, from one-on-one contact to interacting with groups and the broader organization. They are the skills needed to interact with individuals and to manage groups. Managerial communication begins with emotional intelligence or interpersonal skills and an understanding of cross-cultural differences needed to interact effectively with others as individuals or groups. Listening is an essential skill in any rhetorical situation, but is pictured aligned more with the managerial ring because managing others effectively requires even greater attention to hearing what others say, not simply what we think we hear them say. The managerial ring also includes leading meetings and managing teams, both essential capabilities for today's leaders.

3. Corporate Communication. Corporate communication involves expansion from the managerial skills to those abilities needed to lead an organization and address a broader community. Communication becomes even more complex when managers move into the position of needing to think about how best to communicate to all internal and external stakeholders. Again, any good communication depends on having a strategy, but as the audiences become more diverse and larger, the communication strategy becomes more complicated. Leaders will find as they move into higher levels of an organization that they become the leader of change programs and vision development. In addition, they become the company's face and voice for the public.

Projecting a Positive Leadership Image

Leadership communication depends on the ability to project a positive image, or more specifically, a positive ethos, inside an organization and outside. To understand ethos, it helps to look back at the original definitions found in the writing of the Greek philosopher Aristotle. Aristotle identified three types of persuasive appeals: (1) logos, (2) pathos, and (3) ethos. Logos is an appeal based upon the logic of an argument, while pathos is an appeal based on the use of emotions. Ethos is an appeal based on the perceived character of the sender of the message. Is the person trustworthy, confident, believable, knowledgeable, and a man or woman of integrity? If the audience does not trust or believe the speaker or writer, logic or emotion will have little persuasive force.

For Aristotle, ethos is the most important persuasive device: the "character of the speaker may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" (Roberts, 1954). Therefore, "the orator must not only try to make the argument of his speech demonstrative and

worthy of belief; he must also make his own character look right and put his hearers, who are to decide, into the right frame of mind" (Roberts, 1954).

The word "image" is often associated with illusion or superficiality. Ethos refers to qualities of greater depth and substance. It embodies "image," in that an audience makes judgments about the manager initially on mostly superficial perceptions, but ethos ties more directly to character, which an audience evaluates according to the culture in which they are communicating.

"Charisma" is another term often used to describe someone who has the ability to persuade others and move an audience. It resembles ethos in its effect on an audience, but it differs in that it suggests exuding a power over others based more in emotions than in reason. Examples of public figures who were charismatic leaders in their time are John F. Kennedy, Mahatma Gandhi, and Martin Luther King.

Both image and charisma can be used to describe leaders, but since ethos ties more directly to the character of the speaker or writer, it serves as a better word to use in capturing the positive qualities that we want our business leaders to possess. Projecting a positive ethos, then, better defines the goal managers should seek in mastering leadership communication.

A positive ethos will take managers a long way towards influencing their audiences with their intended messages, whereas a negative ethos is one of the greatest barriers to effective communication. How a manager is perceived makes the difference in how well he or she is believed, how persuasive he or she is, and ultimately, how effectively he or she communicates. Successful leadership communication depends on projecting a positive ethos.

One of the primary requirements to inspire confidence and induce others to listen is **credibility**. In their research on leadership, James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner found that credibility is the number one reason people follow someone (1993). To be effective, leaders must be credible to their followers. Credibility is essential to creating a positive ethos. Aristotle says, "persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him **credible**" (Roberts, 1954).

For an audience to view leaders as credible, they must perceive them as knowledgeable, authoritative, confident, honest, and trustworthy. Leaders can achieve the first two through hard work and position. For instance, if they are giving a presentation on the future of energy production in the United States, they must know the industry and the market as well as something about politics and regulatory policy. They can learn the facts and appear knowledgeable. In addition, if they are senior executives of a major energy company, their audience will probably perceive them as persons with the authority to talk about energy. They can exude confidence by being well prepared and feeling comfortable delivering presentations. They can even create an aura of honesty and trustworthiness by effective delivery techniques, such as steady eye contact, easy rapport with the audience, being well prepared to answer questions, and saying, "I do not know but will find out for you" when they do not have the answer at hand. Thus, they can take specific actions to build greater credibility. By doing so, they can begin to establish a positive ethos.

To build a positive ethos, leaders need to know how others perceive them; however, determining how all audiences perceive them is not easy. Research on the ability of managers to judge how

they are perceived found that "most managers overestimate their own credibility – considerably" (Conger, 1998). Few people really see themselves as others see them.

The idea that when two people meet, six people are really in the room – the persons as they see themselves, the persons as the other sees them, and the persons as they may actually be – underscores the complexity of perception and self perception (Barnlund, 1962). Deciding which perception would be the most accurate would lead to a philosophical tangle, although determining which one is most important would depend on the purpose of the encounter. If one of the individuals intends to influence the other, then the perception of the other takes on great importance, and the need for that individual to know how he or she is perceived becomes critical.

What can managers do to find out how they are perceived? The first step is to develop greater emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is the capacity to understand one's own emotions and those of other people. In addition to attempting to understand the self better, the prospective leader should solicit honest feedback from others. Self-exploration and some sought-after honest feedback from others will bring the greater self-awareness necessary to judge ourselves more accurately and to recognize the signals others send back to us either in their words or, often more importantly, in their body language and their actions.

Managers can also improve their ability to project a positive ethos by building a positive reputation, improving their professional appearance, projecting greater confidence, and learning to communicate more effectively. Reputation could include title, organizational positions, past roles or accomplishments, and public opinion. They can achieve a positive appearance through

appropriate and culturally expected dress and grooming. To suggest confidence to an audience, they can use eye contact, establish a rapport, and speak easily about a subject without notes when presenting. By using language effectively to capture the meaning and inspire trust, they can create believers in their message.

How Ethics Connects to Image or Ethos

While managers can control or develop some of the outward manifestations of a positive ethos, it is more difficult for them to change their fundamental character, or for an audience to determine for that matter, their true character. Ideally, a positive ethos would exemplify a strong inner character and high ethical standards. Unfortunately, history shows that the projected image may not be the reality of the person. Ethos and ethics are not always aligned; someone can project a positive ethos and appear honest and trustworthy, yet have little or no ethical foundation behind that projection. Someone skilled in deception can fool others; the absence of honesty and integrity is not always apparent to an audience.

Since effective leadership communication depends heavily on the ethos projected, leaders need to be sensitive to the ethical foundation below the surface. As James Kouzes and Barry Posner found in their research on leadership, "if people are going to follow someone willingly, whether

it be into battle or into the boardroom, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust. They want to know that the would-be leader is truthful and ethical" (1993).

Managers need to look critically at the motivation and meaning behind their words. Today in particular, businesses are looking for ethical leaders; therefore, when working to create a positive ethos, managers will want to include some analysis of the ethical foundation their ethos suggests. For instance, they might ask themselves, "Does my ethos suggest the characteristics of an ethical leaders; therefore, when working to create a positive ethos, managers will want to include some analysis of the ethical foundation their ethos suggests. For instance, they might ask themselves, "Does my ethos suggest the characteristics of an ethical leader, that is, 'fairness, mutual well-being, and harmony'"? (Solomon, 1998). A positive ethos suggests a good character, and a suggestion of a "good" character makes individuals more persuasive. As Aristotle says, "We believe good men [and women] more

fully and more readily than others" (Roberts, 1954). A "good" character suggests an ethical foundation that makes the audience trust the communicator and be more receptive to believing what is said.

Ethos may be the most persuasive tool the communicator possesses. Although it may be difficult for a business leader to be perceived as honest and trustworthy, particularly in today's scandal-laden business world, the success of individuals and companies often depends on it. Managers and their companies are trusted because of their reputation, because they are good at what they do, because of their knowledge, because they appear confident, and because they are believed to be ethical. All of these conditions lead to a positive ethos.

Ethos may be the most persuasive tool the communicator possesses. Although it may be difficult for a business leader to be perceived as honest and trustworthy, particularly in today's scandal-laden business world, the success of individuals and companies often depends on it. Managers and their companies are trusted because of their reputation, because they are good at

what they do, because of their knowledge, because they appear confident, and because they are

believed to be ethical. All of these conditions lead to a positive ethos.

The Importance of Emotional Intelligence in Leadership Communication

Leadership communication depends on understanding the audience in all communication

situations, understanding what moves them to listen and what motivates them to act. This

understanding requires self-awareness as well as increased awareness of others, or improved

emotional intelligence. Audiences' receptivity to the manager, to his or her ethos or message,

can assist or be a barrier to their receiving the intended message. What is it that makes others

attend to a message; what is it that persuades them to listen and to act? In a recent article in

Harvard Business Review, Robert Cialdini argues, "no leader can succeed without mastering the

art of persuasion" (2001). Just as creating a positive ethos aids in the art of persuasion,

understanding what motivates others to listen and to act will help as well, thus the importance of

emotional intelligence for any leader.

Without emotional intelligence, leaders cannot communicate with and manage others

effectively. Reuven Bar-On, who developed the concept of emotional quotient in 1988, provides

a technical definition of emotional intelligence. Emotional quotient (or intelligence) is emotional

and social knowledge and the ability to

1. Be aware of, understand, and express yourself,

2. Be aware of, understand, and relate to others,

3. Deal with strong emotions and control your impulses, and

4. Adapt to change and to solve problems of a personal or a social nature (2000).

This definition suggests that emotional intelligence begins with the ability to identify and manage emotions in ourselves and in others, but it extends also to the ability to translate these emotions into actions that show flexibility and personal and social problem solving ability. For leadership communication, emotional intelligence is as important as the core skills of strategy development, writing, and speaking. "EI accounts for 85% of what distinguishes the stars in top leadership positions from low-level performers" (Gary, 2002).

Emotional intelligence allows managers to interact with and lead others effectively, and the key to interacting with others and managing relationships successfully is communication: "The basis of any relationship is communication. Without communication—be it sign language, body language, e-mail, or face-to-face conversation—there is no connection and hence no relationship. The importance of effective communication skills to your Emotional Intelligence is crucial, and its value in the workplace is incalculable" (Weisinger, 1998). Words and how they use them reflect who the communicators are and how well they understand their audiences.

Knowledge of what moves audiences can help managers to create a positive ethos, which will make them more persuasive. Drawing on emotional intelligence as a source of persuasion may work as well as or better than facts and figures in many cases: "Arguments, per se, are only one part of the equation. Other factors matter just as much, such as the persuader's credibility and his or her ability to create a proper, mutually beneficial frame for a position, connect on the right emotional level with an audience, and communicate through vivid language that makes arguments come alive" (Conger, 1998).

A leader might vary his or her leadership style when the situation warrants it, but the ability to select the most effective style for different situations requires the emotional

intelligence to assess the situation correctly and assume the appropriate style for the context and audience. A deficiency of emotional intelligence can lead to communication mistakes, which in turn can lead to problems in the corporate culture. Thus, all managers who aspire to move even higher into leadership positions must development their emotional intelligence.

Conclusion

In conclusion, improving their leadership communication ability should be a priority for managers wanting to be the leaders in their organization or community. They need to master the core skills and learn the capabilities included in the managerial and corporate rings of the leadership communication framework. By doing so, they position themselves to move into the executive suite and beyond.

References

Bamlund, D.C. (1962). Toward a meaning-centered philosophy of communication.
Journal of Communication, 12, pp. 197-211.

Bar-On, R.& Parker, J.D.A. (Eds.) (2000). *Handbook of Emotional Intelligence*. San
Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Barrett, D.J. (2006). *Leadership Communication*. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006). The
definition of and model for leadership communication are based on this book.

Bowman, G.W., Jones, L.W., Peterson, R.A., Gronouski, J.A., & Mahoney, R.M. (1964).
What helps or harms promotability? Harvard Business Review. 42 (1), pp. 6-18.

Cialdini, R. (2001). Harnessing the science of persuasion. *Harvard Business Review*, 79 (9), pp. 72-80.

Conger, J. A. (1998). The necessary art of persuasion, *Harvard Business Review*, 76 (3), p. 88.

Eccles. R.G. & Nohria, N. (1991). *Beyond the Hype: Rediscovering the Essence of Management*. Boston Harvard Business School Press..

Gary, L. (2002). Quoting Goleman in "Becoming a Resonant Leader," *Harvard Management Update*.7(7), 4 – 6.

Kouzes, J.M. & Posner, B.Z. (1993). *Credibility: How Leaders Gain it and Lose it, Why People Demand it*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Mintzberg, H. (1973). *The Nature of Managerial Work*. New York: Harper & Row.

Solomon, R. (1998). Ethical leadership, emotions, and trust: Beyond "Charisma." In J. B. Ciulla (Ed), *Ethics: The Heart of Leadership.* Westport, CT: Quorum Books.