

Reframing Leadership Communication: Consequences for Organisational Leaders Resulting from Communication Failure: An Australian Case Study

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Abstract The failure of organisational leaders to communicate with business analysts, key media and staff can lead to an erosion of reputation, a reduction in social capital, as well as a major fall in the value of financial capital. This can result in subsequent negative consequences for staff morale and relationships with a wide range of key publics. A developing field of communication and management research suggests that organisational leaders must have the skills and commitment to be as effective in communicating as is their stewardship of the financial, sales, manufacturing, marketing, and human resource functions of the organisation. Research of a wide selection of management texts identified a number of core communication attributes that effective Chief Executive Officers should have as part of their set of leadership skills. Using an Australian case study, and a content analysis of two substantial public documents, a conclusion is drawn that had the Chief Executive Officer in the study been aware of the consequences of the failure to communicate with key publics such as shareholders, governments, victim organisations, communities, the media and market analysts, the outcomes for the individual and the organisation may have been different.

Using Bolman and Deal's (1997) Four Framework Model, the paper assesses if communication effectiveness as discussed in this paper fits within the authors' framework methodology, and if not, whether communication needs to be added as a further dimension in utilising the Model for assessing key leadership characteristics.

Keywords: Leadership, communication failure, Management

Introduction

The Chief Executive Officer (leader) as communicator is a subject rarely discussed in management texts, especially the requirements for effective external communicative relationships. The role of communication as a process is, however, extensively analysed in communication, public relations and management texts. This includes such techniques as the most effective means of writing memorandums, conducting meetings, briefing large groups or presenting board papers (Taylor, 2005; Searles, 2006; Ettinger and Perfetto, 2006; Eunson, 2005; and Mohan, McGregor, Saunders and Archee, 2004).

Researchers in the field of organisational communication have extensively assessed the impact of effective internal communication, and organisational communication theory informs of the value of effective internal communication in terms of productivity increases and higher levels of staff morale. David Morgan, the managing director (and CEO) of Westpac, a major Australian bank, on 12 April, 2006, said changes in culture in recent years had increased staff retention rates, saving the bank about \$50 million in associated costs a year (The Age, 12 April, 2006). The former Westpac Head of Group Internal Communications, Lorraine Lennon, told the author in May 2005, that these changes were all communication-driven. In April 2006 in a

presentation on the bank's website (www.westpac.com.au) it was reported that employee commitment at the bank showed 69% of employees reported a positive score. This outstripped the median for global financial services companies (66 %), and for large Australian companies (64 %).

Goldhaber (1993) reports a study by Katzel, Bienstock and Faerstein where a positive reinforcement programme based on improved communication between staff and managers, resulted in a rise in sales, savings over three years amounting to \$3 million, and where standards of customer service were met 90 to 95 per cent of the time (compared with 30-40 per cent previously).

This study, however, is concerned with external publics and the impact of non-communication with key stakeholders by a CEO. A small group of management writers (Pincus and deBonis, 2004; Puth, 2002; Mai and Akerson, 2003) have commented that communication can materially affect relationships between CEOs and shareholders, suppliers, customers, governments and communities. A United States CEO, Ray Hawley, quoted by Pincus (1994:116) says, "Our ability (as CEOs) to communicate effectively, as opposed to just communicating, makes a big difference in results- and that's true internally as well as externally".

The field of management studies has mainly been the domain of researchers from business. Dubrin & Dalglish (2003, p3) state "About 35 000 research articles, magazine articles, and books have been written about leadership." Leadership deals with change, inspiration, motivation and influence. It is argued that all these aspects of leadership have a strong communicative aspect to them.

Numerous leadership styles have been comprehensively analysed and researched and many theories developed as a consequence. Charismatic, inspirational, visionary, transformational, transactional, contingency, situational, and strategic are just some of the terms used to describe various facets of leadership. The recent literature (Bennis, Spreitzer and Cummings,2001; Dubrin and Dalglish,2003; Bass, 1990; Moore and Sonsino,2003; Overton,2002;Maak and Pless,2006;Hargreaves,2006; Grint,2005) on leadership in management texts discusses how these attributes can be assessed and potential leaders trained and inculcated with the skills to be effective leaders. However, there is minimal discussion or attention paid in any of these writings to the requirement of communication as a core management discipline (Grunig & Grunig and Ehling, 1992; Oliver, 2000, and Argenti, 2003). Communication is a management responsibility (Robertson, 2003; Hackman and Johnson, 2004), and delivery styles of communication can have a positive or negative influence on a wide range of external stakeholders, leaders must be aware of their responsibility to manage this aspect of their stewardship.

It is the premise of this paper that organisational leaders (Chief Executive Officers) must be highly competent communicators, particularly with the wide range of external stakeholders they have to manage. They need to have knowledge and a high level of understanding of communication practice to manage the myriad of interests and publics that can impact on business goals.

Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:128), refer to the need for a CEO to also be the prime communicator, an individual who understands that it is not

just their stewardship of finance, production, sales and marketing and human resources that makes for organisational success. "As the CEO is also the person responsible for sustaining the corporate dialogue, he must convince his (outside) board as well as any stakeholders that he feels responsible for guaranteeing the company's integrity and transparency." Further, Pincus (1994:16) argues for the concept of the CEO as Chief Communication Officer (CCO), with the functions of being the principal communication strategist, "who grasps and relies on the communication process" and who is also a communication tactician, "who knows how and when to employ different types of communication."

Leaders states Puth (2002:12) see communication as one of a number of functions; yet, the author writes, it still remains a difficulty for leaders to communicate effectively and to ensure that meaning is shared. "Good leaders are inclined to have a better understanding of communication and an ability to communicate well in interpersonal and group situations." Puth also argues that if people and leaders are inept communicators, "the general level of communication will remain poor." These comments also apply to CEO's.

Thematic Analysis

As a first step in researching the attributes of effective CEO communicators, a thematic analysis was initiated with the purpose of identifying the key attributes of communicative success when dealing with the external environment. Concepts were recorded that could be included in a matrix of key terms by which CEOs could be recognised for their ability to lead organisations successfully. The following five communication behaviours were the most significant effective attributes identified:

Dialogue

Successful CEOs are great communicators with a vision that they can translate into a common cause note Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:18). They state, "This is where dialogue fits in. Dialogue is the vehicle that creates focus and turns fear into shared uncertainty." Moore and Sonsino (2003:76) support this view: "To be an effective leaderrequires the desire to communicate and the skill to engage in dialogue" and that "very few people are explicitly taught how to talk, persuade or listen (p4)." The authors also quote Bijur from Dauphinis (2000:76) "to be an effective leader... requires the desire to communicate and the skill to engage in dialogue." Fairhurst and Starr (1996:226) state: "Leadership is about taking the risk of managing meaning. We assume a leadership role, indeed we become leaders, through our ability to decipher and communicate meanings of complex and confusing situations. Our communications actually do the work of leadership; our talk is the resource we use to get others to act."

Listening

Hackman and Johnson (2004) discuss communication attributes as seeking feedback, having listening as a primary skill, creating and maintaining satisfying relationships with internal and external groupings, engendering a trusting work environment and being collaborative. Further reinforcement on the need for effective listening is provided by Moore and Sonsino (2003:28) where they state "listening is different from hearing" and that it requires the seeking of common ground and the building of meaning through conversation. The authors write that the criticism most often levelled at senior executives is that they don't listen. Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:128-129) refer to CEO's

making a difference by embracing the corporate dialogue which includes, “listening intently to what people within his company think-about the strategy, about execution and maybe about themselves.”

Openness/Honesty/Trust

Lachotzki and Noteboom (2005:142) write that modern CEOs need to “communicate in a language suited to the company’s values and norms, a language that represents a culture of openness and integrity, of checks and balances, and not one of sweeping things under the carpet.” and “The CEO must accept that openness, honesty and transparency are part of his responsibility.”(p125). Effective leadership is based on relationship building, engagement, high trust levels, information being freely shared, mutual education and feedback according to Mai and Akerson (2003). They also refer to the role of trust and of leaders being open, honest and fair. Mai and Akerson also refer to the Enron example where trust was eroded with substantial damage to the reputation of the organisation and the consequent disappearance of Arthur Andersen, one of the world’s largest accounting firms, which was caught in the scandal. “How leaders communicate with their people is clearly key to how trustworthy they appear and well they in turn extend trust to employees (p23).”

Relationship Management

Bolman and Deal (1997:294) state leadership “exists only in relationships and in the imagination and perception of the engaged parties.” Other behaviours, according to the authors, are to persuade or inspire, “get things done” and produce cooperative efforts. Kotter (1988) also views leadership as building relationships and Gardner (1989), quoted by Bolman and Deal (1997) refers to long -term thinking, looking outside as well as inside and dealing with multiple constituencies.

Communicating A Vision

A core attribute of an effective CEO as discussed by Bass (1985) and Bolman and Deal (1997) is the ability to communicate a vision for the organisation. Bass (1985:55) quotes Bennis (1982) who concluded from a study of 80 CEOs and innovative organisational leaders that a core characteristic was ‘the capacity to create and communicate a compelling vision of a desired state of affairs.’ CEOs could communicate their vision to clarify it and induce the commitment of their multiple constituencies to maintaining the organization's course.

Ineffective Communication Behaviours

On the opposite side of the effectiveness coin is the negative discourse. “In communications among members, “zero feedback” was accompanied by low confidence and hostility; “free feedback” was accompanied by high confidence and amity, wrote Bass (1976:127). Directive, coercive, and controlling actions just did not seem to work, stated Moore and Sonsino (2003:146). “To grow and prosper, contemporary breeds of top dogs should be more responsive, collaborative, visible, inspirational, and communicative than their predecessors-and less authoritarian, isolated, secretive, rigid, and formal,” says Pincus and DeBonis (1994:20). The key concepts, therefore, to emerge from this analysis are:

- Dialogue
- Listening
- Trust

- Openness/transparency
- Relationship management
- Visionary

These terms will be tested within the Bolman and Deal (1997) effective leadership framework.

Framing Effective Leadership Communication

“Because the world of human experience is so complex and ambiguous, frames of reference shape how situations are defined and determine what actions are taken (Bolman and Deal, 1991:510). Framing is a technique used to structure disparate pieces of information into a meaningful structure (Patel and Xavier, 2005). Goffman (1974), is stated by Simon and Xenos (2000) as being the first to introduce framing as a means of organising and packaging information and the authors quote Minsky (1975) as defining a frame as a template or data structure that organises “pieces of information (p366).” Bolman and Deal (1997) follow Goffman and use frames to consolidate schools of organisational thought into four perspectives. They argue frames create a mental model to assist managers to gather information, make judgments and determine how best to get things done. Nelson and Kinder (1996:1057) state, “frames are constructions of the issue: they spell out the essence of the problem, suggest how it should be thought about, and may go so far as to recommend what (if anything) should be done.” Bolman and Deal (1984, 1991) divides theories of organisations into four conceptual perspectives (or frames), which are defined as structural (based on organisational goals, roles and technology), human resources (interdependence between people and organisations), political (power, conflict and the distribution of scarce resources), and symbolic (problems of meaning). The authors, and other reviewers (Scarselletta, 2004), state that framing theory provides a systematic viewpoint for “managers to understand and combat the various problems they encounter at work from a variety of different perspectives” (Scarselletta, p342). Using a United States educational institution faced with a significant need to make changes to manage a new external environment, Israel and Kasper (2004) analysed each of the four frames and identified the management characteristics of each frame. This analysis is used as a further means of identifying if any communication attributes could be found as core facets of each frame.

Israel and Kasper found a structural frame was needed in the initial stages of the change programme “to keep the organisation heading in the right direction” and a “top-down leadership style was the most appropriate.” Bolman and Deal (1997:303) state the most effective structural leadership attributes are as an analyst and architect, and the most ineffective was when acting as a petty tyrant or a rigid bureaucrat. Israel and Kasper (2004:18) then refer to the organisation then moving to a second phase which required a human resources focus. Effective human resource leaders, they state are catalysts, facilitators, “who provide ample time, without competing distractions, for real conversation to occur.” This lessened the chances for surprise, deception and ambiguity to occur in relation to the programme. Bolman and Deal (1997) argue that ineffective human resource leaders are weak, get pushed around and abdicate their responsibilities. Israel and Kasper then point to the change programme moving to another level which

required the use of political skills and this required a further switch to a political frame to handle a number of competing interests.

Careful management of communication with each stakeholder group was needed which required honesty and ethical behaviour when representing each group to the wider organisation. Effective political leadership is based on being an advocate and negotiator (Bolman and Deal, 1997), with manipulation, fraud, and thuggery being characteristics of the ineffectual leader. The Israel and Kasper example ends with the leader having to reframe again, using a symbolic process to celebrate the successful completion of the programme and ensure that all participants had a degree of ownership and were seen take their work into the public arena. Honest communications were also honoured and valued. Bolman and Deal's (1997:303) characteristics of an effective symbolic leader are as a prophet and a source of inspiration. Ineffective leaders in this frame were fanatics and fools and built their processes on smoke and mirrors. This article assisted with further analysis of the Bolman and Deal (1984, 1991) framework and if communication factors were being considered in their assessment of effective leadership.

Case Study- James Hardie Industries CEO

James Hardie Industries was a miner and manufacturer of asbestos products in Australia from 1917 to 1987 (Watson, 2006). It was found that asbestos is one of the causes of the lung disease mesothelioma and increasing quantities of negative publicity about James Hardie Industries and its CEO started to be published in late 2003 for attempts by the organisation to evade responsibility for its asbestos history. This involved the company seeking to wind up its Australian affairs and relocate its head office to the Netherlands, for the purpose, it transpired, to quarantine its financial obligations under Australian law to compensate asbestos victims. The company also created the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation which was to have future responsibility for funding medical claims from asbestos victims.

From a research perspective, past organisational reputation issues such as Herron Pharmaceutical (alleged tampering with tablets), Arnott's (alleged tampering with biscuits) and Ansett Industries (missed maintenance leading to aircraft being grounded by the authorities) were directly linked to the brand and how senior management handled these within a crisis management schema. In the Herron and Arnott's cases, the CEOs very quickly went public and took steps to remove products from the public. For Ansett, the CEO failed to appear before the media to answer to questions about the organisation's response (Watson, 2006). In the James Hardie situation it was apparent the CEOs non communication with media, shareholders, and the community was creating significant negative responses from the New South Wales State Government, Federal Government, all sections of the media, not just the financial specialists, and the wider community.

As a consequence of further research to assess the core attributes of an effective CEO communicator, the literature on framing appeared to offer one methodology for assessing the communication behaviour of the James Hardie Industries CEO. Peter Donald Macdonald commenced as CEO of James Hardie Industries on 31 October, 1999 and resigned in late 2004 following the report of the New South Wales Government's Jackson

Commission (The Special Commission of Inquiry into the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation, September, 2004).

Methodology

A content analysis was chosen as the most appropriate social science method for systematically mapping large bodies of text to find the key concepts identified from the thematic analysis and study of the Bolman and Deal (1984, 1991) framework (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold, 1988). Two sources were identified as most appropriate as they contained substantial records of Peter Macdonald's own words from board papers, internal correspondence, interviews with staff and his own evidence. The transcript of the Report of the Special Commission of Inquiry into the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation, September 2004 was assessed and Haigh's (2005) book *Asbestos House: The secret history of James Hardie Industries*, was also analysed. The content analysis was used to assess the terminology used to describe how the CEO, Peter Donald Macdonald, publicly and communicatively managed a major external issue with key external publics/stakeholders (as one of the key functions of a CEO is to represent the organisation) over the period October 1999 to 2004. "What are the dimensions chosen for analysis? Identify and count the occurrence of specific characteristics or dimensions of texts, and through this to, to be able to say something about the messages, representations of such texts and their wider social significance (Hansen, Cottle, Negrine and Newbold, 1998, p95). Based on the research described above, the characteristics which were singled out for analysis related directly to the overall research questions that prompted the choice of content analysis in the first place

The concepts extracted from the thematic analysis were listed with the descriptions used by Bolman and Deal (1997) to describe effective and ineffective leadership characteristics. Table One lists those concepts identified from the thematic analysis and the Bolman and Deal (1997, 1991) framework.

TABLE ONE:

In table form the words included in the analysis, their source, and antonyms were:

Concept	Source	Antonym
Dialogue	Thematic analysis	Closed/uncommunicative
Listening	Thematic analysis	Shun/neglect
Honest	Thematic analysis	Dishonest/deceptive/manipulative
Open	Thematic analysis	Closed
Trust	Thematic analysis	Distrust
Visionary/prophet	Thematic analysis/Bolman & Deal	Realist
Relationship management	Thematic analysis	Defensive/closed
Fraud	Bolman & Deal	Truth/honest/integrity
Petty/trivial	Bolman & Deal	Important
Weak	Bolman & Deal	Strong
Fanatic	Bolman & Deal	Conservative
Architect	Bolman & Deal	Destructive
Catalyst	Bolman & Deal	Obstructive/defensive

These words were then recorded on a spreadsheet and every instance of them being used in both the Commission's findings and the Haigh book was entered.

Content Analysis

The content analysis highlighted the following points:

- There were no references to dialogue (in either the thematic analysis or the content analysis) but there were 11 references to “closed” communication behaviour, such as “resisted communication attempts,” Commission (2004: 482); “very insular” Haigh (2006:281); “he had a flair for secrecy”, Haigh (2005:208); “oyster-like on matters of corporate deliberation” Haigh (2005:345) and “ no communication with Medical Research and Compensation Foundation for now,” Commission (2004:519).
- There were no references to listening or trust as identified in the thematic analysis. But the content analysis identified seven instances of behaviours which could be labelled as obfuscatory and five which were ambiguous. Neither of these are conducive to effective communication (Mohan et al,2004)
- There were 11 references to dishonest behaviour, and 11 separate references to deceptive behaviour. Examples were, “breached their duties as officers of JHI,” Commission (2004:420); “false in material particulars and materially misleading” Haigh (2006:363).
- There were three references to weak behaviours and none to strong or leadership characteristics.
- In respect to relationship management, the only reference is a negative one in Haigh’s (2006:328) book where the author states that Macdonald was “oblivious to the potentialities of public opinion.”

Conclusions

All the Bolman and Deal (1997) references to effective and ineffective leadership from which the terms fraud, petty, weak, fanatic, architect and catalyst were drawn appear to suggest that communicative behaviours are not deemed to be very relevant to reframing effective leadership. Based on this analysis of the literature and Bolman and Deal’s framework, it is posited that a new framework for measuring effective CEO communicative behaviour is required. The dimensions need to account for factors such as apathy, insularity, obfuscation (seven references), defensiveness (six references) and ambiguity (six references). On the positive axis, concepts such as dialogue, listening, honesty, openness, trust and relationship management are primary variable by which effective CEO communicators can be identified.

Taking the Bolman and Deal (1997) framework on page 303, it is suggested that an extra frame be considered, that of communication. Under effective leadership would be listed attributes of ‘dialogic, listener’, and listed under leadership process would be behaviours of ‘honesty, openness and trust.’ Under ineffective leadership, the descriptor would be ‘insular’ and the leadership processes, ‘defensive, dishonest and obfuscatory.’

It is apparent from this analysis the James Hardie CEO had not been aware of the negative consequences of the following actions:

- agreeing to a media release which the Commission found was untrue (dishonest);
- tried to hide the real reasons for taking the company offshore and escape liability for future asbestos claims (deceptive);

- being uncommunicative with the Medical Research and Compensation Foundation which was created by James Hardie Industries to fund future Australian asbestos victims (closed).

His personal reputation and that of the organisation would not have been subjected to a New South Wales State Government review, investigation of the Australian Securities and Investment Commission for possible jail able offences (Higgins, 2005) and intense negative media commentary.

Future research in this field will be based on a matrix of effective behaviours (as drawn from the thematic analysis such as truthfulness, open communication, trusting and participative). It is planned to interview a series of Australian CEO's to test how these attributes contribute to their communicative and organisational effectiveness.

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