Using Positive Communication to Empower and Develop People

by Todd A. Phillipy

The very soul of leadership is a leader’s commitment to growing and developing people. This is accomplished when leaders, acting as servants, use their words to convey faith, hope and love to their followers. Conversely, when leaders communicate fear, hostility, jealousy and doubt to people, the confidence, morale and productivity of followers plummet. The Bible explains the power of communication this way, “Death and life are in the power of the tongue. And those who love it will eat its fruit” (Proverbs 18:21). Leaders can use their words to build people up or tear them down. This article offers practical steps and suggestions for leaders who are passionate about bringing out the best in their people.

Understanding the Power of Communication

Words are an interesting force. People use them to express themselves through music, speeches, arguments, songs, poems and conversations. Communication can be people’s greatest friend or hated foe. Our words get us into trouble, but at times our words can get us out of trouble. James, the brother of Jesus, explains communication in this way, “With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring?” (James 3:9-11). Leaders must learn how to use communication to strengthen and develop people, not to curse and tear them down.

Leadership is the ability to inspire vision, strength and influence into people through the usage of positive communication (Dannhauser, Patterson & Stone, 2007). According to this definition of
leadership, positive communication is essential to leaders who are attempting to empower and develop people.

**People Long for Acceptance, Attention and Appreciation**

There are many basic needs people need to survive, like water, oxygen and food. In the workplace, people need acceptance, attention and appreciation from their leaders. Followers want to feel important and valued by those they are following and serving. Countless leaders in all spheres of society fail to grasp this law of life and leadership. Consequently, they go about their business, barking out orders, worshiping the bottom line, and motivating their followers with either the carrot or the stick. Here are some ideas on how you can communicate acceptance, attention and appreciation to your people:

1. **Communicate approval**
   A basic need amongst all people is the desire to be accepted by their equals and superiors. The Acquired Needs Theory asserts human beings are innately born with the need for affiliation and to form close relationships with others, especially their leaders (Daft, 2002). It is imperative that leaders recognize this truth and respond to it accordingly by communicating approval and acceptance to their people. This will result in empowered followers who know their leaders believe in them. Leaders must be intentional about their communication and their communication should make their followers feel important and approved. When followers do an excellent job on a task, do not let it go unnoticed. Followers long for their leader's approval, so give approval at every opportunity (Wren, 2005).

2. **Communicate attention**
   People love to be noticed and receive recognition. One of the best ways to motivate followers is through giving extrinsic rewards like public praise, awards and promotions (Cummings & Worley, 2004). When people do things right, let them know you care and proclaim it from the rooftop. Giving people attention is not only an effective way to empower and develop people, it is also one of the most affordable approaches a leader can take. Giving people attention and recognition costs a leader nothing, but followers most assuredly crave it. Make it your personal mission to take the spotlight off yourself and place
it onto your people. Give them attention and communicate to them how much they mean to you and to the success and sustainability of the organization.

3. Communicate appreciation

Countless followers lose motivation and morale when their hard work, long hours and costly contributions are overlooked by their leaders. When leaders intentionally set aside time to tell their people how much they appreciate them and their work, their spirits will be lifted rather than quenched. See your followers as partners, not inferior subordinates. Communication is contingent upon the leader’s perspective and respect for his or her followers (Hackman & Johnson, 2004). Remember that a leader’s success will always be partly measured by the growth and development of their people. As a result, set out to be a positive communicator who is continually giving thanks and appreciation to your people.

Critiquing Your Own Communication Style

The first step to becoming a more effective communicator is having the courage and humility to critique yourself. Are you more inclined to praise or condemn your followers? Do you communicate faith and confidence to your people or fear and doubt? When people make mistakes and fail, do you respond with an iron fist or do you roll up your servant sleeves and gently restore them? Whether you are a novice, mediocre or excellent communicator, you can improve and develop. Do not fear change, but embrace it. Look deep within yourself and figure out how you can improve your communication style and be a leader who effectively empowers and develops people through positive communication.

Be Quick to Praise, Slow to Condemn

The worst and most ineffective things a leader can do is condemn and criticize followers when they make mistakes. Dale Carnegie puts it this way, “Instead of condemning people, let’s try to understand them. Let’s try to figure out why they do what they do. That is a lot more profitable and intriguing than criticism; and it breeds sympathy, tolerance and kindness” (Carnegie, 1981). Though it is not always easy to do, leaders should train themselves to respond to their people in a positive and uplifting manner. Negativity only produces more negative energy. Leaders should always strive to communicate kindness and love towards their people, not anger and hostility. King Solomon wrote, “Some people make cutting remarks, but the words of the wise bring healing"
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(Proverbs 12:18). Too often, leaders react out of emotions and say hurtful things to their followers, resulting in the confidence of their people being crushed. Leaders should rather practice the virtues of mercy, grace and forgiveness, which will enable them to exercise self-control and communicate praise, not judgment. In short, let your people know how much you care for them and take every chance you can to praise them for their accomplishments and victories. Positive reinforcement is vital when leading and developing people. When people are rewarded for excellent work, they will be more likely to repeat it (Daft, 2002).

Communicate Faith to Your People, Not Fear

Great leaders know how to empower and develop their followers. That is what leadership is all about. Leaders must have the foresight and ability to see the potential within people and then cultivate it into measurable growth and development. To do this, leaders must have faith in their followers, believing that every follower under their care has the capacity to grow and flourish. The author of Hebrews puts it this way, “Faith is the confidence that what we hope for will actually happen; it gives us assurance about things we cannot see” (11:1). Leaders must communicate faith to their people, not fear. Fear paralyzes people while faith moves people to action and infuses them with courage and hope. Great leaders like William Wilberforce, Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King Jr. were able to usher in some of the greatest movements in history because they possessed an ability to inspire faith and hope into the hearts of their followers. Adversely, tyrannous leaders like Joseph Stalin, Adolph Hitler and Saddam Hussein led by fear rather than faith. These dictators used coercive power and control to handle people rather than using faith to empower and develop those under their leadership (Christman, 2007). Let your people know that you believe in them and see greatness within them. When people know their leaders trust them, their motivation and productivity will skyrocket. They are also more likely to believe in themselves, when you believe in them.

Restore Your People Gently

When followers make mistakes, which they most assuredly will, purposely restore them with kindness and love. Servant leaders who use positive communication understand the importance of empathy and seeking to understand their people, especially when their follower’s spirits are low. Robert Greenleaf (1977) beautifully writes, “People grow taller when those who lead them
empathize and when they are accepted for what they are, even though their performance may be judged critically in terms of what they are capable of doing. Leaders who emphasize and who fully accept those who go with them on this basis are more likely to be trusted” (p. 35). Great communicators know how to empathize with those with whom they are communicating. Empathy is about placing oneself in somebody else’s shoes and feeling their feelings. Stephen Covey’s Fifth Habit is “Seek first to understand, then to be understood” (Hackman & Johnson, 2004). This means leaders should suspend their judgment, practice mercy and forgiveness, and then proceed to restore and empower their followers with grace and gentleness, not anger and resentment.

Galatians 6:1 says, “Live creatively, friends. If someone falls into sin, forgivingly restore him, saving your critical comments for yourself. You might be needing forgiveness before the day is out. Stoop down and reach out …” Notice how it says, “save your critical comments for yourself.” Leaders must intentionally do this as it does not come naturally. Some people are more negative than others by nature and, as a result, must take a more aggressive approach to their negative communication style. Learn to bite your tongue when you want to say something negative. Take time to reflect and search your feelings to see why you communicate in anger rather than in love.

**Conclusion**

Words are powerful and they can be a leader’s greatest friend or foe. Wise leaders will find a way to use their words to their advantage. Great leaders will use their communication as a tool to empower and develop their followers. Leadership is all about the people, not the leader. Leaders must understand the importance of using their words to build up, strengthen and develop their followers into whole people. Leaders will be much more likely to empower and develop their followers by 1) being quick to praise, slow to judge, 2) seeking first to understand, then to be understood, 3) leading by faith, not by fear and 4) restoring people gently through positive communication.

**About the Author**

Todd Phillipy is completing his master’s degree in organizational leadership at Regent University. His research primarily focuses on biblical studies, servant leadership theory and human development and performance.

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References


