

Super Powers

Smart and Fast Steps for Improving Your Executive Communication in 2016

By David Grossman, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA

As a kid, I loved superheroes. Being the good guy and making a difference were always important to me. And I desperately wanted to have my own superpower. As I grew up, the realization settled in — painful as it was — that a superhero's life was not in the cards. Instead, I settled on finding my own heroes, in real life, and learning from them. As I developed my career as an executive coach and leadership communications strategist, I gravitated toward leaders who clearly wanted to use their talents — their “superpowers” — for good, making a real mark on the lives of everyone around them.

I took what I learned from those courageous leaders as the foundation for my business, and I have since advised hundreds of CEOs and leaders at all stages of their careers on how to be even more effective. I've also worked with many communications leaders, helping them to better support their leadership and successfully navigate their own careers.

The message to all my clients is simple: Communicating effectively gives you tremendous power to transform your company and your team, not to mention your relationships and your life. In a sense, it's like having a superpower.

Here are some of the strategies I consider most important to improving your communication in 2016:

- **Realize that everyone needs to lead.** It's easy to shy away from leadership responsibility by turning to any number of excuses. Someone above you needs to make the final call. You don't manage people; you're an individual contributor. Yet whether you are leading your own communications team or guiding your CEO on communications strategy (or both), it's critical to embrace the idea that “leading” isn't just about managing others. Instead, it's about leading no matter what. Organizations need everyone to lead. And that means working on your skills so you're ready to lead in the most helpful way possible when you have the opportunity. Today, you are a leader because of your actions, not your title.

- **Find your true, authentic voice as a leader, and help the leaders you work for do the same.** As communicators, it can sometimes be tempting to nudge our leaders toward a communications or

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leadership style that we appreciate or that they think is best for them. Maybe we want the leader to be that amazing motivational speaker who delivers killer presentations at the sales conference, or the CEO whose classic, outgoing style has everyone circling around him or her. Yet more than ever, I see leaders trying to be someone else instead of finding their authentic voice, one that allows them to be true to themselves, act in concert with their values and to do so in a genuine way that's focused on others. When you add the headlines in today's slow-growth global economy that reveal leadership lapses in judgment, massive layoffs and cost-reduction efforts, the need for authenticity that's courageous and compassionate has never been greater. Finding a way to talk about, deal with and thrive in today's workplace, given all the

change and tough conversations, requires a different kind of leader — one who's authentic. We can all “try on” strategies that work for others. Yet in the end, leading authentically is about finding what works best for the individual leader. When the leader is genuine, the leader has “full power,” which is what the Greek root of authentic — *authentico* — truly means.

- **Take time to create understanding.** Real conversations are becoming extinct in many organizations today. We take 30 minutes to write five confusing back-and-forth emails, but we won't take three minutes to pick up the phone for a simple conversation. Don't fall into this trap, and help the leaders you support to avoid it as well. We all need to recognize what real two-way communication is and what it takes. The goal is always shared understanding and meaning, and that requires active listening.

- **Show employees you care about them and their perspective.** Increasingly, great leaders recognize that transformative leadership isn't about telling people what to do. It's about equipping and empowering teams to make smart decisions together, respecting the collective brainpower of the group. So how do you get employees to feel significant? Employees are eager to feel a sense of purpose around their work, that they're part of something larger than they are. You can accomplish this by showing employees you care and by getting to know your team better. What are they passionate about? What are the little things that matter to them? By engaging with team members and employees, you can boost morale, engagement and excitement.

- **Clarify each employee's role.** Too often, leaders assume employees fully understand their role and how their work contributes to the company's overall success. Yet if you ask the average employee, they often can't answer those questions. The employees truly don't know where they fit in and why they matter. Leaders at every level of an organization have an important and specific role to help employees connect the dots between the big business picture and what it means to them. This applies to your own communications team as well as the entire organization. When all employees understand their role, they can articulate it and then pinpoint how they are helping drive business results.

- **Take five steps to communicate well.** As we all know, when it comes to communication, things are often thrown together at the last minute. Or worse, there's an overconfidence that “we've got it.” Yet when leaders at all levels “wing it,” it becomes more difficult to handle objections and tough situations. And it becomes a lot harder to clean up. Being more purposeful in your communications can take as little as five minutes. I call it “take five” to communicate well. In a nutshell, here are the steps:

- Start with the outcome. What do you want to accomplish?
- Who's the audience? Where are they coming from and what do you want them to think, feel and do?
- What are the messages that will move the audience to action?
- What are the best tactics for delivering that message? Face-to-face, one-on-one, through email or another way?
- How will you measure the results and know if you're successful?

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- **Tell stories to motivate your teams.** Sometimes leaders dismiss stories because they feel too soft or off-topic. However, a growing body of research proves that simply communicating facts won't accomplish the leader's most important goal of moving people to action. Help your leader realize the critical reality that facts inform, but they don't inspire. Neuroscientists and cognitive psychologists teach us that tapping people's emotions through storytelling allows us to command an audience's attention. For instance, the renowned cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner's research shows that a fact wrapped in a story is 22 times more memorable. In other words, stories rule!

- **Have calmer and more courageous conversations.** I firmly believe that we have more courage inside each of us than we may think, and how powerful would it be to tap some of that — for our benefit and the benefit of others. So have more of the tough conversations. Many of us have important things that remain unsaid — conversations that would be invaluable to have. Addressing issues upfront is the only way to keep everyday speed bumps from mushrooming into larger problems. Tell people what they need to hear — not what they want to hear. It's often through tough conversations that we build relationships and cement bonds. These courageous conversations should also include asking for what you need to succeed. When a deadline is unrealistic, do you ask for time to do quality work? When you're missing background information for a project, do you politely insist on a briefing before you begin work? It might be easier to remain silent, but being assertive shows that you respect yourself and others.

- **Consider how best to communicate.** An important first step to bringing order and civility to communication is to recognize an overreliance on email in business today. All too often, we use email to hide. One key to correcting that problem is to always keep in mind that email is never a substitute for a conversation, even if it's a quick one. It's also smart to think about the outcome. What are you (or the leader you support) trying to accomplish? Would a different action other than email get you to the outcome faster or more efficiently? Would a five-minute phone call or face-to-face discussion allow you to accelerate the project further and faster?

- **Have a plan for how you're going to communicate, and practice it.** Communication done well can be tough. But how can you increase the chances that you'll be effective and get what you want? To get good at anything — whether it's in sports, business or parenting — you need to work at it. Even the most successful talents, such as Michael Jordan and Bill Gates, became so because they worked at it. As long as you keep working at it, you can transform the way you communicate — and you'll be a stronger, more respected leader because of it. You may even discover your own superpower! ■



David Grossman, ABC, APR, Fellow PRSA, is CEO of the Grossman Group. He recently launched his third book, “No Cape Needed: The Simplest, Smartest, Fastest Steps to Improve How You Communicate by Leaps and Bounds.”