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Master of Arts in Leadership

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION SKILLS: ROLE IN THE
INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL VISION, STRATEGY AND
CULTURE

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirement for the degree of
Master of Arts in Leadership

AUGSBURG COLLEGE
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MASTER OF ARTS IN LEADERSHIP
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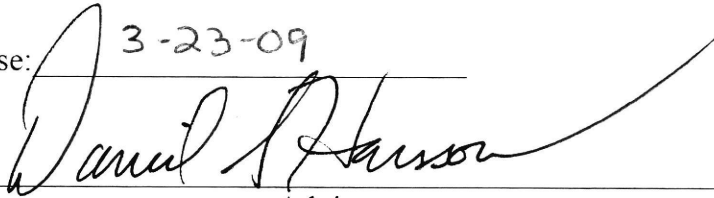
LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION SKILLS: ROLE IN THE
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ABSTRACT

LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION SKILLS: ROLE IN THE
INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ORGANIZATIONAL VISION, STRATEGY AND
CULTURE

PAMELA A. PETER

MARCH, 2009

____ Thesis

____ Leadership Application Project

____ Non-thesis (ML597) Project

There is a generally accepted expectation that leaders should play a significant role in integrating an organization's vision statement and strategic direction with its culture.

Depending upon the organization the author of the vision statement could be the owner, the board of directors or CEO, or other senior leaders or consultants. In any case, because the vision statement is typically disseminated top down, the distance from the statement's author to those who actually do the work is great. This can be especially true in large organizations with hierarchical structures. To bridge that gap, senior leaders depend upon leaders at the front-line to carry the message. This study addresses the relationship between a front-line leader's communication skills and practices and the integration of vision, culture and strategy into employee perceptions. Two executive level

leaders from one business line within an organization, along with five staff employees from the same business line participated in phenomenological interviews. Results provide empirical support that employees view vision, culture and strategy from the perspective of their work and the everyday interactions with their leader. The study also provides some evidence that frontline leader's communication skills affect the perception of vision, strategy and culture.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

The intent of this study was to explore the role of a leader's communication skills, specifically rhetorical and interpersonal skills, in the effort to build a shared vision that drives business strategies and organizational culture. The specific focus of the paper was to discern whether the communication skills and practices of "frontline leaders" play a role in the success or failure of this effort. What I discovered was: 1) a leader's communication skills are difficult to assess from the perspective of employees, 2) employees perceive their world, including the concepts of vision, strategy & culture, from the perspective of their everyday interaction with work and the people they work with, and 3) the nature of the relationship, especially the level of trust, between frontline workers and their leader is contingent upon the frequency of communication, communication style and listening skills.

Context

The concept of leadership encompasses a wide array of distinctive skills. This section will focus on communication skills and relationship building as fundamental to effective leadership.

Leadership

There are many variations of the definition of leadership. Locke (1999) puts it simply: “Leadership is the process of inducing others to take action toward a common goal” (p. 2). James MacGregor Burns (1978) wrote, “I define leadership as leaders inducing followers to act for certain goals that represent the values and motivations--the wants and needs, the aspirations and expectations--of *both leaders and followers*” (p. 19). Embedded in these, and other definitions of leadership, is the assumption that skilled rhetorical and interpersonal skills are necessary for effective interaction between a leader and his or her employees. Interpersonal skills are used when we are attempting to establish or maintain relationships. A skilled communicator has the talent to build relationships that further leadership development. Relationship building and communication are the flip sides of the leadership coin. Leadership by definition requires the participation of another person, just as do relationships and communication. Shortcomings in interpersonal and rhetorical skills can lead to ineffective relationship building, communication, and leadership.

If leaders are to affect behavior, they must be both persuasive and motivational. This is especially true when leaders are called upon to unite employees in the pursuit of a shared vision. Leadership theories, in particular transformational leadership theory and its successors, agree that effective leaders build relationships with their employees and persuade rather than demand employees to action (Hickman & Silva, 1984; Locke, 1999; Nanus & Bennis, 1985; Bass, 1985). For example, Nanus and Bennis (1985) noted, “A vision cannot be established in an organization by edict, or by the exercise of power or coercion. It is more an act of persuasion, of creating an enthusiastic and dedicated

commitment to a vision because it is right for the times, right for the organization, and right for the people who are working in it” (p. 107). In other words, leaders use their rhetorical skills in conjunction with interpersonal skills to encourage employees to take action on their own. Leadership then, is more than management and oversight.

Management vs. Leadership

Today, the terms “management” and “leadership” have two very distinct but complementary definitions. “According to the current wisdom, managers are principally administrators--they write business plans, set budgets, and monitor progress. Leaders on the other hand, get organizations and people to change” (Macoby, 2000, p. 57).

Management is concerned with practices and procedures and bringing order and consistency to the production of products or the delivery of services. By contrast leadership is about motivation and inspiration. “Motivation and inspiration energize people, not by pushing them in the right direction as control mechanisms do but by satisfying basic human needs for achievement, a sense of belonging, recognition, self-esteem, a feeling of control over one’s life, and the ability to live up to one’s ideals. Once companies understand the fundamental difference between leadership and management, they can begin to groom their top people to provide both” (Kotter, 1990, p. 144).

Because the nature of leadership and management is distinctly different from one another it is natural that each requires a different method of communication to be effective.

Communication in Organizations

An Academy of Management/*Training* magazine survey finds that of all leadership skills, communication is of most value to organizations (Delahoussaye, 2001a, 2001b). “Unfortunately, the survey also found that, of all required leadership skills, communication showed the largest gap between importance to the organization and current competency” (Campbell, White & Johnson, 2003, p. 171).

Today’s modern organization has available many options for communication. Advances in technology have increased the ability of organizations to reach more employees more often. The use of electronic media such as email, voice mail and company intranet sites provide organizations the opportunity to communicate the same message to an unlimited number of employees simultaneously with little cost and little effort. All employees can be given the same message at almost the same time without the need to deploy employees to a centralized location. Another benefit is the ability to retain electronic communication for long periods of time or even indefinitely. Employees have the option of reviewing communications at any point in time. One weakness of course, is the inclination of employees to delay reading or listening to a communication sent by electronic media. Or, as can often be the case, the employee may ignore the communication entirely. Another weakness is the lack of face-to-face interaction, a prerequisite to effective interpersonal communication. Edward Hallowell (1999) calls face-to-face interaction the “human moment.” Effective communication, as it relates to leadership, requires “the human moment: an authentic psychological encounter that can happen only when two people share the same physical space. The human moment has two prerequisites: people’s physical presence and their emotional and intellectual

attention” (Hallowell, 1999, p. 59). Hallowell laments the over-use of electronic communication methods and the disappearing human moment in today’s organization. His concern is considerably relevant when leaders are called upon to influence corporate culture through the use of vision and strategy.

Nevertheless, efficiency and low cost are enticing, and dependency upon electronic methods of communication is the norm in large organizations. However, company leaders are not unaware of the shortcomings of electronic communication methods. The trend over the last decade, to redefine the role of a manager to that of a leader, is an indication of the broader expectations the organization has of frontline or middle managers. “Leadership is essential, (...) if you want to move an organization in a new direction or to a higher level of performance. Leaders are accountable for producing such changes and for keeping their organization moving forward” (Zenger, Ulrich and Smallwood, 2000, p. 26-27). Maintaining the status quo does not work in an environment of constant change; the environment many organizations find themselves in today.

Electronic communication is an effective method for management functions such as planning and budgeting, staffing, procedural controls and problem solving. Leadership functions are much more complex as they involve the humanistic aspects of the organization. The definition of the term “humanistic” as intended in the context of this paper is similar with what Edgar Schein (1985) has identified as values; one of three elements of organizational culture. Values represent the goals, ideals, norms, principles and standards as proposed by the leaders of the organization and are intended to align employees in the pursuit of the vision statement. Peter Senge (1990) uses the term “alignment” to describe a commonality of direction among individuals or employees.

Employees who are aligned work as a team and develop a shared vision. The process of aligning as described by Senge (1990) involves mastering the practices of dialogue and discussion. To align employees with the vision of the organization, leaders need to be comfortable with face-to-face interactions and exercise strong interpersonal and rhetorical communication skills.

Interpersonal Communication Skills

Interpersonal communication involves the building of relationships and refers to face-to-face interactions. Leaders develop good healthy relationships when they are motivated by a real desire to connect with people and are sensitive to the needs of their employees. “Whether you are a manager, a supervisor, a secretary, or a line worker, you can affect the success of your organization by the quality of the relationships you share with others in the organization” (Hamilton, Parker, Smith, 1982, p. 96).

Daniel Goleman (1995) refers to the degree to which a person is skillful interpersonally as the “emotional intelligence quotient (EQ).” Individuals scoring high in emotional intelligence are self-aware; they manage their emotions, motivate themselves, recognize emotions in others and create positive relationships. In addition, they exude enthusiasm, confidence and a zeal for life (Goleman, 1995). The power of emotional intelligence is seen expressed in the relationship between a leader and his or her employee. Often, after an extended period of time, high EQ among the leaders of an organization will inspire a desire by employees to become more like the leaders with whom they have built a positive relationship. They begin to share the same aspirations and commitment; that is to say, the same vision, a shared vision. A truly shared vision as

defined by Peter Senge (1990) is when two or more people have a similar picture and are committed to one another having it, not just individually having it. Shared visions begin with a personal vision and an individual's deep caring for the vision. When an individual cares deeply about a vision, they are compelled to share it.

Leaders who have a sense of vision need to communicate it in such a way that others are encouraged to share their visions. "This is the art of visionary leadership – how shared visions are built from personal visions" (Senge, 1990, p. 212-213).

Rhetoric

Persuasion is defined in a variety of ways but is commonly understood as an act of moving people to action by using communication to change the attitudes, beliefs, or points of view of another person. When leaders use persuasion in an attempt to affect their employees' behavior they are using an ancient form of discourse called rhetoric. Rhetoric can be traced to the Greeks. The Greek philosopher Aristotle laid the foundation for the art of persuasion with concepts of credibility (ethos), emotional appeal (pathos), and logical appeal (logos) (Littlejohn, 1978). He asserted that effective rhetorical persuasion required the use of all three concepts. Aristotle emphasized too, that persuasion is most effective when based on common ground existing between the persuader and persuadee.

Persuasion is important in describing effective leadership. However, it is crucial to recognize the importance of relationship building skills to the art of effective persuasion (Campbell, White & Johnson, 2003). This is particularly true with the employee and leader relationship. Credibility and emotional and logical appeals appear

hollow if an employee feels disconnected from his or her leader. As with any relationship, trust will continue to grow and deepen when both parties begin to share their knowledge and experiences. Narratives and anecdotes, testimony, analogy, comparison and contrast are all effective persuasive techniques when interwoven with appeals to emotion and reason.

The Vision Statement

It is rare today to find a publicly held organization without a vision statement. Writing a vision statement is often considered the first step to strategic planning. It is perceived as so essential that organizations often pay tens of thousands of dollars to consultants for assistance in writing a vision statement. Doing so is not without merit. A vision statement should unite the organization in a common quest and be one worthy of following. Without a vision of the future, planning would be chaotic at best and a worthless endeavor at its worst. But often times, the writing of the vision statement becomes the goal in itself and once created all attention given to the vision statement has vanished. "(...) such a vision is a 'one-shot' vision, a single effort at providing overarching direction and meaning to the firm's strategy. Once written, management assumes that they have now discharged their visionary duties" (Senge, 1990, p. 213). In other cases, the vision statement is "rolled out" to the organization via some sort of communication campaign. These campaigns vary in size and method but all have the same purpose in mind: to make the vision statement known to all employees. Again, as a one-shot effort, enthusiasm dies off shortly thereafter. Here leaders are presented with two challenges. The first challenge is not only in announcing the vision, but also in

communicating the vision in such a way that is meaningful and can be shared by all individuals in the organization. The second challenge is in creating a culture that promotes open discussion and the sharing of opinion. Employees are more likely to make the vision their own when given the opportunity to ask questions and share experiences.

Leaders will need to be prepared to devote face-to-face time with employees. They must also be prepared to articulate the vision into an easy-to-grasp philosophy that motivates employees to embrace the vision. Whether or not leaders choose to respond to these challenges will determine the extent to which the vision becomes a shared vision.

Vision, Strategy and Culture

While it is possible for an organization to focus communication efforts on vision, culture, and strategy independently, it is nearly impossible to independently affect change to each concept. Vision, culture and strategy are highly related aspects of organizational life. Together they provide direction and purpose to an organization. Hickman and Silva (1984) describe the symbiotic relationship of strategy, culture and vision: “To unite strategy with culture you first need to develop a vision of the firm’s future and then in order to implement strategy for making that vision a reality, you need to nurture the corporate culture that is motivated by and dedicated to the vision” (p. 25). They argue that vision becomes reality when leaders build a culture that is dedicated to the vision. Schein (1985) has said that creating and managing culture is the only thing of real importance that leaders do. All leaders are familiar with culture at some level. They know that it is real and has impact, but asked to define what culture is and what it does most will find it difficult to put into words.

The concept of culture is abstract and often used when referring to anything having to do with the beliefs, norms, and ideology of an organization (Schein, 2004). In Schein's model these represent only one element of organizational culture: values. Schein identifies three levels of culture: artifacts, values and underlying assumptions (p. 26). Artifacts represent the first level. These Schein describes as the visible organizational structures and processes. Examples would include the degree of formality, status symbols and rituals, working hours, dress code and punctuality (p. 25-27). The second level is values. Values represent the strategies, goals and philosophies of the organization. But Schein believes these values are likely to be "espoused values;" values advocated by senior leaders, their sense of "what ought to be," but not necessarily the organizations "underlying assumptions" which represent "what is," (p. 28-29). Underlying assumptions are the third level and what Schein calls the "essence" of culture (p. 30-39).

The underlying assumptions and beliefs are the accumulated learning that an organization has acquired throughout its history (Schein, 2004). An important element of Schein's definition is that the assumptions and beliefs are shared but are largely unconscious and taken for granted. What Schein calls underlying or basic assumptions are the implicit assumptions that actually guide behavior; that tell group members how to perceive, think about, and feel about things. For example, how do people interact with one another, how are decisions made, how is information shared, etc. But what is most important to an organization is that assumptions and beliefs evolve and can be changed if one understands what culture is and how culture is created.

Within any organization there is an overall culture and the possibility of different and often times competing cultures within subgroups and/or business units. The founder

or senior leaders of an organization have their vision of what the culture ought to be. The challenge is how to embed the espoused values into the thinking, feeling and behavior of the organization (Schein, 2004). In large multi-layered organizations, the challenge extends to all leaders from the CEO to the frontline.

Schein (2004) defines five primary embedding mechanisms, all of which are a form of communication: (1) what leaders pay attention to, measure, and control; (2) leader reactions to critical incidents and organizational crises; (3) deliberate role modeling, teaching, and coaching by leaders; (4) criteria for allocation of rewards and status; and (5) criteria for recruitment, selection, promotion, and retirement (p. 246). To ensure the culture of the organization supports the goal of the vision statement, the vision statement should be the foundation for each of the embedding mechanisms.

However, in order to make use of the embedding mechanisms leaders need to have the attention of their employees. Schein (2004) believes the simplest explanation of how leaders get their message across is that they do it through charisma. According to Bennis (as cited in Schein, p. 223):

One element of that mysterious quality called charisma is undoubtedly a leader's ability to get across major assumptions and values in a vivid and clear manner. When leadership theorists talk about the importance of the leader's "articulating a vision" for the group, they are talking about this same set of issues (Bennis, 1983).

Schein believes that culture cannot be changed without communication, and how we communicate a message is as important as the message itself.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

In the last two decades there has been a convergence of theoretical perspectives concerning leadership and communication abilities centered on the creation and implementation of a vision (Shamir, House, and Arthur, 1993; Holliday and Coombs, 1994). Findings from studies in charismatic leadership, transformational leadership and visionary leadership show that successful leaders are those who are engaging in their communication style, who share the values and beliefs of their followers and who empower through the creation of vision. It is these three elements that are the focus of the following literature review.

Communicating Vision

Marshall Sashkin (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989) introduced a model of visionary leadership based on the objectives of top-level executives. He focused on the belief that senior leaders would imagine an ideal image of their organization, state the vision, set policies that would put the vision into practice and then engage other leaders in order to create support for the vision.

In 1989, Frances Westley and Henry Mintzberg presented a model of visionary leadership meant to render Sashkin's model more dynamic and less linear. They posit that visionary leadership has continued to be defined as a process that can be broken down into three distinct stages: (1) the envisioning of "an image of a desired future

organizational state” which (2) when effectively articulated and communicated to followers serves (3) to empower those followers so that they can enact the vision (Westley & Mintzberg, 1989, p. 17-18). However, they further speculate that in the process of defining visionary leadership as linear, the “emotional resonance” is lost. They propose an alternative image of visionary leadership, one likened to that of a drama. The analogy works well and it provides a perspective that presents an image of a leader, not as the director, but as part of a cast of characters all playing a role in the process of integrating vision into an organization.

By applying three elements of stage production--rehearsal, performance and attendance of the audience to that of visionary leadership--they propose that action, communication and understanding occur simultaneously. In Westley and Mintzberg’s model, the term “rehearsal” is replaced by “repetition,” “performance” by “representation” and “attendance” by “assistance.”

Repetition is the act of developing an “intimacy with the subject at hand” (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). As with actors who rehearse and practice, leaders develop skill through education and experience and know the elements of their business thoroughly. For example, “Lee Iacocca ‘grew up’ in the auto industry. When he left Ford he went to Chrysler because cars were ‘in his blood’” (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 19). The rehearsal analogy illustrates an important element of effecting change in an organization. A frontline leader cannot effect change by simply mimicking the actions or repeating the words of senior leaders. Those capable of inspiring employees to share the vision, culture and strategy of their organization can do so because they believe in what they are doing and it is the essence of who they are.

Representation is the vision itself. The vision not just as a statement but also as it is articulated and communicated, in words and in actions (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989). In this model the use of language is a key factor in successful communication. There are many linguistic devices that leaders can draw on to increase the chance of successful communication. Westley and Mintzberg (1989) offer Winston Churchill and Martin Luther King as good examples of the skillful use of metaphor and imagery to provoke identification and emotional commitment among their listeners.

In their analogy between drama and visionary leadership, Westley and Mintzberg (1989) replace the concept of audience to that of assistance. The distinction is significant in that the term “assistance” implies a less passive role of the audience or listener. Like in a theater performance, they say “...a strategy is made into vision by a two-way current. It cannot happen alone, it needs assistance” (p. 21). And they go on to say, “Vision comes alive only when it is shared” (p. 21). Peter Senge (1990) also holds the view of active participation in the creation of a shared vision. Senge (1990) says:

Visions spread because of a reinforcing process of increasing clarity, enthusiasm, communication and commitment. As people talk, the vision grows clearer. As it gets clearer, enthusiasm for its benefits builds. And soon, the vision starts to spread in a reinforcing spiral of communication and excitement. (p. 227)

Westley and Mintzberg’s model draws attention to three elements of visionary leadership. These elements correspond neatly to Aristotle’s model of persuasion. Leaders who have the ability to create a shared vision within an organization are able to do so because of their commitment and passion to their

industry (ethos); it is “in their blood,” thus their knowledge and experience gives way to logic and credibility (logos). Also, they use language and linguistic devices in such a way as to inspire commitment and emotion, (pathos). And they do so through collaboration and sharing, (common ground).

Like Westley and Mintzberg, Conger (1990) believes there is a critical link between vision and a leader’s ability to communicate it. He says, “The era of managing by dictate is ending and is being replaced by an era of managing by inspiration. Foremost among the new leadership skills demanded of this era will be the ability to craft and articulate a message that is highly motivational” (Conger, 1990, p. 31). He calls this the “language of leadership.” Conger is concerned that few leaders today possess such skills but is encouraged by his belief that these are skills that can be learned and must be as they are critical to transformational leadership.

In Conger’s view, the language of leadership can be broken into two distinct skill categories: framing, the process of defining the purpose of the organization in a meaningful way and the leader’s ability to use symbolic language to give emotional power to his or her message.

Leaders can describe the vision of their organization from a multitude of perspectives. How they “frame” the organization’s vision determines the route to action. A vision delivered in the context of quantitative measures will likely encourage employees to base success on the “bottom line.” This is a narrow shortsighted view that does not prepare the organization for long-term success. Effective framing appeals to the values and beliefs of the organizations members.

“Core values and beliefs are the organization’s basic precepts about what is important in both business and life” (Collins and Porras, 1991, p. 35).

Like Westley and Mintzberg, Conger encourages the use of rhetorical devices to heighten motivational appeal. In addition to the use of metaphor and analogy to appeal to emotions, stories can convey the values and behaviors that are important to the organization. He points to the field of speech communication where research shows that these devices trigger the listener into a state of active thinking. This aligns with Westley and Mintzberg’s view that active participation of the leader and follower, actor and audience, is required to create a shared vision. Still, Conger’s analysis focuses primarily on linguistic techniques and the spoken word and less on delivery.

Studies in the area of charismatic leadership offer further insight into the consequence of content and delivery on vision communication and integration.

Recall again the three stages of visionary leadership as regarded by Sashkin: (1) creating vision, “an image of a possible and desirable state of the organization” (Bennis & Nanus, 1985), (2) communicating vision, the leader effectively articulates the vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985) and (3) moving followers toward the fulfillment of the vision (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

As with visionary or transformational leadership, charismatic leadership focuses on the leader’s creation and implementation of a vision (Holladay & Coombs, 1994). Although there are many leadership attributes that make a charismatic leader, it is the follower’s perception that ultimately determines whether or not a leader is charismatic. “Charismatic leaders are deemed to be

eloquent, use expressive language, communicate in an expressive manner, and use the language of leadership when crafting visions” (Holladay & Coombs, 1994, p. 166). In addition, there is a communicative process that occurs between a charismatic leader and their followers whereby followers perceive themselves to be involved in a significant and worthwhile mission (Holladay & Coombs, 1994). This is an essential element of creating a shared vision. Bennis & Nanus (1985) declare a vision should empower individuals and confer status upon them because they can see themselves as part of a worthwhile enterprise.

The charismatic leadership theory of Holladay & Coombs (1994) focuses on delivery (presentation) as opposed to content, as the way to move followers toward the vision.

In their 1993 study, Holladay and Coombs found that a leader displaying a strong delivery style was perceived as being significantly more charismatic than a leader displaying a weak delivery style. In this study, message content was held constant. In a later study, Holladay and Coombs explored how content and delivery interacted to influence the development of perceptions of charisma.

The latter study was performed using four experimental conditions comprised of delivery: strong or weak, and content: visionary or non-visionary. Strong delivery was characterized by demonstrating good eye contact, effective gestures, showing facial expressiveness and using vocal variety. In contrast, a weak delivery exhibited poor eye contact, occasionally reading from notes, using minimal gestures and facial expressions and minimized vocal variety. Content was tested using characteristics of communication associated with charismatic,

visionary, or transformational leaders (Holladay and Coombs, 1994). The visionary message included: 1) the development of a vision, 2) a strong sense of organizational mission, 3) references to shared values and an optimistic future, and 4) expressions of faith in and respect for subordinates. In addition, the message included rhetorical devices such as metaphor and vivid language. The opposite was true of the non-visionary message. A poorly articulated view of the future, a mission based on profits, a less optimistic view of the future and less faith in subordinates characterized the content of the non-visionary message. However, consistent in both messages, the speaker was portrayed as self-confident and competent to avoid having perceptions of confidence influence the results.

The strongest perceptions of leader charisma were found in the vision content-strong delivery condition. The next strongest perceptions of charisma were found in the non-vision content-strong delivery condition. These results imply that delivery is more important than content to perceptions of charisma. Nevertheless, one should be careful not to assume content is unimportant. Holladay and Coombs suggest that past research by McCroskey may explain their results. McCroskey found that poor delivery distracts listeners from message content (Holladay and Coombs, 1994). "In the present investigation, the vision content-weak delivery condition may have obscured the communication of the vision, thereby blunting the effect of content on perceptions of leader charisma. It seems that good delivery is necessary for content to have its full effect on followers" (p. 180).

Summary

The articles presented each bring a particular point of view to the challenge of vision communication. But one point that seems to emerge from all the articles is that communication is an interactive process between leaders and followers. And the relationship that develops is as important as the communication itself. As Westley and Mintzberg put it: “a strategy is made into a vision by a two-way current – vision comes alive only when it is shared” (Westley and Mintzberg, 1989, p. 21). The articles further suggest that knowledge of the subject, in what context the subject is framed, the use of symbolic language and storytelling are tools for a speaker (leader) to connect with a listener (follower). When a connection occurs a relationship begins. It is within the frame of the relationship that leaders and followers begin to share a vision.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The objective of the study was to discover how vision, culture and strategy are perceived by the frontline employees of a large financial services organization and to determine the impact frontline leaders have on employee perceptions.

Organization

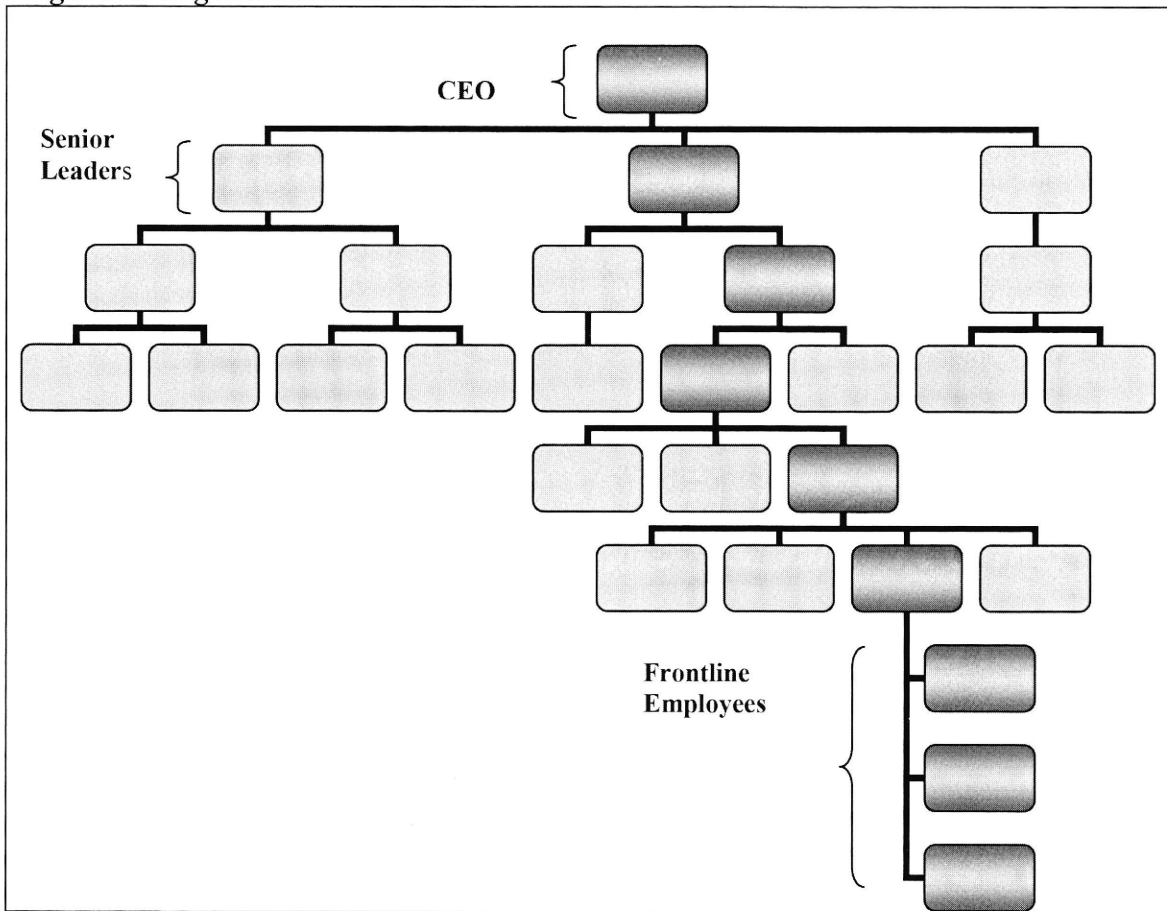
For this study the chosen organization is a regional financial institution specializing in financial advice. The choice of the organization was based on two criteria: 1) the organization must have a formalized vision statement: the vision statement of the organization is “To be the most sought-after financial planning and services firm.” and 2) a hierarchical, multi-layered reporting structure. A flat organizational structure could be viewed as an advantage to the integration process. I wanted several management layers in order to challenge the flow of communication from the top of the organization to the bottom.

Participants

Since the CEO is typically considered the “keeper” of the vision, culture and strategy and one would assume he or she would have in-depth knowledge of the concepts, I chose subjects from the CEO’s direct reports, rather than the CEO himself, to establish the baseline for assessing integration. I then chose additional subjects from the direct reports of the senior leaders. From that group one senior leader and one direct

report of the senior leader agreed to participate. I then drilled down from the senior leader to front line employees within the same business line. The following diagram (figure 2) illustrates the reporting structure of the participating subjects. There are any number of leaders between the senior level of management and those at the frontline. My objective was to follow a single line of reporting from the top of the organization to the bottom.

Figure 2: Organization Structure



Subjects were recruited from the pool of available frontline employees using a random number chart. A total of twenty-four subjects were solicited via an email message. Of the twenty-four solicited, five agreed to participate.

In total, seven subjects participated; two senior leaders and five frontline workers. Of the seven, one was male and six were female. Due to the small sampling size, gender was not considered in the data analysis.

Subjects were then notified of their selection to participate. They also received an invitation with the time and meeting place. Meetings were held face-to-face over a two-week period, each lasting approximately one hour.

Materials

I compiled a list of several open-ended questions to prompt conversation. Some of the questions were intended specifically for subjects at the executive level and some specifically to the staff employees. Questions asked of both executive and staff employees were intended to elicit information that would provide insight into their knowledge of and relationship with the vision, culture and strategies of the organization. The staff employees were asked several questions meant to discern their perception of their direct superior's leadership and communication skills and practices. Those questions specific to the executive level subjects were used to learn of the expectations they hold of front-line leaders in employing and disseminating the vision statement, strategies and culture.

In addition, I asked staff employees to rate their leader's leadership ability and communication ability on separate scales of 1-5, five being the best.

Data Gathering

I met with each of the seven subjects individually in a location that offered privacy and no interruptions. The interviews lasted one hour each. All seven subjects worked within the same business line but none of them reported to the same leader. I began each interview by reading a script outlining the purpose of the research. Subjects were encouraged to explain their opinions and to share specific examples and experiences they thought might further illustrate their point. The tone of the interviews was relaxed and conversational.

CHAPTER IV

Data Report

Data collection and analysis is based on a phenomenological approach to discover a deeper understanding of the nature of the subjects' experience.

*Raw Data***Can you state the vision statement of this organization?**

All of the subjects knew of the existence of the vision statement. However, only two were able to recite it word for word. The senior leader, that subject who directly reports to the CEO, was one of those that could not. However, when the question was asked, the subject responded immediately and confidently, "Sure do, we shape financial solutions for a lifetime." The answer given was not the vision statement but is a slogan used in the organization's advertising. The way in which the subject responded gave the impression he felt a responsibility to know the statement. Because he answered so quickly, it is difficult to ascertain whether or not he actually knew the statement. One of the staff employees also responded with the same advertising slogan.

From this data one might conclude that the flow of vision communication, from senior leaders to frontline leaders and consequently to frontline workers, is broken. However, other data collected in the interviews suggest that a subject's ability to recite the vision statement word for word was not a requirement to comprehend the objective of the statement.

Of the three remaining subjects who were unable to articulate the vision statement, one was on the right path with: “to be the most sought after financial brand.” Although the attempt began correctly, the difference between “brand” and “financial services planning firm” is significant. If the term “brand” was in the vision statement it might imply that the goal of the organization is to create brand loyalty whereas “financial services planning firm” implies service to the customer. Each option would require significantly different strategies for success. Thus this subject’s response does not express considerable knowledge of the vision statement. Another subject answered, “Yes, but I do not know it by heart. I don’t know it but I do know that it is important that we do remember our vision statement for our company.” The final subject said, “I could not recite it. I don’t memorize things like that so I do know that we do have a vision statement. I do know I would recognize it if I saw it but I could not recite it for you. Our vision I think is, as I recall it, is to provide the best level of service and provide retirement planning and the best financial service we can for our customers.” Although unable to repeat the vision statement, this subject shows some interpretive understanding and an ability to make valid inferences based on vague memories of the statement. For example, “to be the most sought after financial services firm” could be interpreted to mean that the organization would need to be able to provide the best financial planning and service.

What is your understanding of the purpose of a vision statement and do you find it effective?

Asked what the purpose of a vision statement is, most of the responses were generic and vague. Responses included terms and phrases such as “to be the best of the

best in the field,” “we create a vision so we all have the same collective understanding of a goal,” “to have a purpose, to have a goal” and “to provide a common goal and direction for the company.” These responses are literal in nature and show only a basic understanding of the words and their meaning. A more critical response was provided by the senior leader: “To galvanize at the highest level, all of our audiences, our employees, our customers, our investors, to know who we are, what we’re all about and to the extent that there is ambiguity when we are faced with a decision to provide us with a touchstone to make that decision against.” This response provides a much larger perspective as to why this organization has a vision statement. In this context the subject expresses greater expectation of the vision statement: 1) It creates excitement both within and outside of the organization, 2) tells a story about the organization and 3) provides guidance in decision making.

Although unable to recite the vision statement word for word, his response to this question gives the impression that he is driven by a personal vision. As pointed out earlier, a personal vision as described by Peter Senge (1990) is the first step to establishing a shared vision within the organization.

Replies to whether or not the vision statement is effective were generally positive. However, several subjects noted their inability to recite the vision statement might counteract its effectiveness. Although some subjects thought memorizing the statement would be worthwhile, most did not. For example one subject made this statement, “I think understanding the statement is more important than knowing the statement. I don’t think memorizing something does a person any good unless you internalize it and if I can translate it and be correct in what it means then I’ve internalized.”

Another common comment was that the vision statement is not usually present in their thoughts. “In our day-to-day tasks and activities it’s easy to lose sight of that” and “I am already so focused on my job and my tasks and my goals that I tend to forget.”

Explanations for why this would happen center on a general sense among the subjects that their position within the company is unique and it is therefore difficult for them to have influence on the success of the vision statement. They made statements such as “my job is different,” “I’m in a very strange position” and “I’m kind of in a different situation I think.” It was also said that the statement is open to interpretation; it means different things for different departments within the organization. The recommendations subjects made to increase the effectiveness of the vision statement tended towards communication. There was consensus that a gap in communication existed but they all agreed too that there is already a great deal of written communication concerning the vision statement. Because the communication is typically written and disseminated from distant areas of the organization, the gap employees refer to may be face-to-face conversations with their leader on the subject of vision. Although the subjects did not think memorizing the statement would be beneficial, several subjects indicated a desire to be more familiar with it. This point is striking in that the senior leader of the organization has formulated a personal vision that can be applied to any operation within the organization. Yet some of the frontline employees see no connection between the vision statement and the tasks they complete each day. While there may be many factors contributing to this lack of insight on the part of the employee, the role of frontline leaders’ communication practices comes into question.

To your knowledge, what strategies exist to reach the goal of the vision statement?

In response to this question, subjects interpreted the connotation of the term “strategy” in one of two ways. The first was to refer to a set of statements created by the organization and designed to inform and describe the type of behavior the organization expects of all its employees. For example, “We have I think (...) six value statements and those value statements take this overarching goal and break it into: this is how we’re going to accomplish what we want to do.” These statements are known as “value statements” and are disbursed throughout the organization in a variety of ways: posters, wallet cards etc. They include such things as “integrity,” “client focus” and “excellence in all you do.” The second approach was to relate the goals and strategies from their own business line. For two of the subjects, this approach was taken after first saying they did not know of any strategies. The first subject said, “Well, not specifically no. But within what I work with, the products that we continuously launch; new types of annuities, new features on those annuities, new benefits. So with the new products that we launch reinforces that we want to be the most sought after brands, or whatever the vision is.” The second subject said, “I honestly can’t articulate it.” But when prompted about strategies within the business unit the response was: “Yes, there are strategies within my area. Our biggest concern is advisor satisfaction. I work on an advisory tool that is used to present to clients. So we have to balance advisor satisfaction with client needs and presentation as well. [But] I don’t think we have actual strategies laid out. Our main concern is advisor satisfaction so it would be along those lines.” But here again, subjects would say their job was so different that they were unable to discuss strategy. There seemed to be a belief that strategy is something beyond and unrelated to what they do; except in the sense that

their job supports the strategy. However, the senior leader indicated there is strategic planning at all levels of the organization. He said, “There are a set of strategies across each of the business and staff units that [are] based on that [vision] statement so we understand our role in fulfilling it and can provide deeper clarity into our own organization as to how we go about fulfilling it.”

These strategies are documented for each business line. How the strategies are shared with frontline leaders was unclear other than that they may be receiving the same written communication as their employees. However, all the subjects noted at one time or another during the interview that there is a great deal of electronic communication as well as what might be considered marketing material; posters, wallet cards, post cards etc. With all this communication, it begs the question, why do some employees still feel disconnected from the vision and strategies of the larger organization? It could be that without face-to-face conversation specific to the correlation between the employee’s work and the success of the organization, employees find no relative meaning in the communication. Senior leadership said that there is an expectation that frontline leaders will be responsible for bridging the gap between the senior level and those at the frontline. Either it is being done ineffectively or not at all.

Please describe the culture of this organization as you know or experience it.

On the topic of culture, subjects described it as “inclusive and diverse” but that it can be dependent upon a leader’s behavior and abilities. One subject cited a tolerance by some leaders to accept low productivity from their employees. The subject felt that often, employees come together with great ideas, they meet and have discussions, then months

go by and no one has done anything. She said, "It just happens that way in every single department I think. There's that kind of culture." She goes on to say, "But it depends on who your leader is too. How much the leader will tolerate that."

The culture was also described as "employee focused" and of "wanting to do the right thing for employees." One subject gave this example: "We have something that is called an ESAT, the employee satisfaction action team. This is the first company that I've seen where they survey you and you see action, you see results." Another subject said, "I think this organization is more accepting of people's differences. They actually celebrate the individuality of people."

When asked how the culture supports the realization of the vision statement, a staff employee said, "The happier you make your employees the more they are willing to return the same. So I think that because we offer our employees so much support in that sense, people are happy when they are at work." She goes on to say, "I mean for the most part. And they trust their leaders because of that. And they want to support them more to fulfill that vision."

The senior leader responded by explaining how he finds the culture to be and where he thinks it should go. He began, "I would hope most senior leaders would be consistent in this." And continued:

The culture of the organization is one of truly wanting to do the right thing for the client. And then within that, having done the right thing for the client, then you do the right thing for the lowest level of the organization that that one person is associated with. So yes, I want to do the right thing for the client and yes I'll do that first, but then I'll do the right thing for my department. So after I've cleared

the customer hurdle I'll do what's best for my department. And within that, there is historically, and I think this is changing, but historically there has been a tendency to purposely move slowly against this. And that is part of risk aversion and partly an organization's desire or yearning to know every detail before it proceeds. And so historically we have encountered some speed to execution challenges as a result of all that. This part of the culture is a hindrance to reaching the vision. Yet I may say hindrance but others may say it acts to prevent us from making undisciplined or non-cautious decisions.

His direct report described the culture as "hardworking, rises to the occasion and with Midwest values. When asked if there was anything she would like to see different she said, "Yes, I would like employees to take more risks and be willing to voice their disagreement." This response has much in common with the senior leader, especially with risk aversion.

Executive: Has the vision statement influenced the culture of this organization?

Senior Leader

"I think it is doing so on an increasing basis. Probably initially, its biggest impact was to help people feel good about what we were trying to accomplish although it didn't necessarily shape peoples' behavior or day-to-day decisions. As it matures and as we wrap other things around it, it becomes more of an operationalized vision versus an inspirational vision. And that doesn't mean at the cost of being inspirational but in addition to being inspirational."

Executive: What expectations do you have of front-line leaders in affecting the culture, vision and strategies?

Senior Leader

“I mean, at the end of the day, they have to do that. The reality is, except for a precious few people in my organization, I am not the leader they experience [or] interact with on a day-to-day basis. So to the extent that the line leader reflects the vision and motivates against it, and makes decisions consistent with it, it will permeate throughout the organization. To the extent they don’t, there is nothing I can do to change that. (...) There is an expectation that leaders will reinforce the vision throughout the organization. There has to be. It’s the only way we could possibly make it operational.”

Direct Report

“We depend on front-line leaders to use the tools we supply and absolutely they should know the strategies of the organization. We expect that at all levels of the organization.”

To the senior leader: Are there any processes in place to ensure leaders take responsibility for that?

His full response was:

Well that’s part of why we have an employee survey. Part of it you simply look at the consistency of the actions and whether those actions are congruent with the strategy. If they’re not then that’s a pretty good indication that there has been a leadership failure in terms of not only communicating but of living the vision. Yes, I just view that as something you do every day. And I

wouldn't be surprised to find our employees are aligned with the vision because one of the good things about a good vision is that it is inspirational. And the definition of inspirational is that someone says yes, I want to work for a company whose vision does that. I think our vision is on the side of the angels and so I would just expect that it has a very natural appeal to the people in our company and that they will naturally gravitate towards executing against it and leading towards it. I think that the company is doing a lot to get people on board but in the end nothing works better than having a vision that people truly want to be part of. The vision itself is principal to making it work. Let's get things straight. Let's say I lay out a vision that says our vision is to make money at all costs. There is no change program, there is no culture program on earth that is going to make that vision broadly appealing and therefore it is not going to be successful. Except for a small set of people who say yes, that's why I go to work each day, people are going to understand a vision that reconciles with their personal values. Work is more than a paycheck. I don't think you can hire someone who doesn't have, for example, customer service as a core value and expect that you can change them. It may be something they pay attention to because they understand that is how they are going to be paid and that is how they will be evaluated. But will they really take it to heart? I don't think so. It is not something you can inject into someone. I think it is something either you have or you don't.

Frontline Employees: In your opinion does your supervisor's behavior and decisions align with the goals of the vision statement?

Responses were mostly “yes” to this question but were often mitigated as they explained their answer. For example, “But like I said before, the vision statement is so broad you can take anything and align it (...) just as long as you’re driving towards a positive goal.” And, “I don’t think that’s on the forefront of his mind when he makes decisions. It’s just that he makes appropriate and the right decisions which then in turn support culture and vision.”

Frontline Employees: Do you think about the vision statement when making decisions related to your own job?

Responses to this question underscored the inability of employees to draw a connection between their own responsibilities and the goal of the vision statement. The subjects agreed that what they did each day did support the vision statement; but they found it difficult to say exactly why. “To tell you the truth, I’m not thinking about those things. Sometimes it is a lot easier to feed up into that vision based on what you do. Our little part of the organization is off in its own world,” and “That’s a hard one because I know that what we do supports the vision but I don’t think that’s our driver for what we do.”

Frontline Employees: What skills or characteristics do you find necessary for effective leadership?

The subjects described a variety of attributes. Responses to characteristics of effective leadership included “someone who can adapt to different learning styles and adapt to different communication styles,” “someone who communicates all the time,”

“competent,” “understanding,” “patient,” “knowledge and trust,” and “I think they would need to be a good listener.” A common theme was the desire that leaders have the ability to let go of control. “Someone who can sit back and let the associates do the driving,” “You need to step in when you need to step in and step back most of the time,” “You allow your direct reports to take on their tasks and let them go, guide them but don’t control too much.” These responses bring to mind the distinction between leadership and management. The need of subjects to have their leaders “let go of control” and “step back” indicates a possible desire for more leadership and less management.

Frontline Employees: What skills or characteristics do you find necessary for effective communication?

The most common answer was maintaining regular *one-on-ones*. One subject said, “That’s huge right there. So we have that one time a week so we can sit down and talk.” This subject puts a high value on how often she is able to talk to her leader and in what context. She is not asking for her leader to be available only to answer questions or to have an “open door policy” where she can drop in at any time. These things are important. But what she is indicating here is that she wants to have a regularly scheduled time when “we can sit down and talk.” This type of interaction creates and builds relationships; an indication that she values a relationship with their leader.

Content and timing were also important: “Information should be shared not after the fact but during the process.” Information shared after the fact excludes employees from the decision making process. The need to be informed “during the process” implies

a desire by the employee that her leader find value in their relationship. The employee wants to feel useful and significant to the leader.

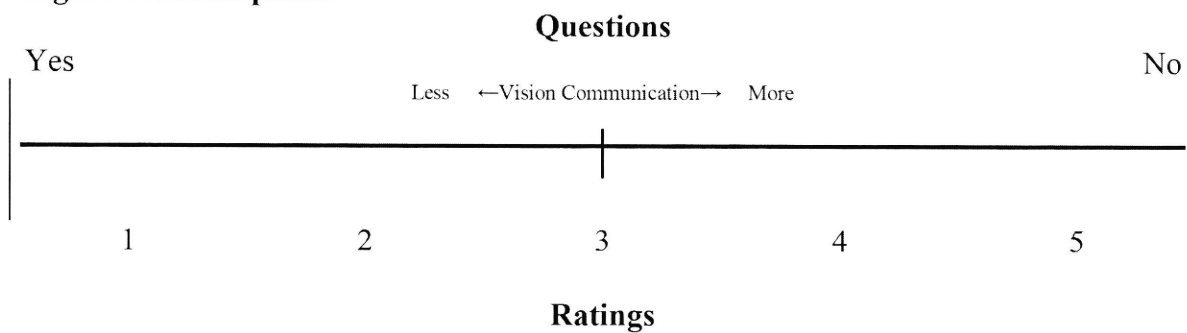
Data Analysis

Assumptions

I assumed that senior leaders and staff employees of the organization would support the view that frontline leaders have key responsibility in the institutionalization of the company vision, culture and strategy concepts. This is important because, whether the directive is implied or overt, frontline leaders must be held responsible for aligning employees' behaviors with the goals of the company in order for employees' perception of their abilities to be meaningful. I further assumed, if an employee gave a low rating to the leadership and/or communication abilities of his or her leader, there would be a corresponding inability for the employee to articulate his or her own role in the execution of the vision statement. A supposition in the use of a vision statement is that it is a positive driver in employee behavior and productivity. Because of the positive nature of the vision statement, another assumption is that negative behavior and attitude on the part of employees would indicate little leader involvement in vision communication. If employees, 1) were unable to recite the vision statement in precise or general terms, or 2) described the culture of the organization using negative, downbeat or unenthusiastic language, or 3) were unable to discuss corporate strategies or strategies specific to their line of business, vision communication would be considered low. The opposite would be true for a high rating and "no" answers to the preceding questions (figure 1). The degree

to which leaders communicate is also evaluated by the employees’ ability to show a basic understanding of the words and meaning of the vision statement. Their understanding deepens with their ability to make valid connections between the statement and their job responsibilities. Furthermore, a subject would not have to state the vision statement verbatim in order to claim knowledge of it. Subjects may express the aim of the vision statement using similar words and descriptions to demonstrate their knowledge.

Figure 1: Assumptions



Results

In general, the senior leader subjects demonstrated a clear understanding of the purpose of their corporate vision statement. Both subjects characterize an effective vision statement as one that is motivational, gives insight into the goals of the company, and influences behavior. Furthermore, both subjects hold the same opinion that frontline leaders are central to vision integration. There is an expectation that “leaders will reinforce the vision throughout the organization” because, “it’s the only way we could possibly make it operational.” Their description of the company culture included terms and phrases such as “supportive” and “one of truly wanting to do the right thing.”

While several of the subjects from the staff interviews referred to the organization’s published list of values, others described what might be considered in Schein’s point of view, the underlying assumptions or what is really the culture of the

organization. They described low productivity and the inability or unwillingness of leaders to hold employees accountable.

Other data from the staff interviews supported the assumption that employees who gave their leaders high scores in leadership and communication ability would also have knowledge of the vision statement, corporate or business strategies and describe a positive culture in the organization. However, the data revealed some inconsistency in vision alignment within the business line.

Employees who rated the communication abilities of their leader a four or five cited frequency, enthusiasm, empathy, authenticity and trust as characteristic of interactions with their leader and characteristic of the leader's leadership style. Frequency of communication was a theme throughout all the interviews. Leaders of this organization are required to schedule at least monthly a meeting with each of their direct reports. Subjects who had regular "one-on-one" meetings with their leader described a stronger connection to the organization and were more willing to give their leaders high scores in leadership and communication skills. This was also evident in the leaders' adherence to other corporate communication policies.

These employees also rated their leader's leadership abilities either a four or five and spoke with enthusiasm as they discussed the vision, culture and strategy of their organization. When defining the purpose of the vision statement, these employees gave statements such as "to be the best of the best in our field" and "to have a purpose, to have a goal and to have the company unified." When asked about the culture, one subject said, "It's absolutely wonderful. It's a company like no other." These same subjects were able to articulate a connection between departmental strategies and the corporate vision. They

talked about new products their division created to help the company remain competitive. Two employees who do not have direct customer contact discussed the connection between their business strategies and the corporate vision in terms of their supporting role in the organization. They saw the success of the vision as dependant upon the operational support they give to the company. “The successes we’ve had help support the company.” and “Our technology needs to be top notch. That’s how I’m applying the strategies and vision to my job” are two examples.

The employee who rated the communication and leadership abilities of her leader a three cited misunderstandings, lack of support for personal growth, poor listening skills, infrequent interaction, and a sense of being disconnected from the organization. In contrast to employees who experienced effective communication and leadership, this employee struggled with expressing her opinions and experiences. In one example, the subject said the purpose of the vision statement is “to provide a common goal and direction for the company.” When asked if the vision statement is effective, the subject stated it was. However, when asked if this was true for her personally, she said, “I’m struggling to remember [the vision statement] because I am so focused on my job and my tasks that I tend to forget.” When asked about strategies she said, “I honestly can’t articulate them” and “it’s more like, “What’s a priority?” rather than “What’s our strategy?” The culture she described as supportive; both in terms of diversity and career development. However, she added the caveat that “It goes up or down depending on what department you’re in.”

Although all of the subjects exhibited some difficulty in discussing each of the three concepts, those employees who gave their leaders an overall rating of four or five showed more enthusiasm for participating in the execution of the vision statement.

The data from the interviews suggest that this organization has had some success in the effort to affect employee behavior through the use of a vision statement, business strategies and organizational culture. Participants spoke of inclusiveness, career and development mindedness, diversity in hiring practices and commitment to training and promotion. However, one participant noted that some individual business lines and departments don't always adopt the policies initiated at the organizational level. When what exists in one part of the organization doesn't necessarily exist across the entire organization, managers at the frontline level may not be following the process and procedures put in place by the senior level of leadership. Many of these policies have been created with the intention of aligning culture with vision and strategy. Programs such as the "skip level meeting" which gives staff the opportunity to meet with a leader above their own, the availability of training for advancement and the existence of internal employee organizations meant to support minority groups based on gender, race, religion, age and disabilities, are not always supported by middle management. In these situations, frontline leaders are clearly obstructing the creation of a culture that is united with strategy and motivated by a dedication to the vision.

Commentary

Effective communication is a concept that is complex and full of nuance making it very difficult for subjects to describe. In spite of this, most subjects gave high marks to their leader's communication ability. This study provides evidence that employees value leaders who talk to them. It shows that from conversation, leaders create trust and loyalty in the relationships with their employees. And it is during the ensuing everyday interactions that employees begin to share the vision of their leader. However, the study also shows that when leaders lack vision themselves, they come across as inexperienced and uninterested in their employees. Interactions appear to the employee to be done out of necessity rather than desire. If they avoid interactions with their employees, the relationships suffer further and employees become disengaged and lack focus and motivation.

The literature review focused on effective communication devices. The authors offered specific tools leaders could use to capture and maintain the attention of employees.

Most leaders would probably not describe themselves as charismatic, transformational or visionary and may dismiss these concepts as unattainable. However, some of the subjects described situations in which their leader employed elements from each of the three leadership styles.

In one example from the study, a subject who gave a high rating to her leader's leadership and communication skills described her leader as a "cheerleader for his

people.” She described interactions with her leader this way: “Oh, he’s such a people person. Every time I see him he’ll make time in the hallway. He’ll say, “how’s it going, how are you doing?” Then I’ll go on and talk about my [work] and how it’s going and he’ll say, “no, no, how are *you* doing?” He truly cares and cares about the work and the department and everybody. So he gets it.” She goes on to say that he inspires her to be a cheerleader herself. He tells her that as a trainer, she should not just train her people to answer phones and do paperwork, but to show that real people are behind that paperwork. “It’s more than just a piece of paper that we’re processing and my leader communicates that to me. And I communicate that to my trainees.”

The subject’s description has elements found in each of the three leadership theories as well as the discussion of rhetoric and interpersonal skills. You can infer from the description of her leader that he is a person who motivates and inspires people to action and does so during the course of regular face-to-face conversation. His use of language inspires emotional commitment: “real people,” “cheerleader,” and “more than a piece of paper.” These are an example of a subtle but impactful use of imagery. In another example the subject described an occasion when a salesperson attended one of her training classes as a guest speaker. The salesperson used the concept of storytelling to illustrate the significance of a particular task in the success of the company. He told a story about a day in the life of a financial advisor. He talked about all the work it takes to acquire a client. He asked his audience to envision him sitting at ballparks and other public places trying to get leads. He talked about the process of setting up meetings with prospects, the inevitable cancellations and rescheduling and all the paperwork involved until finally the prospect becomes a client. He then focused on the role of those in his

audience: the subject's training class. The subject described how the speaker demonstrated the significant role she and the others played in the relationship between the client and the company. The class will be responsible for entering all the data for the client contract. She said, "If they ask for a certain writer, we need to make sure we get it on there. Because if we send out that contract with the wrong information on it? All of a sudden, all that confidence the client had in us is out the window. And then the advisor needs to start all over again. Even though it seems like data entry, (we) play a key role in being the face to the client. Everything you do, the client sees and looks at." In describing this event, the subject told of how the telling of the story helped her connect the vision statement to her own position in the company. "...being a trainer you just have to believe in the vision. You can't be a trainer and not get it or feel it or want it. I'm passing that message on." This example illustrates the significant effect of an otherwise simple story when used to connect a task to the greater good of the organization and its people. Together these two examples show how even modest communicative interactions work towards fulfilling the conditions of visionary, charismatic or transformational leadership.

Listening is another important communication element that was highlighted in this study and also within the three leadership theories presented. Again, the act of listening plays a key role in transformational, visionary or charismatic leadership. When that element is missing from leader-follower interactions, the ability to effectively lead and communicate suffers.

One subject that gave her leader a lower rating voiced concerns about the infrequency of interactions and the feeling of not being heard. She said that her leader did not hold regular one-on-one meetings and he was unaware of her career goals. She

also felt that the leadership above her own leader was out of touch. She said that a director had mentioned to her that he thought her leader was doing an exceptional job. She disagreed. She said, "How does he know? He doesn't report to him and he has never asked my colleague or me." When asked specifically to describe her leader's communication abilities she said, "I think the listening skills ebb and flow. Listening and maybe [understanding] me isn't always on track." When asked what characteristics are necessary for effective leadership and communication, another subject said, "First of all I think they would need to be a good listener and I feel very strongly about that. Not only a good listener to individuals outside of their own world but also of the associates they are leaders of."

Summary

Although the sample population was small the results were consistent. Employees perceive their world including the concepts of vision, culture and strategy from the perspective of their work and everyday interactions with their leader. The nature of the relationship, especially the level of trust between frontline workers and their leaders is more important than are specific skills. However, a leader's ability to communicate effectively does play a role in the success of the relationship and therefore the subject's awareness of the organization's vision. Subjects who described their leaders as good communicators also described positive relationships with their leader. These subjects were enthusiastic and positive when they talked about their own work. Most importantly, these subjects all described their leaders as attentive and available. Face-to-face

interactions happened often; both by chance and with regularly scheduled one-on-ones.

Subjects described a typical encounter with their leader as positive and engaging.

Subjects also wanted to know that they were being listened to and heard. When that was not the case, commitment and loyalty to the leader was weak. Subjects who were unable to connect the vision statement to the jobs they performed spoke of little opportunity for face-to-face conversation with their leader.

Whereas, it was difficult to assess specific rhetorical or interpersonal skills, this study did reveal that an employee's view of the future of the organization was dependant upon the frontline leaders' ability to foster a positive relationship and that in turn is dependant upon the nature of the face-to-face interactions they have with their employees.

CHAPTER V

Conclusion

Overall, this study shows that employees perceive their world, including vision, culture and strategy, from the everyday interactions with their leader, their work, and the people they work with. It also shows the significance of the relationship leaders have with their employees. Employees have a strong desire to be heard and want communication to be interactive. Face-to-face conversations are of primary importance and can affect employees' perception of both their leader and the organization.

Results provide some indication of how frontline leaders influence employee perception of vision, culture, and strategy. Practically applied these results may explain the disparity in ability for employees to unite the vision statement with their own work. Given that everyday interactions with leaders influence employees' perceptions, perhaps they can affect the degree to which employees see themselves as participating in the achievement of the vision statement.

And finally, these results demonstrate the frontline leaders' accountability in employees' perception of the organization's vision, culture and strategy.

Limitations

This study has limitations that should be noted. First, a characteristic of qualitative research is that the findings cannot be directly generalized to the larger population being studied. Also, as is the case in this study, the number of participants in a typical qualitative research study is too small to be representative of the population.

Furthermore, while every effort was made to ask a series of questions that would elicit relevant data, one should consider that the quality of the data collection and the results are dependent on the experience of the interviewer and on the thoroughness of the analysis. However, even given these limitations, the findings presented here provide insight to the employees' perception of the company's vision statement, culture and business strategy. Furthermore, it demonstrates the importance of communication in establishing a climate of trust and responsibility.

Future Research

Future studies could expand these results by broadening the scope of senior leader and staff employee relationship interviews. The current study collected data from one business line within a large organization with multiple business lines. Interviewing senior leaders and their corresponding employees across multiple business lines would give an improved understanding of the depth of integration within the entire organization. Future research could also examine employees' perception after coaching leaders in building positive relationships through the use of frequent face-to-face communication.

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