

COMMUNICATOR

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The V's of leadership communication

By Liz Guthridge



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The road to good intentions is paved with hell, the late writer Peter DeVries once observed. He wasn't referring to the challenges that corporate leaders face in talking with their employees, but he could have been.

Many executives say they want to communicate regularly with their workforce, but their actions often speak differently. When pressed for time – the constant state executives find themselves in – they tend to let employees fall to their “C” list – constituents who aren't nearly as critical as everyone else.

Whether the executives you work with have excellent or middling communication intentions, you, they and your organization can benefit from following the “V's” of leadership communication. The purpose of these “V's”, as shown in the diagram on page 2, is to serve as practical tool to cover key communication bases.

1. Share the vision. Every time leaders meet with employees formally and informally, they need to take the opportunity to paint a clear picture in their own words of what the organization desires to become, achieve or create. It's not meaningful to recite the 50 or so words that make up the vision and mission that hang on the conference room walls. Ideally the executive should strike a balance between being inspirational and realistic. You want people to believe they can put their feet soundly on the ground and reach for the stars to see and reach the vision. And if the ground starts shifting, as is more common than not these days, the leader needs to reinforce the vision, and explain how the changing

circumstances affect what people do differently and more of the same.

2. Demonstrate values. Leaders also need to regularly talk about how the actions they and others in the organization are taking to reinforce the organization's values and their personal values too. Too often, values can seem either very ethereal or a bad joke if no one can find recent and relevant examples of them in action. But if leaders can tell stories about how their commitment for integrity, respect or high ethical conduct has guided their actions, they can bring the values to life. This in turn helps hold the organization together as it changes and evolves.

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A sweet divestiture

By Bob Gorman

The Adams Gum Division of Warner-Lambert became part of Pfizer during the Pfizer/Warner-Lambert merger in 2000. The transition from one company to another offers a case study in applying HR and communication solutions that worked despite a very difficult environment for employees.

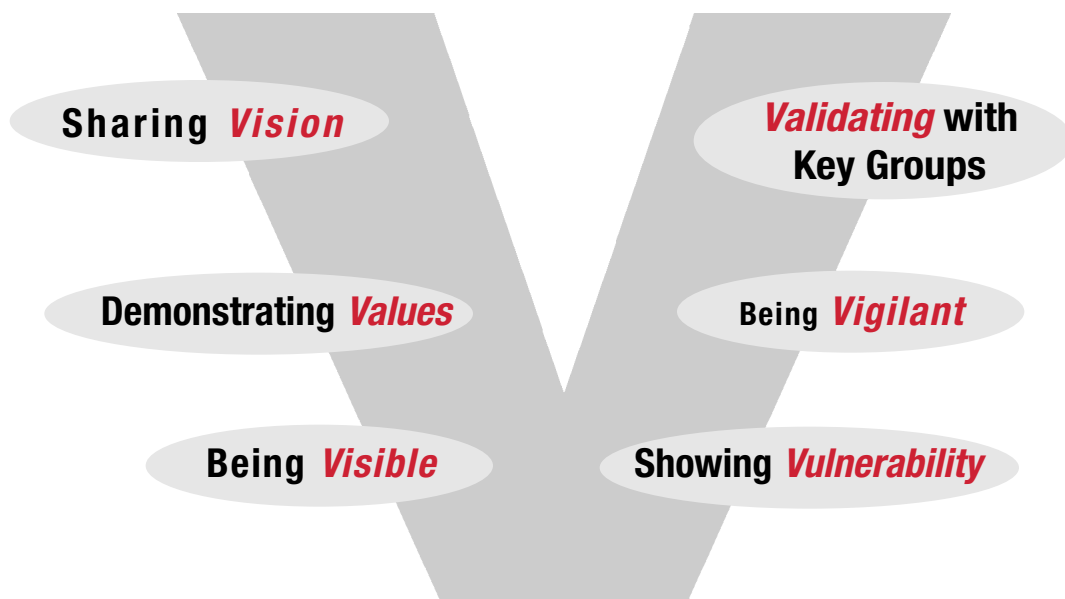
Adams USA is a billion dollar marketer of products such as Dentyne ICE, Trident, Certs and Halls cough drops. Given the fact that Pfizer's business was pharmaceuticals and Adams' was confec-

tionaries, Adams employees felt like the proverbial fish out of water.

“When Adams became part of Pfizer, we knew there was a 95 percent chance that we would be sold within two years,” said Maria Gagnier, Adams Vice-President of Human Resources. “So we always operated with one eye on the calendar and the other on our business performance. We needed to get the business profitable enough to be an attractive divestiture target.”

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V'S OF LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION



3. Be visible. As mentioned earlier, executives have many different constituents clamoring for their time – other company executives, analysts, stockholders, key customers, bankers, suppliers, government officials, board members, advocacy groups and anyone else with a cause. It's often easy to have employees fall to the bottom of the list, but keep them from dropping off totally. Encourage leaders to maintain visibility with employees, especially some form of regular face-to-face communication. For example, the CEO of a professional services firm unfailingly visits every office at least twice a year. He says he relishes the ability to get across his key messages, remind people how important they are to the business and to clients, and to hear what's top of mind with employees.

4. Validate with key groups. These days, it's easy for leaders to get isolated and insulated from the rest of the organization, which can cause even greater chasms between executives and frontline employees. It's not enough for executives to be visible with employees; they need to remove the filters and get direct feedback and validation. For instance, one CEO frequently eats in the company

cafeteria with different groups of employees. It not only gets him more aware of employee concerns and issues, but it also “makes me stop believing all the positive press releases about myself – at least for a few valuable minutes.”

5. Be vigilant. Leaders need to repeat and reinforce key messages multiple times, especially when they themselves have grown tired of the messages, much less delivering them. Corporate leaders need to take a lesson from the playbook of politicians, and stay on message point for many months. At that point the leaders start to cut through the clutter, grab people's attention, and get them to listen. Yes, leaders may be so sick of the message that they're ready to throw up, but they've got to realize that many employees have hardly had a chance to taste the “new” message, much less digest it.

6. Show vulnerability. This brings us to the bonus “V” – vulnerability – for those leaders who are strong enough to show their weaknesses. A good example is the leader who admitted to a group of employees that he had wanted to vomit rather than regurgitate the same message on this road trip, until his corporate

communication counselor told him about the importance of repetition. He not only explained his plans for the umpteenth time, but also showed patience in doing so. Showing vulnerability makes people, especially leaders, come across as more human, and certainly more approachable, credible and trustworthy.

Practicing these “V”'s cannot guarantee you victory on the communication front. But these “V”'s can help leaders focus on some basic communication principles that they can practice regularly. In turn, they can start to transform themselves from communication victims to communication VIPs.

Liz Guthridge is a principal with The Adobe Group, a consulting firm specializing in communication at work. Liz supports organizational leaders as a trusted advisor in planning and implementing fast-paced change. She works to send clear messages, get rid of information distortion and engage employees to get everyone on the same page and achieving business goals.