



[Join the Hub today!](#)

[Home](#) [Login](#) [Free Trial](#) [Join](#) [About](#) [Editorial Board](#) [Contact Us](#)

[Toolkits](#) [Case Studies](#) [How-to Guides](#) [Top Tips](#) [Ask the Expert](#) [AV Guides](#) [Network](#) [News](#) [Jobs](#)

Home > Manager and leader communication > What's Working



SEARCH THE HUB

GO

[Advanced search](#)

**TOPICS**

[Setting Your Strategy and Plan](#)

[Channels and New Media](#)

[Measuring Your Impact](#)

[Professional Development](#)

[Change Communication](#)

[Manager and Leader Communication](#)

[Toolkits](#)

[Case Studies](#)

[How-to Guides](#)

[Top Tips](#)

[Ask the Expert](#)

► This month's GUEST EXPERT



**Sue Dewhurst**  
Managing director, The SD Group

**STRATEGIC PARTNERS**



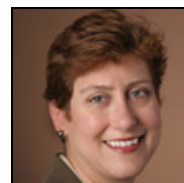
**How to help your leaders be credible in incredible times**

*What communication professionals need to consider when helping leaders steer their organizations out of troubled waters.*

*by Tony Simons, president of [Integrity Dividend LLC](#) and Liz Guthridge, founder of [Connect Consulting Group](#).*

**Average rating:**  
4.50

([Comments:](#) 3)



In tough times, leaders need to keep their people motivated while laying off some and cutting resources for the rest. Leaders grapple with that combined challenge – some knowingly and some not, some successfully and some not. The challenge illustrates a double bind for leader credibility that now exists.

If employees view their leaders as credible, these employees will more often rise to the occasion. But if they don't believe their leaders or trust them, employees tend to merely go through the motions or even resign on the job.

Even when workers perform, are they fully engaged? Are they putting their heart into what they do? Bringing all their personal resources to the job at hand? Adding the discretionary effort that the engagement experts talk about?

Over the past year, leaders have lost many of the motivational levers they've counted on – rewards that reinforced their words of recognition and acknowledgement. Many organizations have suspended pay increases, spot bonuses, promotions, monetary recognition, and training and development budgets. At some organizations, pay cuts are the new norm, as is the refrain – either spoken or unspoken – "You should feel lucky to have a job."

**The trouble with words and promises**

Leaders who want to provide reassurance to employees can find themselves forced into taking actions they'd previously sworn never to do. Or, they may make commitments to programs or particular actions, but later find themselves constrained or countermanded by people superior to them in the organization.

Leaders at all levels are in a tough spot. About the only lever left is their ability to demonstrate behavioral integrity – to build a reputation for impeccable follow-through and straight talk. Leaders need to speak candidly and live up to their words. They then can gain trust and commitment from their employees.

Like trust, credibility is slow to build and quick to fall. People remember the promises they consider to be broken. The promises kept only register when they're unexpected.

**Living by your word**

Over the past year, leaders have lost many of the motivational levers they've counted on.

**EVENTS**

**[The Internal Communication Black Belt Program](#)**

Melcrum has now updated and expanded the Internal Communication Black Belt Program!

**[Social Media Conference](#)**

9th - 10th February 2010, London

**[Delivering Successful Change Communication](#)**

9th - 10th March 2010, London

**[Annual Employee Engagement Conference](#)**

February 2010, Atlanta & 11th - 13th May 2010, London

**[Melcrum member briefing](#)**

Leadership Communication  
12 November 2009, Birmingham Hippodrome, Birmingham UK

**[Melcrum member briefing](#)**

Building Trust through Senior Leadership Communications  
12 November 2009, Crown Promenade, Melbourne

**[Helping managers be better communicators](#)**

28 October 2009, Sandton, Johannesburg

**[Effectively managing change communication](#)**

29 October 2009, Sandton, Johannesburg

**[More events](#)**

**POLL OF THE WEEK**

**Should employee access to external websites be restricted in the workplace?**

- No. Employees should be trusted to manage their own time
- Yes. Internet access is an unnecessary distraction

Powered by PollStream

**JOBS OF THE WEEK**



The current economic climate creates a messy and confusing time for everybody. And leaders often, even with the best of intentions, fail to sustain their credibility through it.

One company reduced benefits plus the base pay of all employees by between 10-15% as a way to conserve cash. In announcing the pay and benefits cuts, the president said he was setting the example by taking a 20% reduction in base pay.

But insiders know that the president makes the vast majority of his total compensation from stock options and bonuses, which aren't changing and are still on schedule to pay handsomely. Industry watchdogs noted the president's eight-figure compensation will decrease by less than 1% this year.

#### Who's Credible?

Credible people are individuals whom others perceive to be:

**Competent** – they're knowledgeable and understand how things work. They don't necessarily need to be the most technically minded, but they need to exhibit some subject-matter expertise.

**Composed** – they keep their cool when faced with challenges.

**Honorable** – they have integrity. They're honest and they stand by their word.

**Likeable** – they're pleasant. You enjoy being around them. You may not necessarily want them for your best friend, but you wouldn't mind having a meal or drink with them.

**Action oriented** – they do things. They don't get stuck in an analysis/paralysis mode.

In other words, leaders are credible if others recognize that they combine technical expertise – the competence piece – with strong relationships. But perhaps more important than that: they do what they say they'll do. They live by their word. They demonstrate the same values they talk.

This little language game is not illegal or even, strictly speaking, dishonest – but this president is gambling with his credibility. How much resonance will his voice carry when next he asks his people to step up in response to hard times?

#### Acting credibly

So what can you do as a communication professional supporting leaders to show others that they're credible? Consider these seven actions:

1. *Go for depth, not breadth.* Concentrate on the three to five values, challenges or goals that will drive the business. As the process experts say, "Focus on the vital few, not the trivial many." Talk regularly about those key issues, not those in the periphery. Too many espoused values lead to accusations of hypocrisy. Focus lets you really drive home the key messages, and lets employees know what leaders want from them. As Tony suggests in his book, *The Integrity Dividend*, "promise less and do it more often."
2. *Be personal.* Get out and about; don't let leaders isolate and insulate themselves. Employees want to see and hear leaders, not read their words. The verbal and vocal cues are critical for interpreting the nuances of the messages. The full communication also humanizes leaders, which helps build relationships that support credibility. If you're concerned about travel budgets and the time travel requires these days, at least do video conferencing and record short videos and podcasts.
3. *Be mindful about your communication.* Consider your intent first. Then determine the most suitable approach (see the section *Being clear about the aim of the communication – the 9 "I"s* below). Be sure your communication is content-rich rather than content-free. Empty reassurances don't add anything. If you don't have much new content because of all the uncertainties, at least be clear about the ambiguity that exists. Also, use the time as an opportunity to do more listening than talking. Some executives effectively compensate for what they're constrained from sharing by disclosing their personal feelings. And always make sure leaders are walking the talk, as people will believe actions over words.

[Internal Communications Manager, TUI UK & Ireland - London, UK](#)

[Internal Communications Manager, Talent2, Melbourne - Australia](#)

[Director of Internal/Employee Communications, Cricket Communications, San Diego - US](#)

[More jobs!](#)

#### TOP 3 RATED ARTICLES

[Dealing with the financial crisis at ING Wholesale Banking](#)



[How to take conference inspiration back to work](#)



[Engagement: A new approach for a new decade](#)



#### VENDOR LISTING

[Get help with your communication programs](#)

4. *Be deliberate about making promises, and be willing to say "no".* Don't make promises outside of a leader's control that they can't commit to or keep. For example, never say never about more layoffs or divesting pieces of the business. Underpromise and overdeliver.
5. *Reflect and respond.* Take time on a regular basis to think about how a leader is performing on these three key components: 1) demonstrating competence; 2) keeping promises; and 3) being consistent, especially making sure the words and actions as seen by others match. If leaders feel they've been deficient in these areas, think about how you're going to rectify the situation. Nobody's perfect, especially when they're juggling many commitments, people and deadlines. So if they drop a ball, just try to pick it up on the first bounce. People will generally cut some slack – if leaders show good intent, already have some credibility, and if need be, apologize. If they break their word, acknowledge it, try to repair the damage, and move on.
6. *Measure credibility.* Leaders may think they're acting credible all the time, but credibility depends on whether employees and other stakeholders perceive them to be credible. Include some questions in your regular employee surveys, pulse checks or focus groups. A more complete question set, using these and other questions, may be used to reliably measure leader development and to track the bottom-line impact of credibility in your company. For example, you can ask:
  - When my boss says he/she is going to do something, he/she will.
  - My boss shows the same values he/she describes.
  - My boss delivers on promises.
  - My boss practices what he/she preaches.
7. *Carefully show vulnerability.* Help leaders be real for the times. Don't let them act as if they know all the answers, rather they should show humility. Talk about *how* the challenges are being faced, not just what they're doing, in light of their technical expertise. What indicators are they following? What signs are they tracking? What customers are they talking to? What's being said? Bring the outside in. Provide context. Use everyday simple language. Find humor so you can share some laughs. Balance showing a leader's professional competence with letting his or her personality come through.

### **Avoiding organizational situations that damage credibility**

Communication professionals who advise leaders should also try to avoid or mitigate against these situations, which can create bad feelings and mistrust toward your organization. This in turn will hurt the personal credibility of you and your colleagues.

- *Message/action mismatch.* Make sure the organization's marketing and formal communication messages don't get ahead of the leaders' informal and semi-formal messages. If these messages don't reflect day-to-day reality – namely, what leaders are doing and saying informally – the organization's trustworthiness will take a hit.
- *Listen for trouble.* Listen closely to any potential problems both inside and outside the organization and act quickly as needed. In this age of 24-hour media cycles, numerous social networking sites, and many watchdog organizations, a potential problem can turn into a full-blown crisis in a few hours. The organization that stays silent or acts in a bumbling manner is often assumed to be guilty. You need to have a crisis plan and respond in a manner that reflects the situation and a leader's values. If you don't, you'll lose the respect and trust of your customers, employees, shareholders and other key stakeholders.
- *Be alert to difficult managers.* Deal with any awkward characters in the C-suite and other leadership levels quickly. Leaders who don't play by the rules, live the values, or who are ineffectual on any number of levels

raise red flags in the organization. Their attitude and behavior can cause a negative contagion that will spread throughout the organization. If you don't contain or extricate them, employees may start to attribute these difficult characteristics to all leaders, not just those who are truly awkward. And instead of employee engagement, you'll have disengagement.

**Staying credible means being disciplined**

Becoming credible won't keep leaders credible. You need to help leaders be disciplined and work hard to protect their credibility. Credibility is job one when it comes to leadership – no leadership happens without it. Seen in this light, the discipline and hard work are worth it. Leaders will become more efficient and effective. Plus, they'll be a stronger, more trusted leader ready to face the world's next challenge.

**Being clear about the aim of the communication - the 9 "I"s**

Before you meet with a group of employees or plan a formal communication, be mindful about your communication.

Becoming credible won't keep you credible.

For example, be clear about the intent of your communication. Are you primarily going to inform employees of a decision that's been made or that's under consideration? Is their input being sought? Is a leader interested in starting a dialogue?

Next, think about the tactics you want to use to ensure they match your intent and they will resonate with the group of individuals you're trying to reach.

Before you match your intention with the most appropriate communication media, consider the 9 "I"s:

<b>Being clear about the aim of the communication – the 9 "I"s</b>	
<b>The LEAN communicator's 9 "I"s</b>	<b>Actions to consider</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Informing</b> – sharing new data or updated data, including decisions you or customers may have recently made.</li> </ul>	Speeches, presentations, emails, newsletters, blogs, huddles, podcasts, videos, and related methods – primarily one-way communication. As much as possible you should include the WIIFM – the what's in it for them – with the core of your message.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Interpreting</b> – providing context, generally connecting the dots between the messages and what people need to do, including explaining the implications.</li> </ul>	Interpretation can be included with the informing, yet ideally you're also opening up the channels of communication to get input from employees to ensure that they understand the information and the interpretation; this can be in-person question and answer sessions, online chats or questions submitted via email or blogs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Inquiring</b> – listening to employees to gather insights, ideas and feedback.</li> </ul>	In-person listening sessions with employees, focus groups, meeting debriefs, meeting feedback forms, pulse surveys, other surveys, and informal feedback. Ideally, try to gather unfiltered feedback as much as possible so you can get a true response and avoid misinterpretations of the responses.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Instructing</b> – sharing technical expertise or</li> </ul>	On the job training such as teachable moments to more formal training.

specialized knowledge.	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Interacting</b> – conversing, preferably informally, to make connections, build stronger ties and relationships.</li> </ul>	Skip-level meetings, leader walkarounds, and informal "meet and greet"s to make a connection, especially in employees' work areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Influencing</b> – appealing to people's emotions as well as intellect.</li> </ul>	Telling stories, talking in informal settings, and making changes by providing opportunities for meetings and conversations (formal and informal) with leaders.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Inspiring</b> – persuading.</li> </ul>	Using symbols in speech, recognizing others who are living the organization's values or who have taken commendable actions, and associating with inspirational, trusted individuals; also leading by example.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Involving</b> – giving employees a meaningful, special role</li> </ul>	Including employees as active participants in a task force, rapid response team, or committees as a way to tap into their skills or knowledge, help with their development, build stronger relationships, solicit their buy-in, and bring more credibility to the activity in which they're involved.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>Initiating</b> – asking employees to take action.</li> </ul>	Clearly articulating the call to action: that is, explaining what you expect employees to do and what it means to them and the organization. Specify the timing, especially the deadline if you have set one.

Tony Simons is the author of *The Integrity Dividend: Leading by the Power of Your Word* (Jossey Bass, 2008). He's the president of Integrity Dividend LLC, and is a tenured associate professor of management and leadership at Cornell University. He speaks, trains, and consults on building and repairing credibility-based leadership and cultures. He has published over 28 articles in outlets ranging from *Harvard Business Review* to *Academy of Management Journal* and *Journal of Applied Psychology*. <http://integritydividend.com>.

Liz Guthridge is the founder of Connect Consulting Group LLC, a workforce and change management firm based in the US. She specializes in LEAN Communications principles and practices – using communications to work smarter not harder to improve results and build credibility. She's the editor/publisher of the monthly eNewsletter, *The LEAN Communicator* and the author of the manual, *LEAN Communications: The 5-Step LEAN Communications System for Doing More with Less and Getting Great Results*. [www.connectconsultinggroup.com](http://www.connectconsultinggroup.com) and [www.leancommunications.com](http://www.leancommunications.com)

**Have your say**

What techniques do your senior leaders use to keep communication at the top of the agenda? Or have you needed to persuade them that they need to change their approach for the good of future company performance? How have you coached them in this regard?

**Rate this article:** [Click to rate.](#)

**Share your comments on this article?**

[Check spelling](#)

[Submit](#)

Comments & Ratings Powered by PollStream

**Most Recent**   **Recommended**

**Reader Comments**

Nikolay Nikolov wrote  
on Nov 15, 2009  
03:02 AM EST

Excelent article.

[Add Comment](#)

[Recommend comment](#)

Nov 10, 2009  
10:46 AM EST

Excelent article. Recommended actions are true.  
Integrity is the urgent value in Leadership.

Rated article 5 stars

[Add Comment](#)

[Recommend comment](#)

Nov 06, 2009  
12:20 PM EST

This is an excellent article! Right on point. Thank  
you!!

Rated article 5 stars

[Add Comment](#)

[Recommend comment](#)

[Recommended by 1  
reader](#)

**Other recommendations:**

[How to shape how your employees perceive leaders](#)

[Nationwide's online "CEO chat"](#)

[Top of Page](#)