

We don't expect Obama, but...

Turning senior executives from good communicators into great ones



It's all about projecting confidence, clarity and authority

Senior executives everywhere can learn from the US President. His exceptional oratorical skills combine a gift for masterful storytelling, a sense of passion and purpose, and an ability to engage with and inspire confidence in his audience.

Not all leaders are such naturals...



Getting it wrong

Picture the scene. It is 9am in Abu Dhabi and the chief executive of a support services business listed in London and Hong Kong gets up to give his key-note speech to an industry conference, in the imposing Emirates Palace ballroom.

He uses a tightly crafted set of speaker notes. The messages are conveyed with clarity; the sound-bites delivered; and even the jokes get a ripple of laughter. Tick.

After the speech, he fields questions from the audience. Relishing the relative freedom of talking without notes, he is caught off-guard and mentions plans to open an office in Saudi Arabia later this year – yet the licence application has yet to be signed off by the relevant authorities in Riyadh.

Fast forward 180 seconds and the headlines start to appear on Bloomberg announcing the expansion plans. The shares rise when the market opens, but subsequently retreat as an enterprising reporter discovers no application has been lodged.

If the offices in Qatar, Bahrain and Dubai were performing, the journalist concludes, would it really need to open in Saudi Arabia?

The market rapidly reverses the early gains and shares finish the day 8 per cent down. Meanwhile, staff are confused and disgruntled. Why were they not informed of these plans and what does it mean for them?

Not a great day. And it might be set to get even worse given the tone of the Chairman's voice on the message that has been left on the CEO's mobile.

Getting it right

Meanwhile, the newly appointed leader of its principle rival – listed in Paris – stands up to give her first town-hall address to 500 people working in the head office.

She got up two hours earlier than normal. The decision about what to wear and the impression it would give off was an important one. Her comments were well received. The news she had to break may not have been pretty.

But acknowledging the state the business is in and demanding a new esprit de corps and willingness to take tough decisions always goes down well – when it is delivered with energy, passion and frankness.

She was pleased with the decision to stream it live on the intranet and, more importantly, to open up a message and comments board.

The all-staff email emphasised this development as much as her commentary, to demonstrate that the business wants to hear directly from its engaged employees.

The content of the subsequent comments may not have all been upbeat, but the spirit of openness was universally well received.

The conference call to analysts two hours later went equally well. The sheer amount of preparation that had been undertaken and the time spent rehearsing with her CFO ensured that they came across as a compelling team. The flash notes came out soon after, and the headlines, 'New Hope,' ensured the shares ticked up 3 per cent on her opening day.

She always felt that the Chairman was a charmer, but was delighted to receive his text message congratulating her on getting through the day.



Three reasons to develop your leadership communications programme

You will run a better business. Existing and prospective clients will want to spend more time and money with you; suppliers will be more responsive to changes in the terms of your business, enabling you to boost margins; investors will respond more positively to a coherent strategy, delivered with authenticity and belief; and employees will be more productive. Collectively, your senior executives will be a focal point of an organisation that is genuinely based on trust and transparency.

Shareholders are more likely to say yes. Effective communication with investors – both existing and prospective – will help you to reduce the cost of capital. New finance will be forthcoming to complete the investments and transactions you want, and the investors will support the new long-term incentive plan you want to implement for senior management.

You will have more time for other critical leadership issues. Communicating strategy clearly will reduce the time you spend dealing with those who just do not “get it” and minimise the amount of time wasted on pointless exercises. You will be able to focus on exploiting more business opportunities, resolving problems quickly, inspiring your staff, and cultivating the next generation of management leaders.



Yes, we can

Bladonmore has spent much of the past decade working with hundreds of leaders across the world. These include Fortune 500 business executives, senior partners at global private equity firms and investment banks, leaders of professional services firms, as well as a number of the people running artistic, sporting and musical enterprises.

Virgin

Advising and coaching Sir Richard Branson on the launch of Virgin Media.

ArcelorMittal

Advising and coaching Mr Lakshmi Mittal on message development and communication to an audience of 500 of his most senior managers.

Crédit Agricole

Advising and preparing Georges Pauget, the CEO, on his first visit to the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Aldar

Advising John Bullough, the CEO, on strategic communications issues, internally and externally.

Linklaters

Advising and preparing David Cheyne, the Senior Partner, to communicate a new growth strategy for the Magic Circle law firm.

PwC

Developing a set of messages and implementing an internal communications plan for Mike Kubena, the CEO of its Central & Eastern European business, covering 25 national markets.

“The communication must never stop. Internally, externally and in all directions. The message is of course important, but it is about doing it consistently, whatever the economic climate.”

Lakshmi Mittal

“A lot of chairmen of a lot of companies are terrified of the press. Our attitude is if CNN wants an interview you, never say ‘no’, you always say ‘yes’, because we want to become the most respected brand in the world and we have to get out there and talk about what we are doing.”

Sir Richard Branson



The First XI: ideas for the next 12 months

1. Nurture your relationship with the head of communications

The quality of the relationship between the Chief Executive and the Head of Communications has never been so important. It should be built on mutual respect, trust and the ability to be as frank as necessary to win the hearts and minds of all key audiences. When was the last time you – as the leader of your organisation – sat down and walked your head of communications through the strategy and KPIs of your business? When was the last time you listened to an unvarnished assessment from your communications director about your own communication performances in recent months? The top leaders do not hire acolytes; they absorb the feedback needed to relentlessly move forward.

2. Health check your approach to message development

Your organisation would never launch a new product or service without truly understanding what its distinguishing features are. Yet so often leaders give speeches, presentations and interviews to internal and external audiences with little real sense of what is unique about their operation? Dedicate a limited amount of time each year to unlock these distinguishing features and ensure they are fed into your key messages.

3. Put branding and communications onto each ExCo off-site

Senior executives – the people who are operationally running your organisation on a day-to-day basis – may come together as often as every quarter or as infrequently as every year. Ensure that communications is on every agenda. The senior members of your team must understand that it is integral to the successful development of the operation and there is a need for everyone to be actively engaged and involved. That might mean focusing on the development of your brand and ensuring that these key lieutenants understand the core values underpinning the business.

4. Get professional help for key presentations and media interactions

It is not weak to seek out help to polish your skills and to become the best you can. The best sports stars have coaches and there is every reason to assume you would benefit from a communications coach. Their support may be focused on helping you present internally and communicate externally – including with the media – and definitely with investors if the business is listed.

5. Deliver a quarterly video message to explain how things are really going to all colleagues

Film remains the most emotive and evocative way of connecting with any audience. Capturing your strategy on a quarterly basis and delivering it will be effective if executed right. That means being direct and explaining things as they really are. Music will play a part. Graphics should be utilised and you will be able to measure exactly how many people are watching and which bits are particularly popular.

6. Run an internal road-show programme

Make the time for a monthly meeting with ten of your employees from all levels of the organisation. Go in ready to listen to what they have to say – it will be illuminating – and follow up on any actions promised. You can guarantee that each of those ten people will tell dozens of others what you are like and what was agreed. It will go towards building your reputation as being accessible and responsive and contribute to an effective internal communications programme.

7. Take your annual report online and teach colleagues to understand it

When your annual report is published, make the effort to ensure it is versioned for internal consumption. That might mean providing a glossary to help members of the team get their heads round parts they do not understand; that may involve getting finance to run some sessions to explain what the balance sheet and cash flow statements actually mean. Fundamentally, it is another opportunity for the business to understand its objectives and strategy and to align the interests of all those inside it, as well as external stakeholders who receive a copy.

8. Push your intranet to the next level and measure its effectiveness

The best intranets are multi-faceted. They are an information source. They capture the strategy and spirit of the organisation and they engage and inspire members of the team to contribute to its development. The leaders of the organisation need to interact and utilise the intranet and should be provided with the appropriate data to understand its effectiveness.

9. Create global ambassadors at a local level. Provide effective communications coaching to your country managers

Investors and analysts put a huge value on the performance of your firm's international operations. Demonstrating an ability to grow in emerging markets is particularly appealing to investors, so these country managers carry a huge weight on their shoulders. Provide them with the necessary support and training to deliver. They may have breakfast with a politician or regulator, lunch with a prospective client and dinner with a reporter. These individuals are mini-CEOs and you must ensure they are given the support to be global ambassadors operating at a local level.

10. Make an impact in your sector with an annual thought-leadership campaign

When your organisation truly understands its distinguishing features, there is a strong argument to invest in re-affirming these to key audiences. Really effective thought leadership is rare and the exceptional pieces are those that resonate for years after completion. Set yourself the target of producing one piece per year that really excites the industry and demonstrates the intellectual firepower of your operation.

11. Invest in you. Undertake your own Leadership Communications Programme

Bladonmore delivers a number of Leadership Communications programmes for senior executives on an international basis. Over the next two pages, we explain how they work in practice and the benefits they will bring you.

Your roadmap: Bladonmore's tailored approach to developing leadership communications programmes

Complete a successful diagnostic review

We conduct these face to face and, whenever possible, use recordings of previous presentations. After identifying strengths and weaknesses in individual performance, we create a programme to make the changes required. Bladonmore also reviews the business plan and the role leadership communications plays in the execution of the plan, and carries out interviews with your colleagues.

Develop a personalised programme

Programmes range from being just a few polishing sessions with an expert communications coach to a tailored programme of behavioural change. Our clients typically experience greatest progress when they receive coaching for specific events, such as results presentations, town-hall gatherings, addresses to staff, conference speeches and interviews with the media.

It takes time to achieve long-lasting change. Short, sharp bursts of highly focused coaching, sustained over a period of time, are proven to be the most effective way of getting the desired outcome. To fit in with the busy schedule of a top executive, individual coaching sessions are often run as a series of 90-minute blocks.

Each coaching session concentrates on developing one particular aspect of performance. For example, one session might be about how to use a script effectively, another on clarity of messaging, and another on techniques for answering difficult questions or handling the media. We recommend using a real presentation as an example during coaching sessions – perhaps last quarter's results or an upcoming analyst meeting. Sessions are recorded on video and a personal DVD is available after each session.

Create an ongoing development programme

An essential reason why Bladonmore's approach is so effective is that we work with individuals to create personal programmes to continue their development. This involves written feedback and an agreed development plan to ensure the positive changes become ingrained and long lasting.

Provide 24/7 support

Bladonmore ensures round-the-clock access to speech writers, messaging experts and media trainers, as required, when preparing for your critical communications.



Service innovation: Leadership communications audit

Bladonmore delivers a number of Leadership Communications programmes for senior executives on an international basis.

Score 1-5 points for each of the following leadership communication attributes. The stronger you are; the higher you score.

The following is a proprietary test Bladonmore has developed to assess the skills of leaders. Take the test and see how highly you score and how your team might rate you.

Leadership communication attributes & skills	Measure	Score (1 to 5) You	Score (1 to 5) Team
Authority	Can you lead the team? Do you command respect?		
Energy	Do you demonstrate enthusiasm and are your energies properly directed?		
Engagement	How skilled are you at connecting with and getting the best out of your people?		
Clarity	Can you get the message across clearly and effectively?		
Resolution	Will you stick with it through the tough times?		
Courage	Will you confront a challenge head-on?		
Decisiveness	Will tough decisions be deferred?		
Self-confidence	Do you have confidence in your own ideas and abilities?		
Assertiveness	Can you win the arguments? Do you speak up when you disagree?		
Trustworthiness	Are your life savings safe? Do you keep promises?		
Total		/50	/50

Addressing leadership communication challenges



Statoil Hydro

Statoil Hydro needed to demonstrate progress on-plan, satisfy analysts and show flexibility to respond to the growing interest from hedge funds by communicating effectively with its investors.

Bladonmore solution

Statoil Hydro's London PR agency asked Bladonmore to develop a coaching programme, preparing the all-Norwegian board for the annual Capital Markets day, presenting to 150 shareholders and analysts.

Extensive preparation and planning was followed by three days in Norway delivering individual coaching to board members to improve their presentation skills and understanding of UK-based analysts.

Results

Each delegate significantly improved the quality of their presentations and their ability to respond to questions. Analysts praised the performance of individual board members and the effectiveness of the Capital Markets day whilst the share price rose in the days following the event and held its gains over subsequent months.

Bladonmore has since been used repeatedly over three years by Statoil to coach the company's directors, senior management and IR team.



Cineworld

Cineworld had been an exceptional investment for private equity firm Blackstone, which then wanted to exit the business via an IPO. However, Cineworld's senior management had limited experience of dealing with the financial markets. The onus was on preparing them to make the transition.

Bladonmore solution

Prior to the investor roadshow, Bladonmore re-worked the existing presentation with management, giving them a sense of ownership over the content, with suggestions made on key messages alongside the financial PR agencies and bankers. Individual and group presentation coaching was given to management team along with expert media training.

Bladonmore's design team worked with Cineworld to create its corporate/investor relations website, which went live at the time of the IPO.

Results

Cineworld raised £120m when it floated on the London Stock Exchange in May 2007. Bladonmore has continued to work with the company on investor communications, producing its annual and interim reports.



Northern Trust

Northern Trust has traditionally had a relatively low profile in Europe, despite being one of the largest global asset managers. The corporate communications team wanted to ensure that key spokespeople at Northern Trust were prepared for a programme of proactive media involvement and increased press interest.

Bladonmore solution

Working closely with the corporate communications team, Bladonmore developed a bespoke media training programme for Northern Trust. This addressed the specialist audiences that the group was likely to be addressing and ensured any media training was designed specifically for Northern Trust's needs. Bladonmore was appointed as Northern Trust's exclusive media training partner.

Results

Over the past year, Bladonmore has coached dozens of senior managers and specialists to handle the press effectively and ensure clear media communications. The breadth and depth of interviewing skills covered by Bladonmore has meant that Northern Trust has identified a marked difference between people who have gone through the training in their ability to direct media interviews and deliver quotable sound bites.



BNP Paribas

BNP Paribas' global head of communications wanted to prepare its senior leadership to respond to any potential crisis generated by a serious, reputation-damaging incident. The key objectives included how to respond during an unfolding crisis of this sort, how best to recover, and how to mitigate reputation risk.

Bladonmore solution

Bladonmore recommended and developed a training exercise that challenged the corporate communications team and the senior leadership to respond to a series of simulated crisis events. The fictional scenarios included a controversial personal accusation made about the CEO, and a rogue trader who cashed in on short-selling shares ahead of a major announcement.

Results

The team created a set of crisis communications messages tailored for a reputation-damaging event. Delegates learned how the media and other stakeholders react during such crises and how best to develop and implement a plan that reduces reputation risk.

Bladonmore provides strategic communications advice and implementation services to organisations, their leaders and executives. Driven by our desire to address our clients' challenges and opportunities, Bladonmore brings a unique combination of expertise and services in print, online, on screen and in spoken communications.

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