



6 Key Communication Practices

to Build Trust and Inspire Your Team

FranklinCovey

Even though our world has changed drastically, our leadership style has not.

Most organizations and teams today still operate from a leadership model rooted in “Command & Control,” focusing on positional power, hierarchy, and compliance.

But because of the accelerating disruption in the world, the workforce, work itself, and the choices we have for where and how to work and live, these old rules of leadership no longer apply. The “Command & Control” leadership model is outdated. We need to shift to a more accurate, relevant, and complete model: a “Trust & Inspire” leadership model.

You inspire intentionally when you connect with people and in turn connect them to a sense of purpose, meaning, and contribution at work, helping them reach new levels. The key is everyone has a purpose, something inside them that drives them. Your job as a leader is to help others connect to it. Once you do, they’ll be committed and engaged with new energy and understanding.

A Trust & Inspire leader focuses on building relationships that develop capabilities and empower their team. And one way in which they build these high-trust relationships is by using clear and effective communication practices—consistently.



Leadership happens one conversation at a time.

One of the most impactful communication channels for leaders with their teams are 1-on-1 meetings, where a leader's communication style can make or break the relationship—ultimately unleashing potential or stifling it.

When leaders conduct 1-on-1s, they can sometimes fall into a Command & Control style, even if it's the most advanced "Enlightened Command & Control" style. Team members will feel managed. But they want to be led.

Use the following practices to shift to a Trust & Inspire style. As a result, you'll engender heartfelt commitment, along with all the passion and creativity that comes with it.

Drawing out motivations and challenges, building trust, and inspiring better performance is hard. But it's sure easier if you use some of these key communication practices.

The following 6 practices will help you inspire those you lead and serve to become the best versions of themselves and to produce their best work.



1. Ask open-ended questions that begin with “how” or “what.”

Closed-ended questions that require only a yes or no answer—for example, “Do you think we’ll meet the deadline?”—can be a waste of breath.

PRO TIP:

Before each 1-on-1, have a list of two or three thought-provoking questions you can ask that begin with “how” or “what.”

Questions that demand a “yes” or “no” response fit with a Command & Control style of leadership. I’m the boss. You’re not. I ask the questions. You give me accurate, concise answers. This sort of communication has its place. However, in 1-on-1s, where a leader has a great opportunity to prioritize the direct report’s growth and development, you want to use a different questioning style. You can significantly improve your odds of finding out what’s really going on by using “how” and “what” questions, which are more likely to yield thoughtful, honest answers and help people feel trusted and inspired.

Poor:

“Are you enjoying the project?”

Better:

“What are you enjoying most—and what’s been challenging—about the project so far?”

or:

“How are you feeling about the project this week versus last week?”

One exception: “How’s Project X going?” is a “how” question that rarely yields much beyond an automatic “fine” or “good.” As with yes and no questions, most direct reports are inclined to say whatever’s likely to keep their manager happy and off their back.

To get a more meaningful status update, go with a more specific question: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you say Project X is going, and what makes you say that?” or “What blockers are you facing with Project X?”

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Every connection is a leadership moment, and great leaders consciously invest in these moments to affirm others' value and to build deep wells of trust.”

– Catherine Nelson
General Manager, FranklinCovey Australia
and New Zealand



2. Draw out issues with follow-up statements and questions.

ASK YOURSELF:

What are some statements you can make that give your direct reports positive reinforcement for opening up and sharing?

Read between the lines.

If a direct report responds to an open-ended question with a short or curt response like, “*It’s fine*” or “*It is what it is,*” don’t just inwardly shrug and move on. Trust & Inspire leaders genuinely care about the people they work with — and they want to understand other people’s thoughts, feelings, experiences, and points of view. You can do this by showing—with well-crafted follow-up statements and questions—you care and that you’re asking with the intent to better understand the situation and possibly help.

For example, if you inquire about someone’s workload and get a vague, one- or two-word answer, you might follow up with a comment like, “*I know you’ve got a lot going on, and I want to make sure you have the*

support and resources you need.” Or you could go with another question: “*Which project is giving you the most trouble?*” or even just “*Could you say a little more about that?*”

If you’re dealing with a guarded individual, consider that they may be dealing with non-work issues or are naturally quiet or shy. Continue to give positive reinforcement/feedback if they do choose to engage.

3. Don't sabotage what you're saying with contradictory body language, voice, volume, tone, etc.

Your body language, tone of voice, and other non-verbal cues can be just as important as the words that come out of your mouth—maybe even more important.

PRO TIP:

Being self-aware enough to notice your body language and voice is very difficult, so it may help to focus on one thing at a time.

For example, when you ask a direct report about a challenge and say you want to help, but then check your phone while the person's speaking, you send a clear signal that you really believe you have more important things to do. Or when you say you think a direct report can reach their goal, but your shoulders slump, and your voice trails off at the end of your sentence, you're signaling weakness in that point of view.

To make sure your communication style builds trust and inspires people, be fully present and authentic. Your words, tone of voice, and body language need to be

in harmony with each other. People can tell when you aren't paying attention or paying partial attention. And failing to give people your full attention is a guaranteed way to erode trust. When speaking, match what you are saying with how you say it. For example, you might lean forward, smile, and use a curious tone of voice while asking a direct report about what they see as the next step in their career. When in doubt, aim to be attentive yet calm—good eye contact, arms loose at your sides, and a confident, even tone of voice.



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Your life is really a series of conversations. Treat each one with care.”

– Joel Peterson

Chairman of JetBlue Airways /
FranklinCovey Board of Directors

4. Be wary of the word “why” when trying to explore people’s rationale for doing things.

Questions that begin with the word “why” can come across as threatening.

PRO TIP:

Conversations that start defensively are rarely productive; people tend to reveal more when the other person seeks to understand them instead of judging them.

Knowing why your direct reports do things is important. When we seek to understand someone’s “why” or intent, we show we genuinely care. We’re not judging or evaluating; we just want to understand. However, questions that start with “why” tend to make people feel like they need to justify themselves or that they’re being accused of doing something incorrectly, as in, “*Why would you do that?*” The last thing you want to do is put someone in a defensive posture. Try rephrasing your question using “how” or “what.”

Great questions that can help you understand someone’s “why” without using the “why” word:

- What matters most to you?
- What makes you want to get up in the morning?
- What do you do at work that brings a sense of meaning and purpose?
- When do you feel most alive?
- What’s your “why”?

Poor:

“Why did you share that assignment with Yao?”

Better:

“How did you decide to partner with Yao on the assignment?”

or:

“What led you to partner with Yao on the assignment?”

5. Use “we” and “us” instead of “you”—but tread carefully when you’re giving praise or accepting blame.

Send a critical message to your direct report: You’re on their side.

FACT:

Strong leaders with loyal teams often give their direct reports credit when things go well (“You really knocked this one out of the park.”) and accept the blame when they don’t (“I really messed up on this”).

Command & Control leaders use “you” language: What can you do for me? Trust & Inspire leaders use “us” language: What can we do together? Inclusive language like “we” and “us” send a critical message to your direct reports: You’re on their side. Consider the huge difference between these two questions:

Poor:

“How do you plan to reach that goal?”

Better:

“How can we work to accomplish that goal?”

The subtext of the first is, “You’re on your own, pal.” The second, on the other hand, says, “We’re in this together.”

Don’t forget that you have to back up your use of “we” and “us” with collaborative behavior. Few things are as annoying to direct reports as a boss who throws around a lot of team-oriented manager-speak but rarely pitches in or helps in a meaningful way.

The plural pronouns can also backfire if you use them to take credit or share blame: “We really knocked this one out of the park” might rub a direct report who put in crazy hours to make it happen the wrong way, as could “We really messed up on this,” when you were the one who ultimately made the decision to pursue it.

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When we trust others,
it's important that we
communicate the trust
we extend – both what
and why.”

– Stephen M.R. Covey

New York Times and #1 Wall Street Journal
bestselling author, and co-founder of
CoveyLink and the FranklinCovey Global
Speed of Trust Practice



6. When there's an uncomfortable silence, wait 10 seconds. Then clarify.

Ever ask a question that opens up a giant, gaping void of silence?

FACT:

Silence can be an indicator that you've hit on something difficult but critical.

It's bound to happen, and it's bound to be awkward. But don't make the mistake of rushing to fill it—sometimes it just takes people time to collect their thoughts. Your job as a leader is to elevate people's growth to the same level of importance as delivering results.

When you give people the time and space to figure out solutions to a question or problem, you create conditions for people to learn and grow. Silently count to 10 and focus on keeping your body language calm and open. If the person finally speaks up, even if it's a one-word answer, affirm the reply with an encouraging response like *"Sure, that makes sense," "I appreciate that insight,"* or *"That's really interesting,"* then add a critical follow-up question to keep them talking: *"Can you tell me more about that?"*

What if your direct report doesn't break the silence? There are two options to try before moving on: Rephrase your question to better explain what you meant (maybe the person didn't understand and doesn't want to ask you to repeat yourself) or provide some optional responses to show that any answer is safe. For instance, if the question *"What are a few things you think could be better about these 1-on-1s?"* doesn't elicit a response, you might follow up with *"For example, are the updates on departmental meetings informative or a waste of time? Or could I be providing more feedback?"* You don't want to put words in your direct report's mouth, but your suggested responses or rephrasing may show you're open to any answer or help them articulate what they are really thinking.

Your job as a leader is to inspire, not merely motivate.

FACT:

6X

Studies show trusted employees are six times more likely to be high performers.

125%

Studies show inspired employees are 125% more productive than those who are merely satisfied.

Build trust and inspire your direct reports. The results will speak for themselves.

Inspiring individuals takes time and persistent effort. It does not develop overnight. However, you can take steps to inspire greatness in all people by consistently using these 6 communication practices during conversations with your direct reports.

To learn more about building trust, inspiring individuals in your organization, and developing your leaders, visit franklincovey.com.

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