A leader for good? Communication in leadership

Dimos Kyritsis looks at current communication tools within leadership practice and asks how coaches can employ these to help transform good leaders into leaders for good.

In my professional experience, the majority of conflicts that occur in the workplace can be mainly attributed to lack of communication rather than to lack of expertise, technical skills or commitment. The good news is that we always have a role to play in a situation where communication skills are required. We can, therefore, take responsibility for the language we use and the messages we send to others.

According to Lasater and Lasater, the authors of *What We Say Matter*s, speech is the most human of activities.[1] They argue that it enables the functioning of society on all levels, claiming that whenever we speak, we change the world, as the way we speak connects us both to ourselves and to those we are relating to.

Good leaders versus leaders for good

Regarding leadership, the role of the leader is to build trust, engage, influence, facilitate and coach the team, as well as manage challenging behaviour, deal with conflict, introduce change, and often manage internal politics within teams.[2] This multitasking role is inevitably fraught with anxiety. Leadership theorist John Adair[3] makes a differentiation between being 'a good leader' and being a leader for good, giving the example of Adolph Hitler as a 'good leader', but who was certainly not 'a leader for good'. Communication plays a crucial role in being a leader for good.

In my leadership coaching practice, many of my clients have asked for help in developing their communication skills, citing feelings of uncertainty about how to communicate their messages, as well as how to interpret verbal messages they receive. Regarding communicating messages, Lasater and Lasater argue that employees are often intimidated about expressing themselves at work, for fear they may be disregarded or invalidated.[1]

Transactional analysis for leadership

Therapists Stewart and Joines[4] use transactional analysis (TA), a theory of personality that provides a model of communication and a method of analysing systems and relationships, both in personal and work situations. It can help people to stay in clear communication and avoid setting up unproductive confrontations.

TA is suitable for use in leadership coaching and it can be a powerful tool in management, communications training and in organisational analysis.

One of the most fundamental ideas of TA is the basic model of three ego states: Adult, Parent and Child.[5] We are considered to be in the 'adult' ego state when our behaviour, our feelings and our thinking are related to what is going on around us in the here and now, appealing to all the resources available to us for support. We are deemed to be in the 'parent' ego state when we are thinking, feeling and behaving like our parents or others who have been parental figures to us. The model of the parent ego state can be subdivided into the categories of 'controlling parent' and that of 'nurturing parent'. We are considered to be in the 'child' ego state when we tend to behave, think and feel in ways we did when we were children. This model can be subdivided into the model of the 'adapted child' and 'free child'. TA provides insights into our behaviour; thus, we can use it both to develop a greater awareness of the way we communicate and shift between the most suitable ego state for a given situation. We can use TA to interpret messages as it enables us to understand the reasons why people feel, think, behave and communicate the way they do, helping us to release judgments and develop an empathetic approach towards others.

> How is it possible to step out of your stressful daily tasks and duties, connect with yourself, recognise ego states, become more aware of your feelings and needs, and make requests based upon your feelings and needs?

One of the most powerful lessons I learnt during my professional coaching training was that any message we receive is based upon the speaker's world, mental state, belief system, perceptions and judgments. It's not only about the content of the message (verbal cues), but about the speaker of that message; their tone and pitch of voice, the words they choose, their body language. The good news is that it's not about us. Even if the speaker has plausible arguments, or if they have a reason to be upset, that does not permit them to be ill mannered. We are all humans, we all make mistakes, we all deserve to be treated with respect.

Developing empathy and compassion

Having found myself in this position, I asked myself what I have to embrace and what I have to let go of in order not to take things so personally, and the answer came along. I had to suspend taking responsibility for other people's communication patterns and embrace empathy and compassion. None of this came naturally to me. I had to reframe my own disempowering perspectives, practise, and effect changes. My coaching supervision supported me a lot in this journey. Kegan and Lahey[6] of Harvard University elaborate on the change challenges we face today, differentiating between 'technical' and 'adaptive' change. The former necessitates the development of new skills, while the latter 'can only be met by transforming your mindset, by advancing it to a more sophisticated stage of mental development'.[6] Investing in a new way of communication is definitely an adaptive change challenge. The notion that any message we receive is associated with the speaker's world and mental state is one of the essential pillars of empathy and compassion.

It is worth considering that offering empathy and compassion neither requires that we

approve of nor condone the other person's behaviour, nor does it detract from our own perception of reality or perspective. We can give empathy and compassion to someone and at the same time disagree with or disapprove of their action(s). It simply helps us to understand the reasons why someone speaks or acts the way they do, and we can therefore focus on observing the other person's speech, and release any judgment we may be holding, which is likely to lead us to labelling that person. As psychologist Kristin Neff writes: 'The moment you see the man as an actual human being who is suffering, your heart connects with him. Instead of ignoring him, you find to your amazement that you are taking a moment to think about how difficult his life is. You are moved by his pain and feel the urge to help him in some way'.[7] Empathy involves understanding the reasons why someone behaves as they do, while compassion entails the clear seeing of suffering, feelings of kindness for those who are in discomfort, and the acknowledgement that all of this is a common human condition.

As I noted earlier, the way we speak is the way to connect to ourselves and to others. During my recent teacher training in restorative yoga, my tutor, Deborah Berryman, emphasised the importance of empathy and compassion in teaching, pointing out that we cannot give empathy and compassion to other people unless we give it to ourselves, otherwise we are building non-functioning relationships with unclear boundaries. That was another powerful lesson that brought home to me that I had been judgmental and critical towards other people not because of the things they said or did, but because I had been judgmental and critical towards myself. According to Neff, compassion for ourselves involves recognising our own discomfort and suffering, discerning the reasons for our suffering, extending kindness to ourselves because of our suffering, and realising that this is a part of the common human experience.[7] We are not the only ones in this world thinking, feeling, speaking and communicating the way we do. Apart from our verbal communication, our state of mind affects our non-verbal communication, and our body language in general, which others pick up on.

The key components of non-violent communication

The first gift of (self) empathy and (self) compassion is that it enables us to differentiate between observations of facts and evaluations when we communicate, as both help us to release judgments. This forms the first component of the non-violent communication (NVC) model, developed by Marshall Rosenberg,[8] who argues that a combination of observations and evaluations is often heard as criticism. Observation is a statement based upon a fact that happened, and is free from any form of our own perception or opinion. The statement, 'She said she will not meet her deadline' offers an example of pure observation, while the statement 'She won't meet her deadline' is an example of observation mixed with evaluation, as it contains our own estimation of her performance. Leaders can invest in the art of observational language whenever they evaluate someone's performance at work, so as to make it more useful and less prone to misinterpretation.

Empathy and compassion are also associated with the identification of feelings. Once again, to improve our capacity to identify, acknowledge and assuage the feelings of others, we need first to develop a greater awareness of our own feelings and be able to communicate them. This is the key to self-expression – the second component of non-violent communication. We often expect other people to guess how we feel, while we are reluctant to express and communicate our own feelings, in the false belief that the more vulnerable we appear to be, the more likely we are to be exploited. Rosenberg highlights that the expression of one's vulnerability is likely to resolve conflicts.[8] He also argues that when we express our feelings, we should be cautious to distinguish between feelings and thoughts, which entails distinguishing between what we feel and what we think we are, as well as how we think others react or behave towards us. He argues that the statement 'I feel that you don't respect me' does not involve an expression of a feeling, as he does not identify 'you don't respect me' to be a feeling. Rather, it expresses what the speaker believes the other person is doing to him. By contrast, the sentence: 'I am sad that you did not attend the meeting' does verbally express a feeling.

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Heightened awareness of our feelings and the reasons we experience each feeling helps us to gain further clarity of our needs. The expression of our feelings facilitates the expression of our needs. The more we express our needs, the more likely we are to fulfil them. Acknowledging and expressing our needs is the third component of non-violent communication.

Rosenberg[8] and Lasater and Lasater[1] agree that the way to get our needs met is through request making. We therefore ask for actions that may comfort our needs. Rosenberg is in favour of using positive language when we make requests, suggesting that we communicate to others what we *do* want them to do, rather than what we *don't*. Lang suggests we focus on verbal positive pathways as a means of reframing negative pathways, arguing that speaking the positive is as empowering as hearing the positive.[9]

Requests seem to be more constructive when they are accompanied by the speaker's feelings and needs, otherwise they may be perceived as demands. Lasater and Lasater[1] argue that a speaker who makes a request should be open to the possibility that the other person may decline. If they try to pressure someone into agreeing, then they make a demand, no matter how calm and kind they may appear to be. In the workplace, leaders are likely to make a request in a group situation. In a group, the members need to be clear about what the request is and who it is directed towards, so that they can know what they are expected to do and how they are expected to act. Request making is the fourth and final aspect of NVC.

Creating leaders for good

The above theories and practices of communication invite leaders first to connect and communicate with themselves, as a means of developing a greater awareness of their own patterns, feelings and needs, and communicate them through observations and through request making, instead of demand making. Considering Lasater and Lasater[1], who argue that whenever someone connects with themselves, they connect better with others, we can infer that a leader who is connected with themself builds a greater connection with their team members. As Kinyon and Lasater state: 'When you tend well to yourself, you can listen with interest, hear the other person, and understand what is going on for them. Working through a conflict with them starts with connecting to yourself'.[10]

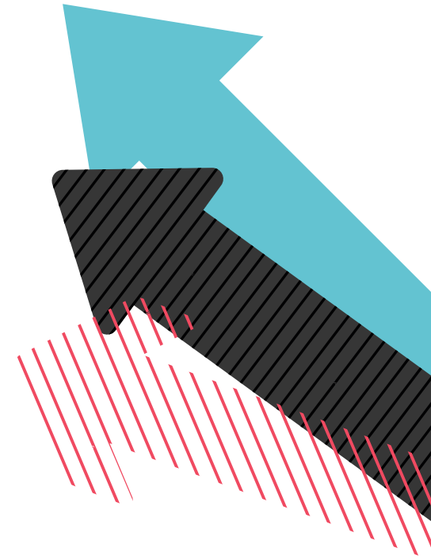
How is it possible to step out of your stressful daily tasks and duties, connect with yourself, recognise ego states, become more aware of your feelings and needs, and make requests based upon your feelings and needs?

The answer is practice. Leaders can focus on practising these skills outside of work, in situations that do not seem to be stressful.[1] They can therefore train the brain to memorise the sensation produced and to bring it forward when needed. A daily ritual can also act as a reminder. Kinyon and Lasater stress that daily practice of a skill enables one to integrate it so that they can have access to the body memory to regain awareness, presence and choice in the moment they need.[10]

These communication theories and practices are also highly applicable to coaching relationships. As coaches, we can be overwhelmed by the dynamics of the conversations with our clients, as well as by our willingness to support our clients in producing results. Unless we give empathy and compassion to ourselves, we will be unable to extend empathy and compassion to our clients, release any hidden judgments we might make, and develop greater unconditional positive regard for them. The theory of ego states that TA offers can help us understand better both where our clients are, and then pinpoint the ego state we find ourselves in and make the choice to shift into a different state to connect with ourselves and better serve them.

Having invested in developing self-compassion and empathy, I am much more present, focused and calm in my sessions. My clients are picking up that energy, stating that they are feeling listened to and cared for. Adopting the model of transactional analysis in my relationships with my clients has helped me move from the state of 'nurturing parent' into the 'adult' state, and that shift has given agency to my clients and greater ownership over their results. In following the principles of non-violent communication, I have managed to create more structure for my clients and set clearer boundaries with them.

A coach, a leader, and anyone who is able to express themselves and communicate their feelings without defensiveness, attack, judgment or blame, has the ability to inspire others to do the same. Inspiration is a clear contributing factor to change. Modelling healthy behavioural and relational patterns as a coach is a skill that has the potential to elevate a good leader into a leader for good. ■



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