

Whispering Through a Bullhorn

What Happens When a Leader Speaks

One of the benefits of being a leader is that we have the privilege – and responsibility – of influencing others. When we speak, our followers listen.

But what do they hear?

Often way more than we intended to say. We often speak with very focused intent while our listeners hear in a broader context. How our message fits into that context determines the ultimate impact of our words. Here's an example. Let's call our leader, "John".

John: "I got a call yesterday from Customer X. They were not happy about how long it's taking to get their orders. Let's step it up and make sure we're serving our customers well."

John's intent: *I need to keep everyone focused on customer satisfaction.*

The Followers process this in the context of other messages:

- *Last week John was pushing to control costs – no overtime to make sure things get done on time.*
- *Our company values include "excellence", but if I take the time to make sure everything is accurate I'm going to slow down getting the orders out.*
- *We give Sales realistic delivery dates, but they keep promising things sooner.*
- *John pulled me off of Customer X's order Monday to work on Customer Y's order. How do I know which Customer to satisfy?*
- *Maybe I'm supposed to prioritize orders based on how likely they are to complain to John?*

The impact of John's words on the followers: lack of clarity; reduced confidence in the John's grasp of reality; hopelessness about ever being able to do their job well; reduced energy and enthusiasm toward their work. Loss of productivity.

Our words don't just apply to the current incident we're trying to address. They echo through the halls long after the specific incident has been forgotten. So what can we do?

1. Consider your audience's **perspective** before you speak. Just like a marketer considers how various market segments will respond to each word and message, consider how your followers will hear your words. That implies you know your audience well enough to anticipate their response. Make sure your message addresses their needs, not just yours.
2. Consider the **consistency** of this message with other messages you've delivered (especially your own behavior!). Proactively address any potential mixed messages. If you've declared one thing to be your top priority, and are now saying something else is most important, clarify why the change and how the two priorities interact.
3. Have a **dialog** rather than make pronouncements. Have a conversation where those you want to influence get to share their concerns and ideas on the challenges and how to overcome them. They will feel valued and you will better understand what is interfering with your success.
4. **Own it** when you do fumble your communication. Admit it, apologize, and clarify. A little humility and transparency cover a multitude of mistakes.



enLumen Leadership Services: illuminating your path to better leadership.