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communication ► engagement ► change

Maintaining trust
in times of change

Introduction

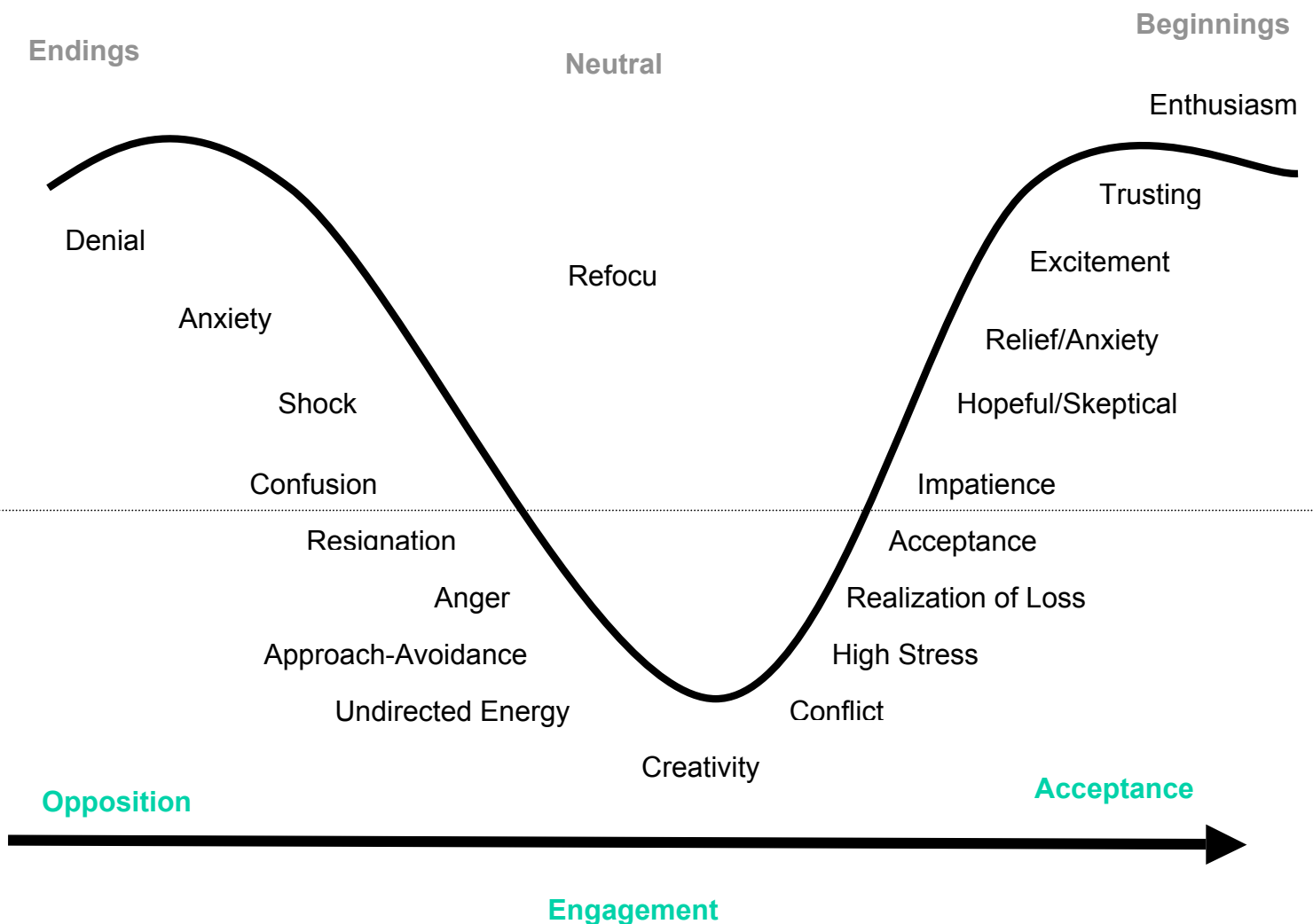
Trust: You can't buy it and you can't demand it, but it plays a central role in deciding your success as a leader. As governments find to their cost, you can have a clear agenda, a powerful communications machine and little credible opposition, and yet under perform because you have failed to recognize the importance of building and maintaining trust.

It's not so hard to build the trust of your people when times are good: when you can offer a high degree of security and a clear, shiny career path, everyone's happy and inclined to trust the competence and integrity of those running the firm. But how can you ask your people to trust you when you're 'letting go' of their colleagues, merging with a competitor or restructuring their department?

Picture the scene: you are about to announce plans to close a regional office, reduce new staff intake and hold salaries for employees as part of a plan to shore up faltering profitability. In this document, we explore the simple but critical rules that help you to inspire trust in your people when implementing difficult or controversial plans.

The change curve

Research over many years has demonstrated how people react to sudden, imposed change in their lives, such as abandonment or bereavement. Fig.1 shows the 'change curve' that people's emotions may follow in the weeks and months following a traumatic event. Organisational psychologists now believe that teams or even whole organisations experience a similar pattern of emotions following major organisational trauma such as the announcement of a series of redundancies, and its effects may be experienced by a whole team, not just by those directly affected by the changes.



Shock

At a personal level, shock is an emotional anaesthetic that allows an individual to cope with an immediate trauma. It is sometimes characterised by astonishingly normal, everyday behaviour in the face of a momentous event: Shock may last hours or days before 'reality' kicks in. Organisationally, a team in shock goes back to its desk and carries on with the work in hand, appearing rational and unmoved by your announcement. Keep your communication at this point short, clear and sensitive to emotion.

Denial

Denial can be characterised by a refusal to discuss or even acknowledge that an event that has happened. Organisationally, a team in denial may continue to work as normal and not respond until your actions make them realise that 'this really is happening to us'. Make sure you keep on repeating your key messages at this point as their retention of detailed information may be very limited.

Anger

Anger is a response to a recognition of one's powerlessness to change the situation. Organisationally, anger is displayed in familiar ways – hostility, unwillingness to listen and - more damagingly - a detachment or disengagement from work, clients and colleagues. Resist the temptation to avoid or suppress the anger – instead, manage it with dignity and openness.

Letting go

This period can last weeks or months and may be characterised by depression or withdrawal as an individual feels 'in limbo' – recognising that the past has gone but not yet ready to face the future. Organisationally, it is the most dangerous time for leaders: After the turbulence and conflict of anger, a team may appear to return to normal, and leaders may believe that the battle is over and everyone – particularly survivors – has 'got over it' and moved on. Just when your people most need to hear from you, you stop communicating with them and go back to shutting your office door. Use this time to focus especially on your key players – the 20% you really must keep at all costs. Lunch them, talk to them and above all listen to them.

Looking forward

Weeks, months or even years after the initial event, people are ready to start living a new life when they reach this stage, and only at this stage can they really start to be attracted by what the future has to offer. The danger for you is: Is it your future they will go to, or the future offered by your acquisitive rival? Now is the time to be more bullish with key messages about your vision for the future and the benefits it can offer.

Maintaining trust through the change curve

To maintain trust, you will need to match your communication to the needs of people at different stages of the curve: Keep it clear and simple at the early stages, and most importantly keep on talking: Too many change communication plans focus on the initial announcements and come to an end after a few weeks – just at the point where your people have let go of the past and are ready to engage with your messages about the future. A robust communication plan helps you plan ahead and ensure you can match your people's needs with the right message and the right tone at the right time.

Developing a communication plan

Any communication plan focuses on three issues – the **market** you want to influence, the **message** you want to get across, and the **media** you should use to get the message to your market.

Understanding your market

It's easy to think that your primary internal market is the people most affected by your plans. But experience has shown that your success is driven by how well you meet the needs of those around the people affected – the ones, for example, that are staying with you, whose trust in you will be determined by how they see you treating those who are going. Handing out black bags to the losers, and reassuring the winners that they are all safe and secure didn't work in the 80's and it won't work now. So plot every different internal market you need to think about including the less obvious ones, like recent recruits (the firm they thought they'd joined suddenly looks different), your star players (who can leave tomorrow) and opinion leaders – the popular, respected people whose views will influence many around them. Lump any of the above into a one-size-fits-all briefing and you may find you fail to target yourself at the people who really matter. So think about

- Who are they?
- What will their concerns be?
- Who would they want to hear things from?
- *What's our strategy for keeping their trust?*

Getting your message across

The key to getting it right is simple – remember that for this task you’re a leader - go back to basics! Here are the factors that influence whether what you say builds people’s trust in you.

What’s he really saying?

Research demonstrates that people use three things to build a perception of what you’re saying: __

What you say: The words you actually use often contribute a tiny amount to someone’s understanding of what you really mean.

What you sound like: Tone of voice is used to assess the underlying message – does it match the words?

What you look like: Body language and facial expression often contributes most to an assessment of what you are really saying and whether or not they’ll trust you

What you say

When you’ve decided what to say, apply these critical tests:

What’s the real essence of this message? Remember that people under stress may fail to absorb up to 80% of what they hear – so make sure your message is clear, strong and repeated again and again.

Is it confident? Look at the phrases below and see the difference – the right-hand ones are active, positive and use straightforward language. Remember Richard Nixon’s “I am not a crook” – what’s the one word you focus on?

Subtle differences in language may make a huge difference to the impression you leave: __

Passive, impersonal

“It has been decided...”

Negative

“We are not hiding anything...”

“Staff will be consulted...”

Active, personal_

“We have decided...”

Positive

“We want to be entirely open with you...”

“We will consult with you...”

Is it inspiring? People need to trust your competence as well as your integrity: is your message one that inspires people? Use imagery, repetition and conviction rather than cliché and jargon.

Is it concise? Fleet Street editors used to maintain that the best copy could be improved by being cut by another 30%. If you’re not the best copywriter, make that 50%.

Is it management speak? If it contains any of the words below, go back and start again.

Killer words

Your communication will improve if you never use these words again:

Synergistic

Scenario

Downsizing

Framework

Holistic



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What you sound like

Listen to the speech patterns of people who inspire trust (Mo Mowlem, a newscaster, a rabbi – take your pick) and learn from them:

Look people in the eye, speak calmly and evenly and don't be frightened of provoking emotion.

Take your time – pause, look around, give your words time to soak in. You will sound more authoritative and help reduce your audience's anxiety levels.

Above all keep it short and simple, to allow your real message to shine through.

What you look like

Research has demonstrated that the majority of your audience's reaction is governed by what you look like when you speak – eye contact, body language, facial expression.

Use your power and status carefully: The more senior you are, the less grand and formal you should appear if you want your audience to trust you in a difficult situation.

Plan the details – switch off your mobile, ensure there are no interruptions and take time to relax your shoulders and neck before you start.

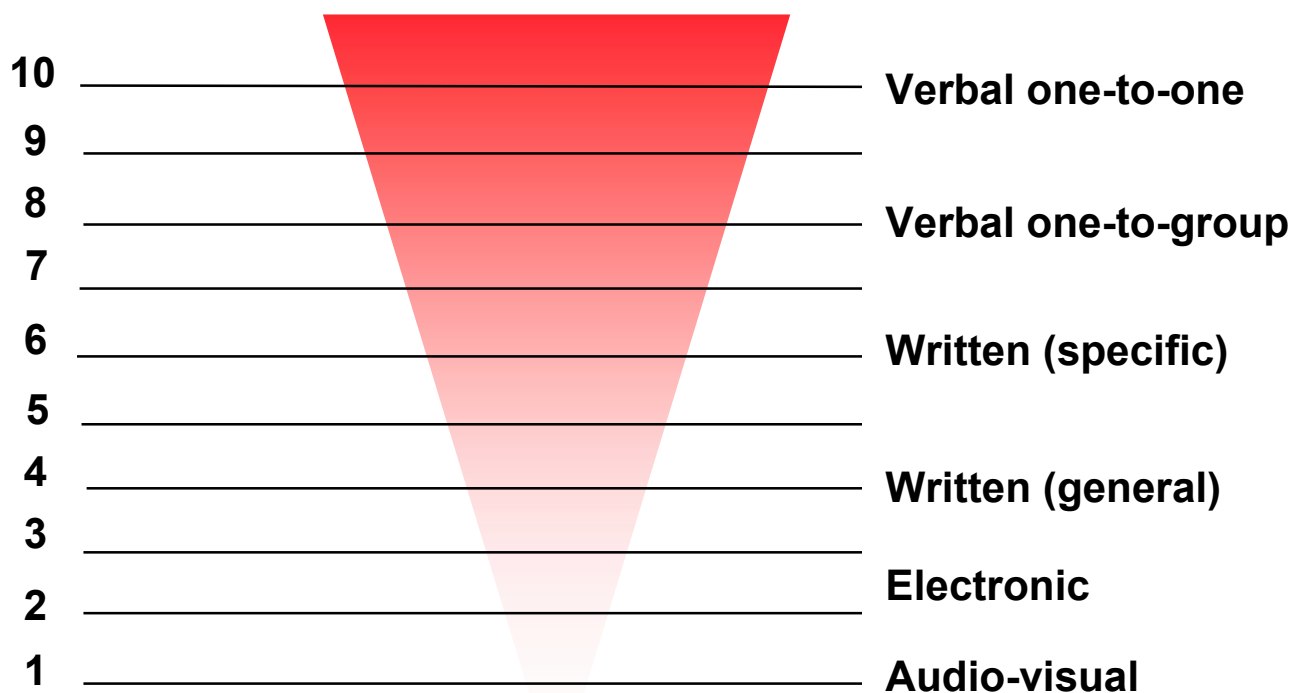
Using the right media

The more concerning the message, the more important the medium

We were all appalled by the Claims Direct leaders who fired their people by text message. But how much better is that all-staff memo you were planning? The chart below shows how the gravity of your message dictates the appropriate medium to use. Use your senior team and a well-planned timetable of meetings to ensure that everyone gets the message in the tightest timeframe, in the smallest group and from the person they are closest to.

Use printed information only to back up the face to face discussions. It helps reinforce your messages and ensures consistency and clarity, but it is impersonal and you may be concerned that sensitive information can be passed directly to the wrong hands – a letter or email copied on to a client without warning by a distressed employee may be disastrous for your trustworthiness in their eyes.

The Concern Scale



Pulling it all together

Our experience of helping professional services clients maintain their people's trust and confidence through difficult times has taught us the essential value of these guidelines. But more than anything else, their success was ensured by their ability to recognise that there is an essential difference between the skills that make them great lawyers and those that make them great leaders. It's hard to be both, but that's what your people will expect of you if they are to stick with you in bad times as well as good.

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