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## *Communicate like a leader*

*Introduces you to the current gold standard in leadership communication known as the “platitude-bullshit-lie” model and explains why HOW you communicate beats WHAT you say, big-time.*

**L**et's get going. No matter how much you have internalized a leadership mindset, you need to translate it into *specific behaviors* that signal to others you are leadership material. We've already mentioned that you are seen as a leader, *because you act like one*.

That said, there are several factors that determine the quality of your acting, the most important one being your communication skills. In other words, you are also seen as a leader, *because you talk like one*.

This is easy and probably self-explanatory, so we will dive directly into the intricacies involved in successful leadership communication.

### ***How you say it ...***

The more difficult part is the notion that, as a leader and communicator, *what you say* is comparably unimportant compared to *how you say* it. Perhaps you've already experienced this yourself: As you build your corporate career, you will increasingly *need to say things that have no content or meaning at all*.

Top leaders are trained in regurgitating stale phrases like "customer-orientation is king" or "we value our people" in a way that captures an audience. Essentially, phrases like this derive their magic from the *way they are said*.

Again, we are going to beat the assertiveness drum: great leaders can charge such empty phrases with an assertiveness that leaves audiences trembling with admiration.

**... *beats what you say***

So, in short, your skill lies in the ability to communicate in a way that *creates the illusion of a convincing or logical point when none is present* and—as a plus—even makes your audience feel good!

That’s why it is so easy for leaders to avoid factual statements beyond the obvious. Doing so, they can never be proven wrong, and their audience will anyway remember much more how they said something and much less what they really said.

***The platitude-bullshit-lie model***

As a consequence, true leaders need to be very good oral communicators. Being true to our trade as consultants, we’re going to introduce a model that will help you practice your oral communication skills. This model is called the *platitude-bullshit-lie model*. Don’t be confused: you will sometimes see the term platitude-bullshit-lie ladder, which is about the same thing.

As the name says, at its core, the model focuses on your ability to *assertively express platitudes, bullshit, and lies*. The beauty of the model lies in its broad explanatory power: it is uncontroversial to assume that about 95% of what successful leaders say belongs in one of the three categories.

***Assertiveness, again!***

So the model is constructed around two axes: what you say in terms of *content* (platitudes, bullshit, lies) and how you say it, as measured by the *level of assertiveness* you display.

The mechanics of the model allow us to define the relationship between what you say and how you say it in one sentence: the level of assertiveness you need to display is directly proportional to your content.

In simpler terms, the *bigger the crap* you say, the *more assertive you need to be* when saying it. And this works along a continuous function starting with platitudes and finishing with lies. That was easy! Let's now explain how you can *make this work for you*.

### ***Platitudes***

As a leader, babbling out platitudes is daily business for you. What separates you from the sherpas is your *ability to display "gravitas"* (as our HR buddies like to say) when saying meaningless stuff everybody knows anyway.

So, in keeping with the model, you are required to have this assertive look on your face that makes clear how extremely important your message is. For a sane person, this takes practice.

Start with a simple platitude, obvious stuff like "the sun rises in the east." Squinting and raising your head a bit usually helps. Learn from G.W. Bush; he was a master in this. Once you can say this in a way that makes a business audience tremble with admiration at your wisdom, move on.

### ***Bullshit***

Raise the bar and increase the bullshit factor. For example, right before filing for bankruptcy, a good bullshitter can get away with stuff like "while we see some challenges short-term,

the long-term outlook is good.” While *platitudes actually have no content, bullshit is different*. In general, bullshit is difficult to debunk, as it always contains an idea or proposal that *could be true*, but never is. For example, in our model we would summarize half-truths (that are very important in business discussions) under bullshit.

You probably hear (and hopefully talk) a lot of bullshit yourself in your office each day, so we’re not going to provide more examples.

### *Lies*

The day you master bullshit statements like the above, try to move on to *the realm of flat-out lies*. Probably the most popular lie in business is something around “we value our people,” or “people are our most important asset.” On reflection, this is not a very big lie, because *nobody actually believes it*. But it’s a good start.

A better one would be “we have found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.” This could have been potentially true. And to make it stick, it had to be said on various occasions by different people.

This kind of *orchestration is actually a defining feature for lies*. In general, lies need some kind of ballyhoo around them, as this increases your probability of getting away scot-free. However, we do not recommend that you lie more than is necessary to advance your career.

Princeton Professor Harry G. Frankfurt says it very clearly in his famous title *On Bullshit*: “our attitude towards bull-

shit is generally more benign than our attitude towards lying.”

Also, note that the degree to which you can lie (and get away with it) is limited by your rank: if you’re low-ranking, a small lie is okay; if you’re high-ranking, you can get away with a bigger lie. You knew this anyway.

However, many careers fail because low-ranking managers *play around with lies just way above their level*. As an aside, now you also understand why we find “middle management” a bit of a clumsy concept.

### ***Leadership language***

Okay, so we just said *HOW you say stuff beats WHAT you say*. Still, there are a couple of buzzwords and phrases expected from senior leaders. So it pays to invest a bit of time to dig into this. And please, all you number-crunchers out there, do not worry about your linguistic competence. This really is a lot easier than you think.

You get the idea: all you need to do is to use a few words and phrases every now and then. Your sherpas and fellow leaders *will love them*. Here are the top six you need to succeed in any boardroom:

“*Strategic*”: We’d recommend you say this word approximately every 90 seconds. Because, as you know, everything you do as a leader *needs to have strategic qualities*. The word has no meaning at all, but we have to admit it just sounds great, and everybody uses it all the time. Great opportunity for newbies to practice leadership communication!

*“Very clear”*: You always need to pretend you “very clearly” know what to do. In most instances, this is used in the context of “I have a very clear vision or strategy or plan” (meaning: I have no idea) or “we took a very clear decision” (meaning: we have no idea). Sometimes you will hear “crystal-clear” (meaning: we *really* have no idea and would appreciate being left in peace unless you intend to follow other interests outside the company).

*“This is a matrix”*: Wow! In case you need to demonstrate you did not spend the last 20 years under a rock in the desert, this is your line (meaning: “I have no clue what’s going on, and I probably don’t care.”)

*“ASAP”*: As Soon As Possible. We would like to again say that anything you want to see happen, you want to see happen NOW. All of your ideas and proposals need immediate attention and action by your sherpas. Spicing up every cinch with the acronym “ASAP” creates a *sense of urgency*.

*“Leave the comfort zone”*: A classic. Of course, leaders always *ask others* to leave their comfort zones. You can comfortably use this in motivational speeches or whenever you feel like psyching out a few sherpas. The phrase is often used in conjunction with “think out of the box.”

*“This is a journey”*: Whenever the numbers suck and you are responsible for all the shit that has happened, this is your

phrase. It is usually *used to buy time* (meaning: “look, bear with me for a few more months, the HR guys are going to find me a new expat assignment soon).”

### ***Forget authenticity***

Because we hear it all the time, allow us just one comment on “authenticity”: forget it.

The frustrated disciples of the “authentic” movement cannot accept that the business world is not about being nice. But we have a simple solution: Why not be an *authentic asshole*? This is Authenticity 2.0!

### ***Case study:***

This case comes from the political arena and is a fantastic example of how great leaders deftly use the platitude-bull-shit-lie model: you probably remember the “mission accomplished” message that G.W. Bush and his guys sent out to announce the end of the war in Iraq.

Of course, the war was far from over; in fact, the vast majority of casualties, both military and civilian, occurred after that speech. The relevant thing for us was to understand how this obviously big fat lie was delivered and orchestrated to make it stick. And the guys pulled out all the stops!

GWB, the leader, had to put on a flight suit, get into a fighter jet, and make a risky arrested landing on an aircraft carrier (first time ever a US president did this!), only a few miles away from the coast.

In line with our model, the pretty huge lie needed support.



GWB’s advisors chose fighter jets, an aircraft carrier and thousands of soldiers just to inject the right level of assertiveness. And it showed how the model can be put into practice anywhere. And no, we did not provide any consulting on this one.

***Next steps:***

1. *Make sure you understand the platitude-bullshit-lie model.*  
It is particularly important to understand how, as you move up each level, the level of difficulty increases too. In our experience, though, you will quickly enjoy the results from this tool—and practice can be fun.
2. *Enjoy listening to yourself.* A must for senior leaders! Great leaders have the ability to talk and talk for hours, not because they have to, but because they enjoy listening to their own wisdom. Get into the habit of using long car drives to practice.
3. *Always be the harbinger of good news.* In principle, there is nothing wrong with having at least one piece of good news for management once a week. By the way, the truth is that there is no “bad” piece of news. There are always two sides to the medal; you only need to think hard enough to identify the “good” side.
4. *Do not communicate bad news to management anyway.* Ignoring bad news is a sign of progress in terms of your leadership skills. Should you not have advanced far enough, at

least do yourself a favor and send someone else to bring the bad news. This is absolutely mandatory in all corporations claiming to have a we-don't-shoot-the-messenger culture.

5. *Get comfortable explaining your mission statement to new hires.* This is not easy, because most mission statements read like Dadaist manifestos. By all means, this is a fantastic opportunity to hone your communication skills. For example, when doing rehearsals around the platitude-bullshit-lie model, you could make your company's mission statement part of the exercise. In case you wondered: yes, mission statements always belong into the bullshit section.
6. In case your HR guys talk to you about it, *forget this authenticity crap.* There is no value in being seen as a likeable or humane person (that's what's behind the "authenticity" credo). People respect assholes. Period. So why not be an authentic asshole? This is Authenticity with a capital A!
7. *Always have something to say.* Unless you belong to the glorious C-suite where sphinx-like silence usually is interpreted as a display of "gravitas," it is never wrong to add your two cents. If you feel like there is nothing to add to a discussion, there is still the opportunity to—in your own words—just repeat what someone else said to build your share of voice. To make it less embarrassing, you can al-

ways claim to clarify. People like clarifications. In short: say something so the boss can see you!

8. *The longer the meeting, the better.* Any meeting worth its salt needs to last at least three hours. The more senior you are, the longer your meetings need to be. This corroborates your importance. Speed kills!