The 7 Deadliest Communication Sins in Project Management:

How Project Managers’ Poor Communication Habits Undermine Morale, Motivation and Trust on Project Teams!

A White Paper By

SkipWeisman.com

Creating Motivating Work Environments, Delivering Champion Level Results!
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“Creating Motivating Work Environments,
Delivering Champion Level Results”

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These “7 Deadliest Communication Sins” Are the Root of Much of Your Project Management Problems
(Such as low employee morale, low productivity, negative attitudes and a toxic team environment)

“Every time some project leaders open their mouths they ruin their own credibility and reputation while destroying employee morale by killing the confidence, motivation, self-esteem and self-worth of the people they need to get results for their organization.”

Skip Weisman

This report will show you how and why and what you can do to turn that around.

Twenty years in professional baseball management taught me one thing about creating Champions on the playing field - it is that executing the simple “fundamentals” of the game make the biggest difference. The teams and athletes that effectively execute the little things when the championship is on the line come out on top.

In football it is called blocking and tackling. In baseball it’s an outfielder hitting the “cut-off” man on a throw to home plate to get the lead runner, in basketball it’s sinking free throws. For an individual sport like golf it’s keeping long drives in the fairway, and in tennis it’s about holding serve and not double-faulting.

To create a champion organization in business or the not-for-profit world it’s about leadership “communication.” And that’s great for me because whenever I am invited into an organization to help improve performance and attitudes throughout their work environment, the number one issue I always hear at every level is, “communication.”

When I delve deeper to understand what is meant by this nebulous word, I learn that the communication challenges start at the top, with the organization’s leadership. Employees model the behavior and communication styles of those above them or respond and adapt to their leaders’ communication to protect their positions.

In working with organizations of all sizes throughout the country I’ve identified the primary culprit to be these “7 Deadliest Sins” of project management communication. These sins of communication never fail to create distrust throughout a project team.

This is a problem.
Especially since one of a leader’s primary goals in developing a cohesive, motivated, high-morale team with a “can-do” attitude must be to increase trust in the environment. Fixing these seven deadliest sins is a great starting point.

Fix one or two of these and the mis-understandings, frustrations and resentments developing in an organization begin to turn around. Fix three or four and an organization will begin to see significant improvement in short-term results and performance. Fix five or six and your organization can receive my “Champion Organization” designation while working on the last one or two.

Below is a list of “The 7 Deadliest Communication Sins in Project Management:”

- Communication Sin #1: Lack of Specificity
- Communication Sin #2: Lack of Focus on Desirable Behaviors
- Communication Sin #3: Lack of Directness
- Communication Sin #4: Lack of Immediacy
- Communication Sin #5: Lack of Appropriate Tone
- Communication Sin #6: Lack of Focused Attention
- Communication Sin #7: Lack of Respectful Rebuttals

VIOLATING THESE COMMUNICATION SINS HAS REAL BOTTOM LINE COSTS

Upon completing a recent project I took my client to lunch to thank him for his business and we reviewed the progress we had made together. He told me stories of how just by changing his communication style when interacting with key employees it solved many of the problems he hired me to help fix.

Those original problems included senior team members and frontline employees who...

- Were not taking responsibility for their jobs
- Needed constant prodding to get things done
- Were not responsive to client requests
- Did not return phone messages
- Were having shouting matches both in the office and while on project sites
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- Using profanity when communicating with co-workers, clients and vendors
- Procrastinated on following through on business opportunities
- Were showing up late and/or leaving early with no explanation
- Had negative attitudes
- Complained about customers and co-workers
- Were “disappearing” during the day

These behaviors had caused significant damage to the $15 million business with 25 employees. So much so that my client himself admitted that his lack of action to address these behaviors had cost him about $5 million over the previous 10 years, due to:

- Lost customer relationships
- A wrongful termination employee lawsuit
- Accounts receivables gone uncollected
- Failure to promptly identify and negotiate changes/add-ons on customer projects
- Invoices going out late creating cash flow problems forcing a dip into credit lines
- Over-paying employees in salary benefits due to extremely poor Performance Management/Review process

This is really a summary of just one specific client’s issues. But it is also a microcosm of other client’s with whom I’ve worked the past nine years.

You may also have experienced these issues at some point.

Your frustrations and desires may be similar.

In my initial interview with him about working with his company I asked what he wanted to achieve if we were to work together. He said, “I just want employees who show up to work, do their job and not whine about it.”

He also said, “I’m tired of having to micro-manage every aspect of this business. No one can make a decision. The decisions they do make are made with no regard for the company but what makes their life or job easier. If this keeps up I’ll just sell the business and move on.”

I could tell he was serious. He couldn’t understand why no one else seemed to care about his or her job. He felt he was being taken advantage of and was ready to walk away.
What I learned after starting the project was that my client’s communication style was creating fear, uncertainty and anxiety throughout his company. This, in turn, was creating significant low-trust between almost all levels of employees. I also learned that how my client’s communication style actually caused the micro managing he was so tired of engaging in. He was creating such fear of making a mistake in his employees they were paralyzed do or say something “wrong,” so they came to him for virtually everything.

These problems are not unique. I can almost guarantee your organization is suffering from one or more of these organizational leadership communication sins.

I want to help you fix these problems, that’s why I created this report to identify and provide solutions to the biggest organizational leadership communication mistakes.

The Issues, Case Studies, Solutions for the “7 Deadliest Communication Sins in Project Management” follow in this report.

“Before working with Skip our team was stuck in one mindset. There was a culture of complacency and disrespect. Now everyone expects more from themselves and each other, they definitely communicate better and are moving forward.”

Dwight Coombe, President
Sprague & Killeen Insurance
Ellenville, NY
Communication Sin #1: Lack of Specificity

The Issue:

Project leaders complain to me that they have to ask direct reports, and others to whom they delegate, time and again to follow through on assigned tasks, or to adjust something that was submitted because it wasn’t done properly.

When I tell them that it’s their own fault they give me an angry look. But it is true.

It’s true because the usual culprit is non-specific communication. By non-specific communication I mean that basic details are left out in giving instructions or words are used that have dual meanings causing mis-understandings and the need for mind-reading (we’ve all been the victim of someone communicating with us in this non-specific and ambiguous manner where we’ve had to try and read the mind of the other person, or guess, which usually sets us up to fail).

When organizational leaders or co-workers fail to communicate with specificity, team members can feel left in the dark or like they are being set up to fail. This causes uncertainty, distrust and resentments.

Usually, this is not done maliciously and is the result of poor communication habits. However, in very low trust, toxic work environments teammates will throw others “under the bus” by not providing specifics and details that could allow a co-worker to succeed and look good. Other times managers and co-workers may engage in non-specific communication with peers or subordinates as a way to create a false sense of job security.

This latter situation is hard to monitor and must be flushed out by organizational leaders through consistent monitoring and performance management systems. Otherwise a low trust, low morale work environment will manifest, stifling creativity and productivity, ultimately creating, or reinforcing, a toxic work environment.

The Solution:
The solution is as simple as adding specific details and clarifying the meaning of the words and statements we use. As children we always heard the statement “say what you mean and mean what you say.” Communicating with specificity means simply giving people all the information they need to be successful, e.g., deadlines, dates, times, locations, etc. Set people up for success by providing specifics and you will get what you want and need the first time.

Finally, realize that gaining clarity is as much the responsibility of the recipient as the initiator, and therefore ask for clarification and an understanding of priorities or meanings before closing the conversation.

Case Study:

Three Examples of Non-Specific Communication:

1. **Lack of Detail Specificity:**
   A leader desires to have something completed so that it can be acted upon on the subsequent Friday. Many leaders might say, “I need this completed by the end of next week.” The subordinate may think they have until the end of the day on that Friday to return the completed request. In reality what is needed is the item back by the end of the day on Thursday so that it can be acted upon early Friday.

   When Friday morning comes and the item is not back as expected the leader inquires, only to find that the individual is just starting to work on the project with the intention of completing and submitting it by the end of the day. This causes a conflict, which builds resentments and distrust.

   ▪ **Solution:**
     Change - “I need this completed by the end of next week” to “I need you complete this and return it to me by next Thursday at 5pm because I want review it and prepare before I leave Thursday night so that I can act on it first thing Friday morning. With your other priorities is that a timeframe you can meet for me?”

   ▪ **Results Achieved:**
     Productivity in this office improved 100%. Priority items were completed and returned on time. It has allowed every team member to better prioritize his or her work more consistently.

2. **Mind-Reading Necessary:**
   I was coaching the President/CEO of a $5 million recreation facility and his personal assistant to help them work more effectively together. Early in our work together both agreed they were frustrated with their inability to complete key priorities. During one of my observation days I was able to witness the cause of the problem.
Whenever the President/CEO brought something to his assistant to work on, it immediately was placed on the top of her pile of things to get done. Often times it was placed there with no note or verbal instructions. The personal assistant automatically put it on the top of her priority list, pushing her priorities aside assuming that whatever he handed down to her “must be more important than what I’m working on.”

- **Solution**
  Change - I instructed the President/CEO to identify the specific day/time by which the item needed to be completed. I instructed the personal assistant that if she did not get that she was to hold the items, collect them during the day and schedule a 10-15 minute meeting to review them so they could prioritize the items together and get on the same page.

- **Results Achieved:**
The trust between the President/CEO and his personal assistant improved tremendously as did their productivity while the stress level throughout the office was significantly reduced.

3. **Non-Specific Meaning:**
My wife recently accused me of always leaving our front door open when I come home after being out at appointments, saying “you know you left the door open again when you came home this afternoon?” I got defensive and protested because I know I “closed” the door behind me when I returned.

She proceeded to inform me that she meant, “locking” the door completely so as to better seal the door’s insulation during the winter months to save on heating bills. It was a simple mis-understanding between the concepts of “closing” the door vs. “locking” the door. But, that’s not what she accused me of. She accused me of leaving the door open. Which, to me meant the door was not closed fully so that the latch was not snapped shut.

- **Solution**
  Change - “you know you left the door open again when you came home this afternoon?” to “did you realize you didn’t lock the front door behind you when you came home this afternoon so cold air was seeping through the weather stripping?”

- **Results Achieved**
I proceeded to lock the front door every time I returned home from being out during the day in the middle of winter. The relationship between my wife and myself improved, as we didn’t have a need for any future challenging discussions around this mis-understanding. It also opened up other opportunities for us to look where we could improve our level of specificity in other areas.
“Specificity works very well to get the job done and done correctly. Since learning from Skip about communicating with more specificity I have more confidence that the job will get done in a timely fashion and the person helping has more confidence and is no longer confused.”

Jolene Borell, CPA
Vanacore, DeBenedictus, DiGiovanni & Weddell
Newburgh, NY

“Investing time on the front end has also been successful for me. I have spent the time when I assigned the task, to give detailed assignments, and when the work was returned, it was completed as I requested. That's the power of communicating with specificity!”

Jason Puckett, CPA
Vanacore, DeBenedictus, DiGiovanni & Weddell
Newburgh, NY

NOTE:
Understand that in most project management situations this non-specific communication is not done maliciously. It is a result of laziness or old communication habits. By investing time on the front end of the conversation a leader will be saving significant time, energy and frustration because the person to whom the request is being made will have all, or at least most, of the information they need to successfully fulfill expectations.

Additionally, agreement will be made by both parties as to the expected performance, thus reducing, or even eliminating unmet expectations, poor performance and lack of follow-through. Focusing on reducing “a lack of specificity” in project management communication will improve performance results.
Communication Sin #2: Lack of Focus on Desirable Behaviors

The Issue:
From experience I know project managers can easily articulate quickly and clearly the behaviors that drive them crazy. The behaviors they wish members of their project team or even their co-workers, bosses, significant others or children would stop doing.

There seems to be no end to the list of these undesirable behaviors. As a matter of fact, in my workshops when I ask participants to list those things I can usually fill 2-3 flip-chart pages.

There are three problems with this approach.
1. It focuses everyone’s energy on the behavior that is undesirable and wherever your focus goes, that thing grows.
2. It lacks specificity and asks the person being told what “not to do” to mind-read as to what the specific desirable action(s) are. For this person it ends up being a trial and error approach until they can figure out through environmental feedback what the acceptable behavior is.
3. There is no positive reinforcement when an employee does engage in the desirable behavior so it can be repeated more frequently. Many leaders wrongly believe that if someone is doing things right they don’t need to comment since the individual is doing things correctly. They assume they only need to address and correct undesirable behavior and that’s where the focus and the comments go.

This sin is closely related to Sin #1 as it is steeped in a lack of specificity.

The Solution:
A simple three-step exercise:
1. On a sheet of paper draw a line straight down the center of the page, making two columns. Label the left column “Undesirable Behaviors.” Label the right column “Desirable Behaviors.”
2. In the left column write a list of the things that you wish people would stop doing, all the undesirable behaviors that drive you crazy.
3. In right hand column write the alternative desirable behavior you would prefer to have people engage in. Ask yourself “what do I wish they would do instead?” There must be at least one alternative desirable behavior for each undesirable in the left hand column.

When you focus on desirable behavior it gives you something that is measureable. It is easier to judge if the desirable behavior was fulfilled. Trying to prove a negative, that something you didn’t want to happen didn’t happen, is much more challenging, is subjective, and can be open to debate.

Additionally, catch people doing things right. Make specific comments regarding what you liked about the actions an employee took to complete a project or task. Tell them you’d like to see more of that type of action. This will reinforce positive behavior and will make it more likely it will be repeated.

Case Study:

Two Examples of a Lack of Focus on Desirable Behavior:

1. I recently witnessed my client confronting one of his direct reports with, “I need you to stop coming to our team meetings late and unprepared.”

The assumption is that my client wants his direct report to “attend meetings on time and be prepared.” However, that is not what he asked for. The fact that this has been an ongoing, unresolved problem tells me that his continued behavior request change focused on only the undesirable behavior.

His worksheet looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIORS: For our team meetings...</th>
<th>DESIRABLE BEHAVIORS: For our team meetings...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Stop coming in late</td>
<td>• Show up at least five minutes early</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stop showing up un-prepared</td>
<td>• Prepare your comments in advance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Stop being surprised when no one else contributes</td>
<td>• Prepare an agenda and circulate it to all ahead of time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Delegate agenda items for others to come prepared to discuss</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

I coached him to change his communication style so the sta statement moving forward would be:
“I need you to be on time and prepared for all future team meetings. By that I mean that you are at the meeting at least five minutes ahead of the scheduled meeting time with a prepared agenda. Agenda items to be discussed should be delegated to appropriate team members to ensure their active participation in the meeting.”

Results Achieved:
Behavior that had been a problem for more than six months changed immediately. Agenda’s were distributed at least 48 hours prior to meetings and this person started requesting other team members prepare to participate in the meetings for which they had responsibility for agenda items. Meetings were much more productive and showed a significant increase in participation and discussion from attendees.

2. Another recent client asked me for feedback before he shared a request to a team member. It went like this: “I need you to be less disruptive in our team meetings.”

I asked him two important questions:

1. How exactly was he going to measure “less disruptive?”
2. How much “disruption” was he going to accept before it became too much?

I helped him transition the statement to the desired behavior he needed to have from this individual. What specific type of behavior was being disruptive?

His worksheet looked like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>UNDESIRABLE BEHAVIORS: In meetings...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Be less disruptive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Stop taking calls and checking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>e-mails in meetings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Stop the venting &amp; complaining</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DESIRABLE BEHAVIORS: In meetings...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>▪ Be focused &amp; pay attention and when you have something of value to add to the discussion suggest it in a positive, respectful manner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Turn off your Blackberry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>▪ Only speak when you can add value &amp; bring solutions to the table when you do.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The new request was rephrased like this, “I need you to focus on contributing more value in our team meetings and by that I mean coming prepared to participate at a high level by eliminating side conversations with those sitting around you, making sure your Blackberry is turned off before you come in to the meeting room and focus your comments and questions in a way that helps us look for solutions and opportunities.”
Results Achieved:
This individual would turn off his Blackberry immediately upon sitting down at the conference table and began to actively participate and provide opinions and suggestions on issues for which he had experience, adding value to organization’s initiatives. Disruptions from other meeting participants also gradually decreased as this person was seen as a role model in the organization.

Eliminating this project management communication sin can literally transform the results you achieve with your project team.

“I have to say I was skeptical at first, but must admit I am seeing significant positive results from applying the leadership communication skills you have taught us. I am now looking forward to having the responsibility, along with other members of the Meyer Contracting senior leadership team, to perpetuate the development of our company into a “Champion Organization,” and build on the outstanding foundation your work over the last six months has provided.”

Michael Petrone, Head Project Manager
Meyer Contracting
Pleasant Valley, NY
Communication Sin #3: Lack of Directness

The Issues:

There are two primary contexts in which project managers need to be most aware of this communication sin:

1) **Failing to communicate directly to the individual causing the problem and instead going to a company leader or manager behind the perpetrator’s back to “tell” on them. This causes fear and distrust throughout an organization as employees begin to believe that the company leader has spies.**

   In these types of organizational cultures everyone keeps to himself or herself, tries to cover their tracks and is reluctant to share resources. Teamwork is non-existent, silos manifest and there is a feeling that company leaders play favorites.

2) **Another example of indirectness killing organizational culture is when individual personnel engage in behaviors inconsistent with company policies or industry ethics and the leader or manager chooses to communicate to an entire team with a broad-brush overview of the issue, hoping that the perpetrator will “get it” and change their behavior.**

   What usually happens in these situations is that all non-guilty employees resent the fact they are being called out on things they are not doing and don’t understand the need for the meeting. And, the perpetrator doesn’t really see themselves as engaging in the behavior in a way that is detrimental, so their behavior doesn’t change due to their “blind spot (and you would amazed at how prevalent “blind spots” or an unawareness within individuals is).”

The Solutions:

1) **In these situations the organizational leader has to stop enabling and reinforcing the behaviors in which others bring the mistakes of co-workers to him or her. Additionally, organizational leaders need to create processes and systems that allow leaders to identify issues first hand and then confront them in private.**

   When someone does bring these issues to his or her attention the leader needs to delegate back to that individual the responsibility for bringing the issue to the perpetrator’s attention. The person should be coached, and or trained in positive leadership influencing communication skills so they can address the issue directly with the offending individual.
Helping Leaders Create Champion Organizations!

If, after addressing the issue directly twice with no resolution, they should bring it to the attention of the person ultimately responsible, but only after letting the person know (with specificity and a deadline date) that they will do doing so. This way, it is not a surprise if the perpetrator is then confronted by someone in authority.

The power of this solution is that positive leadership influencing communication skills will be developed at all levels of an organization. This will improve overall organizational communication and develop leaders throughout the organization (one of my three key fundamental “Strategies of Champion Organizations”– you can download the free report at this link).

2) Perpetrators of behaviors inconsistent with company policies, procedures or industry ethics must be confronted directly, specifically and promptly in a one-on-one conversation – no exceptions.

Only after it has been addressed in this manner, and if the issue has or could have significant impact and ramifications on the organization, should it be addressed to all in an open forum.

Case Study:

Throwing Other Project Team Members “Under the Bus”

With a recent client I was interviewing employees to identify the specific areas that needed to be addressed to improve the morale, attitudes and level of employee engagement. A common phrase I heard was “throwing people under the bus.”

What this meant was that individual team members were identifying things other team members were doing wrong and would go to the company owner directly. Because of past behavior by the owner, all employees knew he would immediately address the perpetrator.

This management approach created significant fear and distrust throughout the company.

We worked on this issue from two fronts:

1) We instituted a guideline where the expectation was that if there was an issue occurring that someone thought was not appropriate or could possibly be in violation of the best interests of the client or the company, they were to address it directly with the individual first. If this did not correct the issue they would bring it to the attention of the individual a second time. If this did not solve the issue, on the third time they would tell the company owner only after letting the individual know they were going to do so.
2) I worked closely coaching the company owner to deflect any such communication that was second hand. Together we made sure that he did not act on that second hand information. Additionally, to provide a comfort level that projects were adequately progressing he increased his site visits and provided positive feedback as to what he witnessed while onsite and set up follow up discussions to communicate specifically the areas he identified needed correcting (this way the constructive feedback was done in private, separate from the site visit and came after praising the positive progress that was being made).

- **Results Achieved:**
  Team members began to open up in team meetings with each other whom they used to resent and have a low-trust relationship with. The owner of the company began to trust his employees more because he was witnessing first hand the work they were doing. He began to have open, honest fresh discussions of project progress instead of one-way confrontational monologues with employees. On the job results and productivity improved significantly.

**The Dress Code Violation**

While in the midst of an 8-week leadership training program for 15 middle-level managers one of the participants asked my advice as to what she should do about a recent company dress code violation by one of the firm’s newer employees.

As outlined in “Issue #2” above, the department leader called a team meeting to review the dress code with all ten members of the team. Two days after the meeting the perpetrator again showed up for work in inappropriate attire. My student asked me what she should do.

I told her she, or the team leader, had to address the issue directly with this individual. I coached her on the language to use so that it was approached in a professional, non-accusatory way. We were also careful to craft the language so that it did not come across as a personal attack about this person’s taste in clothes.

- **Results Achieved:**
  The end result was that the individual did have a “blind spot” and didn’t realize her clothing choices were inappropriate for the professional setting in which she was now employed. Trust and respect was built between two key company employees and the impression of a poor performing employee was transformed (this issue can also be avoided if more “specificity” was developed in the company’s orientation and on-boarding program.

*There is no greater opportunity for project managers to build trust between project team members and to create a high-performing project team than by reinforcing the value of direct, candid communication.*
Communication Sin #4: Lack of Immediacy

The Issue:

This issue is all about project managers engaging in procrastination and avoidance then tolerating the impact of the bad behavior or poor performance within their project teams.

Wishing and hoping things go away or get better on their own is not an effective project management strategy, yet many project managers choose to engage in this approach.

I have known many project manager that have acted as if this was their leadership strategy. I also must admit that this was my strategy when I first became the leader of an organization when I was just 26 years old.

One of the key differentiating factors between effective, “Champion” project managers and mediocre or poor leaders is this Communication Sin #4. Project managers that address issues promptly will gain the respect of their teams and create a positive environment where people can focus on getting things done instead of engaging in gossip and whining.

The one thing I learned the hard way was that the issue on which we are procrastinating never gets better. It festers, and like an infected cut on our bodies, it always gets worse.

What prevents leaders from addressing issues promptly? Fear:

- Fear of the reaction they’ll get,
- Fear of creating defensiveness,
- Fear of damaging the relationship with the person they have to confront,
- Fear of not being liked,
- Fear of not having all the facts for an effective confrontation (this usually is the case when working from second-hand information-see Sin #3 above)

The Solution:
Commit to addressing issues promptly and directly (see Communication Sin #3), and develop a low tolerance for tolerating things that are, or should be, unacceptable according to your organization’s standards. Commit to being a leader that is respected, but not necessarily liked by everyone. If some of the fears outlined above are an issue, take a class in effective leadership influencing communication and confrontation skills to become more comfortable in these situations.

Case Study:
At one of my procrastination workshops the owner of a $15 million company stood up in front of 50 other business owners and admitted that his habit of procrastination had cost him personally about $5 million over the last 10 years.

The things he would procrastinate on and tolerate in his company included poor employee performance, change orders and billing on client projects, employee discipline problems and sales and marketing initiatives.

One issue that created long-term resentment came out of a lawsuit against him and his company for wrongful termination. His lack of promptly and consistently addressing the employee performance issues and documenting those attempts to address and improve job performance led to a $25,000 settlement against him and his company.

It also led to his enactment of Communication Sin #3 - Lack of Directness in that he took his attorney’s advice and drafted a memo to all employees letting them know that they could be terminated at any time without reason because the state in which they operated was a “work at will” state.

This may have been great legal advice, but created long-term resentment and stifled morale for up to eight years after the incident. Only an innocent discussion during one of my focus group facilitations with the company’s employees brought the incident out in the open.

“"Our staff focus and morale has improved dramatically and as such we are getting more done with much less effort since we started working with you, Skip.”"  
Ken Balasiano, Owner  
Medicap Pharmacy  
Fishkill, NY

Results Achieved:
As issues were addressed promptly, environmental stress and anxiety was significantly reduced and confrontational conversations were eliminated. Trust and respect between team members rose as issues were dealt with in a timely fashion and were not left to fester to build resentment and animosity between team members.

When it comes to project management, this may be the most damaging of all communication sins. The reason being is that everyone on the project team can feel the resentments build and the tension increase, as issues continue to go unresolved and all team members are forced to tolerate the negative impact while the project manager loses the respect and trust of his or her project team.

It happens more often than you might imagine. Don’t let it happen to you.
Communication Sin #5: Lack of Appropriate Tone

The Issue:

Effective project managers know there are three components of communication that allow for the success transmission of any interpersonal communication; words, tone and body language.

This article will focus primarily on tone. Tone, even more so that body language, can have a tremendous impact on the meaning of the words one uses in a message. The more I work with executives and company leaders the more I am learning how much inappropriate tone is impacting their ability to lead.

If you’ve done any sales training or personal development you’ve probably been exposed to the results of a communication study that has been the basis of communication training for more than four decades. It is based on a 1967 study by U.C.L.A. professor Albert Mehrabian which showed the impact each of the three communication components have on the meaning of a communicated message. That study showed that:

- Body language accounted for 55% of the message’s meaning,
- Tone of the language accounted for 38% of the message’s meaning, and
- Words accounted for just 7% of the message’s meaning

However, based on my experience and other research and insights by communication experts these percentages are bunk. As one colleague, Patrick O’Malley wrote on his website “if this were true shouldn’t you be able to understand 93% of a person speaking a language you don’t understand, and 55% of someone making a speech on television with the sound turned off?”

But, I do feel tone is extremely important for leaders to master. Even the slightest inappropriate tone can cause resentment and distrust at worst, and confusion at best.

The inappropriate tone I want to focus on includes:
• The raising of one's voice when showing anger and frustration,
• Being short and curt giving off the impression of being impatient and annoyed with the person speaking with us,
• Using sarcasm to make a point or to respond to someone

Using inappropriate tone when communicating in the manner described above is a sign of complete disrespect and devalues the person to whom we are communicating. It will rarely build long-term trust in a relationship. More often than not it creates resentment and can ruin relationships, teamwork and the commitment culture project managers and project teams need to succeed.

The Solution:

Leaders who communicate with inappropriate tone do so because it is a habit that has been developed over many years. It can be a challenging habit to break. The best solution is the following approach:

1. Gain awareness of this as a communication issue, ask for feedback with humility to identify if this is an issue of which you need to be unaware;

2. Work with team members to create a “Team Agreement” that will allow all team members to hold each other accountable to certain behaviors and put “communicate with appropriate tone at all times” in the team agreement;

3. Allow team members, both superiors and subordinates, to respectfully call each other on inappropriate communication styles in any interaction.

4. When responding to any communication count to five, take a long, slow deep breath and respond respectfully, instead of reacting without thinking.

Remember, a project leader’s responsibility is to positively influence others to achieve a vision together. In order to do that effective communication is vital. For communication to be effective all three components of one’s communication must be congruent and appropriate in order for a message to be properly received, and for it to have a chance to positively influence.

Even though some studies like the one identified earlier are causing debate over the power of body language on a subliminal level to influence communication, I personally believe the most influential on a conscious level has to be tone.
There are so many different variations of tone that one simple sentence can have six different meanings just by the emphasis placed on the words.

**Try this exercise:**

Read this sentence out loud put the emphasis and inflection on a different word each time through:

- *I* never said he stole the money!
- I *never* said he stole the money!
- I never *said* he stole the money!
- I never said *he* stole the money!
- I never said he *stole* the money!
- I never said he stole the *money*!

There are seven words in the sentence, six different words emphasized and six different meanings to the statement. Champion Leaders know how to appropriately apply tone in their communication style so they can positively influence the conversation.

**Case Study:**

I received an e-mail recently from a participant in my 8-week Champion Leadership development program asking me this question, “In our next session could you address the issue about ‘voice raising’ and if and when it is appropriate or not?”

It seems the e-mail was prompted by a staff meeting that occurred at her organization in which a senior company executive raise their voice and chastised her in front of peers, causing personal embarrassment and a loss of respect.

I was happy to address the issue. It took just two minutes. The answer is “*never*.”
Results Achieved:
When appropriate tone is consistently applied results from team members will increase because their self-confidence and self-esteem will rise. It will also provide a more open and creative environment, as team members will feel more comfortable sharing their opinions and ideas.

Of the seven deadliest sins this may have the potential to damage relationships on a team more quickly than others, and project managers must keep their tone in check and appropriate.

Personal Case Study
This issue was becoming such an issue between my wife and I that we created our own solution. We have agreed to allow each other to call a “tone” violation whenever one of us believes inappropriate tone was applied to a response in a conversation. I estimate that 95% of the time when this happens the perpetrator truly did not mean to project the tone and the accompanying meaning. It just happened out of habit. As such after a couple of years each of us is calling the “tone” violation much less than we used to.

“I truly appreciate your consistent follow-up and follow-through in our work together. You fulfilled every promise you made to us and went above and beyond in many cases. As such, I am happy to recommend your coaching and consulting services to the owner or CEO of any size company that wants to get more out of their personnel resources and their overall business.”

Sanjib Sarkar, President
HMedicine.com
Charlotte, N.C.
Communication Sin #6: Lack of Focused Attention

The Issue:
In looking back on my career as a leader, this might have been the sin I violated most, and in today’s technology dominated world it is too easy for project managers to fall prey to this sin as well.

I, personally, vividly remember members of my senior staff popping their head into my office asking for a moment of my time and feeling pressured to give them a response right away, I would allow them to talk while I tried to do other things, from talking on the phone or typing a letter to opening and sorting mail.

Today, with the intrusion of technology the multi-tasking conversationalist is becoming commonplace.

This is one of the complaints I hear most when I interview a leader’s direct reports for feedback. The interesting thing is that while most who are subjected to the less than 100% attention they receive almost everyone makes an excuse for their boss because of the demands on their time.

However, studies are now starting to show that multi-tasking is not conducive to getting more done in less time. As a matter of fact most experts will tell you that it will make leaders much less effective.

In terms of leadership, however, it is even more detrimental. Leadership is about developing a team that respects the person by whom they are being led. There is no greater way to show someone disrespect than to not give him or her your full attention during a conversation.

If the results you are receiving from direct reports aren’t what you would like it to be, it may be because communication is unclear and non-specific. Engaging in this sin reeks with non-specificity (see Project Management Communication Sin #1), as it is impossible to glean details from a conversation in this manner.
The Solution:

Solution #1

Put down the smart phone, turn off the e-mail notifications and minimize the computer screen of the document you are working on, turn and face the individual with whom you are conversing. It is that simple.

Giving focused attention to someone requesting it is a choice. It is a choice worth making as it has significant upside.

Leaders who take the time to give focused attention to their direct reports who request and need it, will:

- Build respect and trust with team members
- Save time in having to repeat conversations and instructions
- Save time in correcting delegated work projects
- Develop your direct reports quicker
- Model the type of leadership behavior your direct reports should be applying in their leadership and managing roles.

Solution #2

I know what you are thinking. I can hear you now “every time I sit down at my desk people are pulling at me, wanting a “minute” of my time, I can’t get anything of my own stuff done.”

This is where leaders need to act like leaders. The cause of this problem is not the people who are coming to ask for a moment of time, the cause is in how the leader responds.

Leaders need to take control of the conversation by setting boundaries and showing respect for everyone’s time, including the person making the request. Solutions in this type of scenario are to pushback on the interruption and ask to schedule a specific time at which you can give the request and the issue full attention. This way both parties have their time respected and can focus on the issue at hand.

If there are a lot of these situations, the more you pushback the more those coming to you with issues will begin to ask for time instead of just barging in. They will also begin to solve some of the issues on their own as long as they are clear on the parameters within which they have authority (this is about delegation strategies and is an area I spend a lot of time with in my executive and leadership coaching relationships).
Case Study:
In the middle of a recent “Influencing Skills Champion Leadership Communication” training program I received the following e-mail:

“It is common practice that when a partner and a team member are discussing an issue and a phone call comes into the partner, the partner will take the call and either the team member will sit there for a few minutes, or, if it’s a long phone call they will leave and try to catch the partner at a later time. The partner, typically will not follow up with the team member, it is on the team member to follow up with the partner. There are times when days go by before they reconnect - either the partner is on the phone when they go follow up or they are at a client. While for the most part the issues can wait, there are times when the partner has promised the client an answer immediately and we still have not gotten through the issue days later. Its impacting client relationships.”

My answer to the training participant was to tell her to apply her newly learned champion leadership communication skills and ask for the respect she deserved as a team member. The next time a situation like this arose, she asked for dedicated time from her boss. She explained how frustrating previous scenarios were and it how it negatively impacted a client’s relationship due to the delay in responding to a client’s request. Her boss is now giving her dedicated time to address issues when she asks for it.

If a project manager wants a quick fix strategy to mend a damaged relationship with a project team member, investing focused attention during a conversation is the answer.

“Skip’s concepts are a practical and easy to follow approach to changing a lot of habits and create more effective behaviors.” Rich Zaziski, CEO FYI Systems, Inc. Parsippany, NJ

Communication Sin #7: Lack of Respectful ReBUTtals
The Issue:

Imagine being in a conversation with your boss and they are giving you positive feedback on a project you just completed. The conversation goes something like this:

“Skip, you really did a great job bringing that project in on time and under budget, I was pleased with how you were able to do it during an unusually difficult economic climate. But, I also need to say I think you should have delegated more of the work to some of your team members and not have done so much of the work yourself.”

Or, you are in a conversation with a business prospect to which you just made a sales presentation hoping to get their business. After the presentation the prospect says to you, ‘Skip, I’m really impressed with the work you’ve done to understand our needs and provide solutions that will be a good fit moving forward, but we’re going to stay with our present supplier.”

In both instances the conversation starts out very positive and then the other shoe drops. How do you feel? Do you feel like the first half of the statement was valid and truthful or was it just a smokescreen to make you feel better with the constructive feedback and rejection, respectively?

Leaders are subconsciously sabotaging relationships with their peers, subordinates, business colleagues, customers and others by engaging in the communication sin I call the disrespectful rebuttal.

Using the word “but” in our conversations has become so commonplace it is difficult to stop using in a conversation when we are debating ideas or providing feedback to someone.

As a leader it is vital you become aware of your own tendencies to “but” another person and begin the transformation to another way to transition conversations.

The word “but” (also “however” and “although”) negates whatever phrase comes before it, such as the statements at the opening of this segment. Here are some other common applications and you will see what I mean:

- “I agree with you, but…”
- “I think you make a valid point, but…”
- “I understand and appreciate what you are saying, however…”
When you are on the receiving end of these statements you know its just window dressing because what follows the “but, however or although” is a statement that proves the exact opposite of what came before the transition.

Subconsciously, the recipient of the communication loses trust and respect for the communicator. Over time, if someone is subject to being “but”ed often the relationship deteriorates and trust between the parties is compromised.

This is also a big cause of conflicts that arise during confrontational conversations as the recipient of the statement feels like they are not being heard or empathized with and has to escalate the level and tone of the conversation. Being able to deftly debate another without using these negating transitions is often enough to keep the conversation at a professional level with both sides feeling heard.

The Solution:

The solution is to begin building a new communication skill using the word “and” instead of “but, however, or although” as a transition. It would sound like this...

- “I agree with you, and...here’s what I also think may work...”
- “I think you have a valid point, and, from my perspective this is also true...”
- “I understand and appreciate what you are saying, and, I also heard this...”

“And” does exactly the same thing as “but, however, or although” in those statements. It is simply a transition to your statement of your points you need to make. You will notice though that it offers a much softer transition and doesn’t negate what was said before it. In the latter statements using “and” what comes next is adding to the discussion, not negating and putting your opinions above the other persons.

This type of communication is high in respect and empathy and will allow your conversations with others to build trust and respect. You may still not win the debate, but both parties will leave the debate having felt heard and respected to live and fight another day.

Case Study - Practice Exercise:
In my “Influencing Skills Champion Leadership Communication” Trainings I have participants practice this exercise. It’s a lot of fun, gets a lot of laughs and makes a powerful point. I encourage you to practice this exercise at your next staff meeting:

Pick an issue that has two very opposite sides like one of the following:

- Pro Life vs. Pro Choice
- Gun Control vs. 2nd Amendment
- Flu Vaccination vs. No Flu Vaccination

Or in my region we like to debate:
- NY Mets Fan vs. NY Yankees Fan or
- Boston Red Sox Fan vs. the New York Yankees Fan

Have a discussion about the issue for five minutes in the following manner:

One person starts with a statement as to their position on the issue.

The other person will respond with one of these three statements:

- “I agree with what you are saying, and...(make your counter argument)
- “I can appreciate how you feel, and...(make your counter argument)
- “I think you make a valid point, and...(make your counter argument)

Each person should make note of how many times they either say “but, however, or although” or wanted to and began to stutter or just stop speaking altogether because their brain got stuck and they didn’t know what to say without saying “but, however, or although. Also noticed how using “but” or its equivalent raises the tension in the discussion while using “and” as a transition tends to defuse the tension and allow for a more reasonable, less emotional discussion.

It is a very powerful exercise that makes a powerful point showing how ingrained using “but, however and although” in these types of conversations is. Try it and let me know how you make out.

Project managers who make this subtle shift in their communication style will notice the emotional intensity of the conversations greatly reduced and better relationships with project team members will begin to develop.
Where to Go From Here?

If you’ve read this far you have probably come to the conclusion that these project management communication sins put a drag on a project teams productivity and company profits in a number of ways.

First, non-specific communication creates the need to have multiple, repetitive conversations just to complete a simple project. In professional service firms billing by the hour this can dramatically cut into a firm’s profits. In other companies where employees are paid by the hour non-specific communication increases payroll expenses.

Imagine adding to non-specific communication a continued focus on undesirable behaviors, which force employees to use trial and error to find what behaviors are desired of them. This is wasting even more time and energy while creating misunderstandings, frustration and resentments throughout a company’s culture.

““The specific results I can point to include improved staff morale with a better work ethic. Employees at all levels are taking greater responsibility for their jobs, are working better together and communicating more effectively with respect and specificity. And, best of all I am no longer micro-managing and have been able to “let go” and enjoy running my business again!”

Chris Meyer, President
Meyer Contracting Corporation
Pleasant Valley, NY

On top of those two, add mis-directed communication that fails to address the proper channels needed to get things done or to obtain specific individual behavior change(s) on a team.

Now imagine a team with a leader that consistently engages in just these three communication sins. If you were on this team how would you feel?

Would you feel motivated to want to help the leader and the team achieve its goals or would you feel stressed and frustrated and maybe even angry about how much time you and others waste trying to get the right direction and right answers? How much respect would you have for this team leader?
I bet you know project managers that consistently engage in five or more of these sins, don’t you?

How frustrating is it to be on a team like that?

Individually, these sins can each cause negative morale, motivation and productivity but may be not more than an annoyance. However, as each sin is piled on top of the other, the negative impact on organizations and teams grows, exponentially.

Multiply that by the number of members on your organization’s leadership team, and possibly other team leaders throughout various levels in your organization, and this is how negative and toxic work environments develop.

Additionally, studies show that one of the primary reasons good employees leave organizations is because of a negative relationship with an immediate supervisor.

The best way to burn out good employees is by continually speaking to them with one or more of these leadership communication sins. The minimum cost of replacing a lost employee through a re-hire, orientation and on-boarding processes is 1 ½ times the salary of the position.

Between the cost of replacing good employees at 1 ½ times salary plus the day-to-day hours and minutes being frittered away because of these leadership communication sins, profits are slipping through your fingers.

Is that a price your company can afford? Is it a price you are willing to pay?

I have to warn you! Fixing these leadership and workplace communication sins is not easy. If it were, you would have already done it by now and you wouldn’t be reading this report!

The Leadership Communication Paradox
The main issue is that many organizational leaders have blind spots when it comes to their communication style. Most people do, for these reasons:

- The “7 Deadliest Communication Sins” are deeply ingrained habits that have developed over many, many years;
- Few leaders get real, honest feedback from their subordinates or peers;
- Because these communication sins often create fear in those organizations, there is too much fear to approach the leader about these issues for job security reasons;
- Egos get in the way of leaders who do get the feedback from subordinates, peers and even their bosses so they don’t really hear the feedback;
- Low self-esteem in the workplace

Therefore, it often times takes an outside, third party observer that the project leader trusts, and to whom they will give authority to, to give them the feedback they need (this is the work I do for organizational leaders who are ready to improve).

This is why, when I created my “CHAMP Leadership” model, the second trait in the CHAMP leader acronym, the “H” stands for ‘humility’ (the others are C=Commitment, Clarity & Communication, A=Accountability to Measurable Results (Goals), M=Motivation for Momentum, P=Preparation and Perpetuation for Profits). Leaders must lead with humility and be open to this kind of feedback. They must embrace this type of feedback and use it to get even better. When leaders get this type of feedback from others it is always done with the best of intentions and must be taken in that context.

If the project manager is engaging in this type of communication style, imagine how difficult it is for him or her to address similar issues with those on the project team and other subordinates. It’s a “do as I say and not as I do” message that rings hollow. The project leader needs to get his or her communication style in order before asking others to improve (or it could be a joint, parallel effort for all team members to work in together, sometimes these are the most fun and effective programs with whom I’ve worked).
Even then, however, few project leaders know how, or are willing to step up and directly address these communication mistakes with the perpetrators. The reason being, egos can get in the way of the feedback and the conversations to change behavior. If not done properly and from the right perspective they can become confrontational. Or, the fear of those things happening causes procrastination (oops, that’s sin #4, see how these issues can be deeply ingrained in an organization’s culture).

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If, after reading this report you’d like a head start on changing the leadership communication habits of yourself and others in your organization, you are going to take the first step with the Leadership Communication Mastery Series

“The Leadership Communication Mastery Series,” available at www.LeadershipCommunicationMasterySeries.com and includes 10 lessons in leadership communication just perfect for project managers and project team members. Not only will it go deep into each of these 7 of all deadliest communication sins of project management, but it will also offer deep lessons in the 3 levels of high-performance leadership communication. This website goes into all the details at www.LeadershipCommunicationMasterySeries.com.

"The issues you guys raised in "The Leadership Series" were spot-on with a lot of what is going on at our company. It was nice to hear that we are not alone in dealing with these organizational personnel performance challenges. I especially liked the approach and tone you suggest to address the issues, not so motivationally driven but more focused on development of the "person" behind the employee."

Kim Finch
ARS Advertising
St. Joseph, MI
About the Author - Skip Weisman
Skip Weisman and his company Weisman Success Resources, Inc. works with leaders of businesses and non-profits to help them create a “Champion Organization.” Skip defines a “Champion Organization” as one that consistently moves towards achieving its goals while nurturing a positive, productive and motivated workforce. You can learn more and download other resource articles and White Paper Reports at [www.WorkplaceCommunicationExpert.com](http://www.WorkplaceCommunicationExpert.com) or, after reading this report feel free to e-mail him at [Skip@WorkplaceCommunicationExpert.com](mailto:Skip@WorkplaceCommunicationExpert.com) with any questions you have regarding how to improve your Leadership and Workplace Communication so you can begin to create a