

High-Impact Communicating: A Key Leadership Practice

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Communicating for high-impact is fundamental to enhancing leadership effectiveness which, in turn, helps produce desired organizational results, and create economic value. After considering some relevant literature, a practical definition of high-impact communication and a practice-oriented framework are offered. This framework for enhancing high-impact communicating helps answer the call from practice minded scholars, educators, and practitioners to bridge the gap between theoretical formulation and the real-world practice of leadership. Six essential skill components of effective communication, which in practice are dynamically inter-related, are integrated into this framework. The application value and implications of this framework along with some application challenges are discussed. This article is intended to help advance the practice, applied research and teaching of high-impact communicating as a key leadership practice.

INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal influence is a critical managerial leadership competency (Kerns & Ko, 2014).¹ The effective leader uses influence skills to help set a clear and motivating direction, focus people on actionable and important areas of impact, and coordinate and link organizational resources, especially people. Communication is a fundamental practice area within the interpersonal influence/people skill domain that can contribute to leadership effectiveness and business outcomes (Riggio, Riggio, Salinas, & Cole, 2003; Flauto, 1999).

The concept of managerial performance competencies has been extensively reviewed and numerous taxonomies have been published. These indexes have all included the managerial leader practice area of communication (Tett, Guterman, Bleico & Murphy, 2000; Yulk, 2012; Kerns & Ko, 2014). While the labels and language used to refer to communication practices studied within these taxonomies varies, the positioning of managerial leadership communication skills as a key people-oriented influence practice area is consistent across these more academically oriented studies.

Applied research has also underscored the importance of communication skills to enhancing leadership effectiveness and emergence. For example, Longenecker and Yonder (2013) recently reported that a leader's skill in communicating, especially during periods of rapid change, is critical to his/her effectiveness and to the success of the organization. In a sampling of managers from U.S. manufacturing and service-oriented organizations, they found that ineffective managerial communication was the most frequently reported deficiency among these managers. Deficiencies reported include poor listening, ineffective one-on-one conversing and inadequate non-verbal communications. After reviewing the literature and investigating business communication skills, Conrad and Newberry (2011) concluded that

communication is connected to all organizational activities and business leaders and teachers/trainers concur on how important it is to organizational effectiveness.

The economic burden of poor communication in healthcare settings, for example in U.S. hospitals, has been estimated to exceed 12 billion dollars annually (Agarwal, Sands, & Schneider, 2010). Ineffective communication in healthcare settings such as hospitals results in wasting medical professionals' time and increasing the length of patient hospital stays which contributes to adverse business and economic impacts. On a broader front, evidence indicates that individual leaders significantly impact the economic growth of nations (Jones & Olken, 2005). It follows that the key practice of high impact communication likely influences policy formulation and outcomes. However, even though there is a substantial literature devoted to economic growth, economists have not made a strong connection between changes in economic conditions and leadership (Jones & Olken, 2005). In addition, the fostering and managing of workplace engagement to offset the costs of disengagement is enhanced by the high-impact communication of organizational leaders (Kerns, 2014; Taneja, Sewell, & Odom, 2015). Leaders who communicate with high impact can help their organizations more effectively formulate and execute strategies to create and sustain cultures of employee engagement which will help provide for a competitive advantage and successful positioning of enterprises in the global marketplace (Taneja, Sewell, & Odom, 2015).

A managerial leader can benefit by having a practice-oriented framework and approach to high-impact communicating. This article offers an operational definition of high-impact communicating. In alignment with calls for theory and conceptualization in behavioral science to include facts and observations gleaned from the real-world of practice, the author has developed an approach to enhance high-impact communicating (Locke, 2007; Locke & Cooper, 2000). While innumerable books, articles, seminars, classes and coaching proliferate focusing on improvement of any number of distinct components of communication, there is little available that integrates the well-recognized key components of communication into one integrated whole approach to high-impact communication. The intent of this article is to offer one integrated practice-oriented framework for high-impact communication, to help seasoned professionals and emerging leaders enhance their communication effectiveness, and to act as a springboard for teachers and applied researchers to help those they serve become high-impact communicators.

PRACTICE – ORIENTED FRAMEWORK

Substantial opportunities exist for practitioners, researchers and teachers to utilize knowledge about interpersonal, social and communication skills. The framework offered here applies this knowledge by building upon observations and experience in working with a broad range of managerial leaders across diverse settings.² Based on fieldwork, applied research and consulting, together with relevant literature reviews, over the past 30 years the author has made the following observations about high-impact communication applied to organizational leaders:

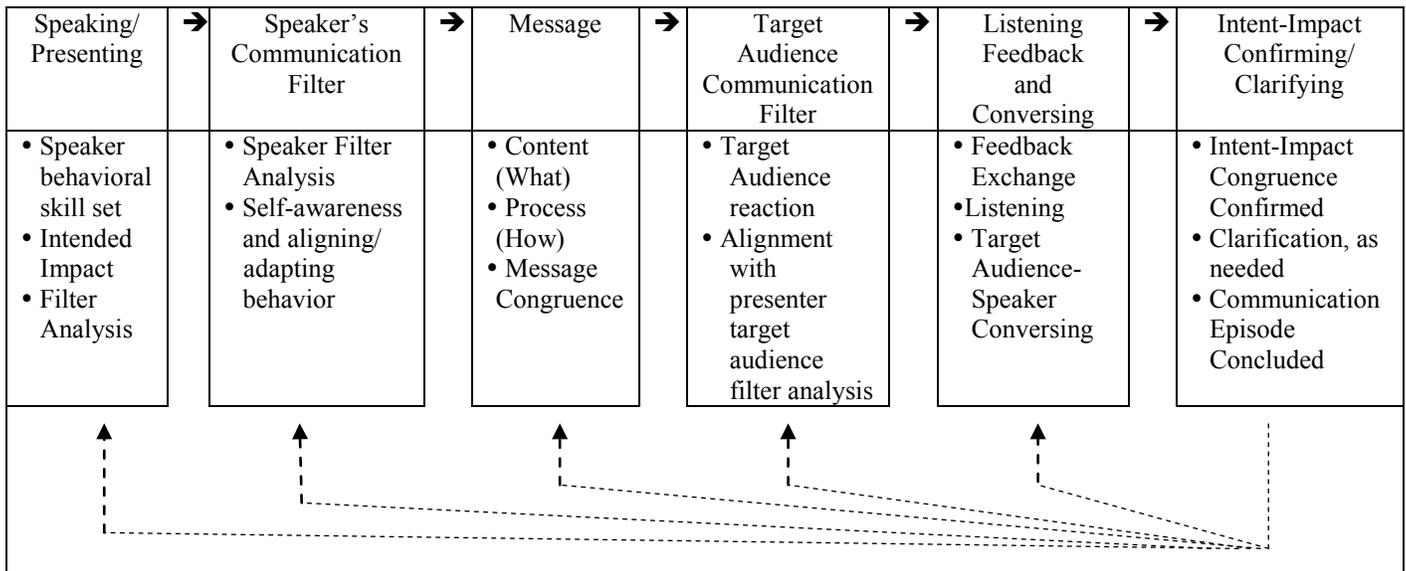
1. Communication is pervasive in workplace settings (Katz & Kahn, 1978).
2. There are no widely accepted theoretical models/frameworks that fully integrate the skills that are fundamental to the practice of high-impact communicating, leaving the practitioner without integrated evidence-based, practical guidance (Spitzberg, 2003).
3. The practice of high-impact communicating is a dynamic process which includes speaking/presenting, situational context and self-awareness, listening, feedback and conversing skills (Brink & Costigan, 2015; Kerns, 2015; Seiler & Pfister, 2012).
4. Communications vary along a continuum from low interactivity to high interactivity (Levasseur, 2013; Brink & Costigan, 2015).
5. While many of the skills associated with the concept of high impact communicating have been studied separately, in practice they are highly interactive and need to be considered in a more integrated/dynamic way (Hargie, 2006a).

6. High-impact communicating is considered a key managerial leadership practice contained within a broader sphere of interpersonal influence competency (Kerns & Ko, 2014).
7. Organization leaders can better index how well they are doing in practicing high-impact communicating by using practical assessment tools to index their effectiveness (Ashley & Reiter-Palmer, 2012).

Based on the above observations and study of the topic of high-impact communicating and leadership, with the perspectives of an organizational development consultant/industrial-organizational psychologist, business professor/scholar and practitioner who has served on the workplace firing line, over the years the author has developed an integrated framework to help emerging and seasoned managerial leaders enhance their communications for high impact.³ This framework, depicted below in Figure 1, has been applied in many settings including work organizations, executive education classrooms and applied research projects. The model is practitioner friendly and conceptually tied to relevant literature relating to the study of leadership, communication, and interpersonal influence. As used in this article, "high-impact communication" is communication in which the speaker's intent in sending the message is the same as the impact the message has on the receiver. The notion that communicating is effective when "intent equals impact" is foundational to the framework.

This proven framework integrates six key components of effective communication to more fully examine the dynamics of high impact communicating: speaking/presenting, the speaker's communication filter, the message, the target audience communication filter, listening-feedback-conversing, and clarifying and confirming intent and impact. Much has been written about each of these components separately; however, all of the components are integral. Communication cannot be effective if the speaker focuses on fewer than all of the components in his or her communication; the components need to be integrated into one coherent framework. The framework presented in Figure 1 addresses the need for a holistic, integrated, practical approach to effective communicating.

FIGURE 1
PRACTICE-ORIENTED HIGH-IMPACT COMMUNICATING FRAMEWORK



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In the framework, the six components are presented in the chronological order of the most basic communication; however, the components are inter-related and in practice are dynamic and interactive. The discussion below describes the components and the interplay among them.

Component I: Speaking/Presenting

The first component of the framework focuses on the speaker and the behavioral skill set the speaker brings to the communication. The dynamics associated with the oral presentation of a message, and the impact a speaker will have on her/his audience, are influenced by a number of skill areas. Elements of delivery that influence communication impact include energy level, confidence, clarity, voice, managing questions/interruptions and speaking without depending on notes (Grant & Taylor, 2015). Speaking can be prepared or more impromptu. Grant and Taylor (2015) point out that impromptu communications are more characteristic of the communication that leaders engage in but that impromptu communication of leaders is a neglected area of study in the extant literature.

To be effective, a speaker will have an understanding of the impact he or she intends to make on the target audience. To fully gauge the impact he or she will have, a speaker needs to understand what is in his/her own communication filter as well as what is in the target audience's filter about the communication and the topic being presented (more fully discussed in Components II and IV below). Communication filters can significantly impact how a message is delivered and received. Knowing what is in the audience's filter will help formulate the content of the message and how the message is presented for desired impact. Accurately and proactively analyzing or detecting what is in the filters of the speaker and the target audience relative to the communication and the topic presented is a key managerial leader skill.

Component II: Speaker's Communication Filter

As in other areas of leadership functioning which highlight the importance of self-awareness, it is critical for a leader to discern what is in his/her communication filter around the topic being presented and/or discussed (Sparrowe, 2005). Communication filters often contain such variables as values, cross-cultural perceptions, attitudes, educational levels and the relationship between the speaker and the audience. To increase the chances of the message having the intended impact, the message needs to be delivered with self-awareness of any significant perceptions that the speaker has that are relevant to the topic being presented, and then the speaker's perceptions need to be managed in a way that helps advance the intended message. Without this self-awareness, a speaker may unknowingly influence the impact of the communication, to undesired effect. The goal is to accurately analyze one's communication filter and appropriately adjust one's behavior to ensure the filter does not interfere with the message being communicated.

Component III: Message

The content of the message and how the message is delivered form the next component. Communication experts emphasize the importance of delivering a message in such a way that the content (what is being communicated) is congruent with the process (how the content is being delivered) (Hargie, 2006b). High-impact communicating is advanced when a speaker's words match the speaker's non-verbal behavior. Also, if the speaker fails to send a clear message that is free of unnecessary information or is not oriented to the receiver, the impact on the target audience is not likely to match the speaker's intent. Clarity of delivery helps ensure that the speaker's message will have the intended impact, especially if effectively oriented to significant elements in the target audience's filter. These interactions across skill-areas underscore the importance of looking at high-impact communicating using integrated frameworks rather than considering each component skill areas separately.

Component IV: Target Audience Communication Filter

As discussed above, the target audience has a communication filter that can distort the intended message. These filters are internal perceptions and experiences that affect how the target audience

receives the message(s). The situational context surrounding the communication episode will also be part of the target audience's filter (Kerns, 2015; Seiler & Pfister, 2012). The managerial leader needs to be aware of what perceptions and/or experiences the target audience may have, be aware of the situational context of the delivery of the message, and understand how these filters may influence how the message is received or interfere with the message having its intended impact. The message and/or the delivery should be adapted to account for these filters.

Component V: Listening, Feedback and Conversing

High impact communication also requires the speaker to listen effectively to feedback and converse with the audience. Behavioral responsibilities of the effective listener include making eye contact, asking open-ended questions, paraphrasing the target audience's words and avoiding interrupting while receiving feedback and conversing.

Feedback is the response the target audience gives the speaker about the impact of the message, and can be verbal and non-verbal. To maximize high-impact communicating, the speaker needs to listen attentively and note cues to determine if his/her impact was as intended. Listening and feedback exchanges are a key part of the conversing process. When intent is having the desired impact, these conversations typically flow smoothly.

Component VI: Intent-Impact Confirming and/or Clarifying

In high-impact communication, what a speaker intends to communicate gets through to the target audience for the desired impact (intent equals impact). An effective high-impact communicator ensures that his/her intended message(s) have had the desired impact on the target audience. Over a period of time, one can track and estimate how often intent equals the desired impact. Estimating and tracking success is more challenging when communications are impromptu, where accelerated dynamic interplay between the key components in the framework is more typical. An effective communicator would ideally approach an intent-to-impact ratio of one to one across diverse situational contexts.

With an understanding of the various components of the high-impact communication framework, and the interplay among them, a discussion of the application value of the framework, and how relevant tools for targeting specific areas for improvement might be integrated into the framework, follows.

APPLICATION VALUE AND IMPLICATIONS

Work relating to enhancing high-impact communicating for managerial leaders has application value and implications for practitioners, researchers and teachers. All three groups contribute to the growth and development of emerging and practicing leaders. Practitioners can benefit from having practical frameworks and tools to help them better manage their own high-impact communicating. A discussion of the application value and implications of the proffered framework across practice, research and teaching domains follows.

Practice Domain

The high-impact communicating framework described above can serve as a practical roadmap for productive conversations and action learning. While the components are broken down for clarity and discussion purposes, in practice, the six component framework is an integrated and interactive whole. To help operationalize the high-impact communication framework, various behavioral skill areas provide opportunities to increase the effectiveness of communications within the various components of the framework. A managerial leader, independently or in consultation with others, can consider the following ten behavioral skill areas, each of which alone are integral to the communication process, and identify the areas which he/she should target for improvement when striving to become a high-impact communicator:

- Speaking/presenting (impromptu and prepared)
- Assessing personal communication filters relative to topic specific content
- Assessing target audience communication filters relative to topic specific content

- Delivering messages that are congruent between content (what is being said) and process (how it is being presented)
- Listening
- Receiving feedback
- Providing feedback
- Sustaining a conversation/conversing
- Assessing intent-to-impact ratios for specific key communications
- Assessing intent-to-impact ratios over specific periods of time

The above checklist of behavioral skill areas represents a springboard for conversations with managerial leaders about their high-impact communication and areas of improvement within the context of the overall communication framework. Discussing these skill areas can lead to more sophisticated forms of assessment, including, for example 360° surveying which utilize Likert type scales. Managerial leaders may also address the behavioral skills noted on this checklist with reports when coaching them to enhance their high-impact communicating.

The skill checklist has been adapted for use in the recruitment and selection of key executives by the author and his colleagues. Behavioral skill areas are selectively referenced in recruitment materials and candidates are probed about their skills in behavioral based selection interviews. This work is aligned with applied studies reporting that requirements for effective communication and interpersonal skills are prevalent in recruitment notices for CEO-level positions (Cullen, 2010). Also, the work being done relating to situational judgment testing and scenario-based training has been applied by the author when probing C-level executives for their awareness of and skills at assessing personal and/or target audience filters relative to topic content (Fritzsche, Stagl, Salas, and Burke, 2006).

Each of the ten behavioral skills above can be aligned with the appropriate component in the framework, allowing the managerial leader to focus on improving concrete real-world behavioral skills which play significant roles in the framework to enhance high-impact communicating. The author and his colleagues frequently provide clients with an expanded version of Figure 1 wherein the ten behavioral skills are appropriately integrated into the framework.

Research Domain

The focus of this article is on providing practicing managerial leaders with additional perspective and understanding to support high-impact communicating. Several areas, however, could benefit from additional research. Given the paucity of evidence based frameworks for practitioners to review and consider, it would be of interest to further examine additional practice-oriented frameworks intended to enhance practitioner communication impact. This work would be especially valuable if these frameworks would integrate practices into a practical and coherent whole.

The design, development and formal evaluation of assessment tools associated with practitioner oriented frameworks like the one offered here is an opportunity for additional research. This work on assessment tools will be most helpful if the tools were part of an integrated configuration of practices nested within a broader framework, which contributes to achieving desired organizational results/outcomes. This line of research could likely benefit by using practice oriented assessment methodologies like the Linkage Research Model (LRM) which was introduced by Jack Wiley and his colleagues (Wiley & Campbell, 2006). Kerns (2002) provides a practical description and application of this approach.

Individual differences may likely play a role in leader efficacy in high-impact communicating (Judge & Long, 2012). For example, personality facets and skill levels needed for focusing on practices embedded in a framework for high-impact communicating vary among individual leaders (Levasseur, 2013; Nimon & Graham, 2011). Stam, Lord, Knippenberg and Wisse (2014) underscore, for example, how individual differences come into play when considering the dynamics associated with communicating a vision. It would be important to know how other interpersonal influence practices

interact with one's effectiveness at delivering high-impact communications. For instance, field work by the author and his colleagues has shown that individuals high in conflict avoidance tendencies may not communicate for high-impact, not because they lack the requisite skills, but their predisposition for conflict avoidance inhibits their display of communication skills. Empirically investigating how high-impact communicating is related to other key managerial leader interpersonal influence practices seems useful.

Brink and Costigan (2015) as well as Conrad and Newberry (2011) remind us of the importance of studying the alignment of workplace communication skills with areas that are taught/developed in business schools. More generally, further study of the alignment between what we focus on in external leadership development programs, including high-impact communicating, and what leaders actually do in the workplace, seems especially valuable (Conger, 2013). Indeed, increased alignment may help decrease the alarmingly high incidence of managerial leadership ineffectiveness and/or incompetence (Kaiser & Craig, 2014; Aasland, Skogstad, Notelaers, Nielsen & Einarsen, 2010).

Finally, the impact of technologies and social media on the importance and effectiveness of direct interpersonal communication needs to be more fully explored. As Te'eni (2001) points out, technology assisted communication can impact not only what we communicate (content) but how we send the message (process). For example, Hartman and McCambridge (2011) indicate that the millennial generation is prototypically seen as being more connected to technology oriented communication than they are to interpersonally focused exchanges. This is only one potential area for studying the role of technology and social media in impacting high-impact communication in the workplace. This area of research would seem to offer valuable insights and information for organizational leaders (Davenport, 2014).

Teaching Domain

The teaching of managerial leadership could be advanced by having practical frameworks and tools to offer both emerging and experienced practitioners seeking to enhance their effectiveness. The author has imported some of the applications used in organizational settings to the business school classroom when facilitating the learning of frameworks and practices associated with high-impact communicating.

Application of the high-impact communication framework offered in this article has been advanced by using experiential exercises in the business classroom setting to help learners better understand and utilize this framework. For instance, this learning process often includes having adult learners enrolled in MBA leadership related classes identify how the nine cross cultural dimensions offered by House, Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges and Sullyde Luque (2011) might influence their communication filters. Learners are asked to identify two cultures across the globe using the taxonomy offered by House and his associates – one that most aligns with their preferences and one that is less connected to their preferences. Students share what is in their communication filters relating to the two cultures. Learners with experience with specific cultural clusters are asked to share things that they believe are important for organizational leaders to know when interfacing with people in that specific culture. Typically, a rich and informative exchange takes place during these sessions which helps students more fully recognize the challenges encountered when conducting business and communicating around the globe. This experiential activity is aligned with work being done to prepare leaders to communicate effectively across diverse global cultures (Caputo & Crandall, 2012).

Another valuable exercise is for students to practice applying specific tools that help enhance performance relative to components in the framework. The "S-E-N-D-E-R" tool, for example, can be introduced to enhance speaking skills.⁴ This activity involves a learner presenting 2 to 3 minutes on a topic of interest and then, after viewing a video tape of his or her performance and receiving coaching from the teacher and fellow learners (who use relevant elements from the S-E-N-D-E-R tool as a reference), the presenter repeats the presentation. The post-coaching performances typically show significant improvement in presentation skills indexed in the S-E-N-D-E-R tool. This activity is sometimes modified to focus on helping the learner gain experience at managing questions and

interruptions. This approach seems to help students better manage both prepared presentations and impromptu conversing that occur.

Another helpful tool to apply the framework includes students brainstorming and presenting practical ways to track intent-to-impact ratio. While the focus of measurement is on the workplace, learners frequently extend this activity to other areas of their life. These discussions typically relate to organizational well-being and work-life balance and how high-impact communicating can enhance one's overall quality of life. This activity is in response to the call for workplace assessments to be applied in business classrooms (Yu, 2010).

Providing learners with the opportunity to practice maintaining a conversation supports Component V in the framework, Listening, Feedback and Conversing. Many different tools and approaches can be used to help students become more proficient in conversing. These tools generally target active listening, giving and receiving feedback, and open ended questioning skills. To help students with the concept of open ended questioning, the teacher typically offers students some "just right" questions gleaned from experts in the field (Marquardt, 2014; Browne & Keeley, 2011).

Another impactful way to assist students with the framework is to have effective leaders review the model with students and indicate how they apply it in their communication efforts. The lessons learned by the successful executive while striving to achieve high-impact communicating have proven to be impactful teaching moments that spark student learning. The impact on learners has been especially impactful in sessions where high-impact communicating leaders have shared their intent-to-impact ratios as well as their performance against the 10-item behavioral checklist previously noted.

SOME CHALLENGES

Putting the high-impact communicating framework into practice presents a variety of challenges. Managerial leaders need a practical methodology to measure how well they are communicating for high-impact. Although there is a paucity of methodologically sound practice oriented models that effectively integrate key communication components, the author encourages emerging and experienced organizational leaders to consider using the Linkage Research Model (LRM) to help measure effectiveness (Wiley, 2010; Brooks, Wiley & House, 2006). This approach can systematically help a leader and his/her organization focus on a variety of practice areas including high-impact communicating. Organizational leaders are challenged, in general, to find and adopt practical frameworks which integrate key communication skill components and are supported by straight forward approaches to assessing high-impact communication.

Closely associated with the previously noted challenge is the need for practicing managerial leaders, leadership developers and applied researchers to consider how other interpersonal influence practices may interact with a leader's high-impact communicating. Other practice areas such as conflict management, decisive problem solving and self-awareness likely influence a leader's communication effectiveness. Knowing how certain interpersonal influence practices may relate to high-impact communicating would be valuable.

Communication takes place in changing contexts, requiring the leader to be flexible in seeking to be a high-impact communicator, especially when communicating with diverse target audiences. Global leaders, for example, who show flexibility when communicating with key stakeholders across diverse cultures will likely be more impactful in their communications. Indeed, the author's field experience indicates that the more behaviorally flexible an organizational leader is in applying this framework across changing contexts, the more likely he/she will be in achieving high-impact communicating effectiveness. This field study evidence aligns with other observations found in relevant literature (Lavasseur, 2013; Bies, 2013).

Another challenge for developers of leaders would be to ensure that they are offering frameworks and tools that align with workplace practice needs of an organization. This alignment of interventions will help ensure value-added outcomes. In addition, this strengthened alignment between workplace needs and

developmental offerings will also likely help emerging and experienced leaders achieve greater upward mobility in their careers (Laud & Johnson, 2012).

A final challenge for managerial leaders applying this framework is for them to consider how the use of communication technologies and social media influence their efforts at practicing high-impact communicating (Phelps, 2014). Technology assisted communication underscores the importance for a leader to recognize and understand what is in his or her communication filter as it relates to this contemporary topic. It also highlights the significance of a leader knowing what is in the target audience's filter when addressing the topics of technology and social media. This may be particularly relevant when a leader is communicating with individuals considered millennials.

Focusing on the challenges of assessing the effectiveness of frameworks, the impacts of other interpersonal influence practices on high-impact communicating, behavioral flexibility, key alignments and technology influences will enhance our understanding and execution of this key area of managerial leadership practice. Moving forward, additional challenges for practitioners, applied researchers, and teachers will emerge. This important practice area will, if executed effectively, likely contribute to enhancing a leader's overall effectiveness across diverse organizational settings as well as boost the achievement of desired business results.

SUMMARY STATEMENT

The development and application of frameworks and tools to help managerial leaders more effectively understand and execute high-impact communicating will be beneficial to advancing the practice and study of leadership. In turn, it will also likely contribute to producing better business results and creating greater economic value for key stakeholders. With a systematic approach that builds upon practice oriented frameworks and tools, additional resources can be developed and applied to help leaders deliver high-impact communication in workplace settings. As this work moves forward there will be a need for assessment methodologies, additional integrated practice oriented frameworks, and the identification of best practices to help managerial leaders enhance their communication effectiveness. These and related efforts will likely advance our knowledge and understanding of the dynamics associated with communicating for high-impact.

ENDNOTES

1. A debate comparing and contrasting management and leadership has occurred over more than thirty years. In this article the terms managerial leadership, management and leadership are used synonymously.
2. This system of managerial leadership strives to provide practitioners, applied researchers and teachers with an integrated approach to viewing and understanding leadership. The system brings together several streams of leadership study and research that have been offered over the past 100 years. A key practice in this model relates to a leader's high-impact communicating. A better understanding and management of high-impact communicating can help advance the practice, study and teaching of leadership which is the focus on the current article. It is beyond the scope of the current presentation to review and discuss the other system dimensions and related practices.
3. In developing leader performance enhancing frameworks and tools, the author and his colleagues utilize the following set of criteria. The framework and tools need to:
 - Add value in an organization
 - Have face validity for practitioners
 - Be relevant to practitioner's daily work
 - Be evidence based in practice and/or research
 - Be practical to implement in an organizational operating environment
 - Be coachable/teachable
4. A variety of tools and resources are available to the practitioner and teacher wanting to positively impact high impact communicating. The S-E-N-D-E-R tool is one example of a tool that can be used to help students and practitioners improve their skills at speaking (Component 1 in the high-impact communication framework). The letters in the S-E-N-D-E-R tool denote:

- S: Set the scene
- E: Eliminate the unnecessary (see Kohlrieser, 2008 for the related "four-sentence rule")
- N: Notify the listener of important points
- D: Demand feedback
- E: Enunciate clearly
- R: Receiver-orient the message.

While the detailing of specific tools to help execute the practice-oriented framework components is beyond the scope of the current article, readers are referred to resources such as Robbins and Hunsaker (2012); Caproni (2012); Kerns (2007).

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