



THINKING OUT LOUD

A PSA WHITEPAPER

The Trust Deficit: What Speechwriters Need to Know Now

Leaders are not trusted. Leadership communicators need to change their approach.

By Jill Vitiello
President, Vitiello
Communications Group

Six years ago, the Edelman TrustBarometer revealed a new and troubling trend: Faith in traditional leaders was diminishing rapidly, and trust in peers was increasing instead.

The 2015 TrustBarometer revealed that the phenomenon has become only more profound—and for people who help leaders lead, truly alarming. Today, employees, indeed all your audiences, trust the CEO less than they trust their randomly assigned cubemate at work, their neighbor at home or their Facebook friends.

What, as speechwriters and executive communications professionals, are we going to do about it?

First, let's have a quick look at the data.

EROSION OF TRUST IN LEADERS; RESISTANCE TO INNOVATION AND CHANGE

Only 43 percent of people responding to the Edelman survey rank the CEO as a credible source of information about a company.*

If most people don't trust the CEO, whom do they trust?

By far, people report that they trust academics and industry experts above all others, with a credibility rating of 70 percent, closely followed by a company technical expert at 67 percent. Perhaps most telling, respondents rank the credibility of *people like themselves* at 63 percent. They even rank the trustworthiness of a regular employee (that cubemate) at 49 percent.

People not only distrust leaders, but they also are wary of innovation and change.

The survey asked respondents to rank their level of trust in a variety of innovations, from electronic and mobile payments (trusted by 69 percent) to genetically modified foods (trusted by 31 percent). Overall, 51 percent of all people who took the survey say that the pace of development and change in

business today is too fast. They believe that greed—not good—is the real motivation behind business innovation.

We are living in a world where people are skeptical to the point of cynicism—especially when the boss is speaking. So, what can we as speechwriters do to arm ourselves and our leaders against this trust freefall?

** All these numbers vary significantly by economic region, with people in developing countries generally trusting leaders, innovation and change more than people in developed nations. Before acting on the findings, [read the full report](#).*

OUR OPPORTUNITY: THE INTERSECTION OF ENGAGEMENT AND INTEGRITY

In the quest to engage employees, sometimes the opposite happens. Leaders' natural bias for action may simply overwhelm employees. No doubt you've seen the collective eye roll when you announce a new initiative, or the shrug when you invite employees to participate in an event; you've heard the silence during the Q&A portion of town halls. No speechwriter wants his or her CEO to endure these misfires; no leader ever intends to incite apathy.

Influencing an audience of employees is very different and in some ways, more difficult, than reaching an audience of outsiders. Employees operate within the corporate culture and they are familiar with the senior leadership team and its foibles. That makes soaring rhetoric and polished prose—the speechwriter's sweet spot—somewhat suspect inside the organization. What employees truly crave is authenticity and trustworthiness from their leaders.

Who better to write the words that position leaders as genuine, thoughtful and sincere than the speechwriters who know the leaders so well?

Our opportunity lies at the intersection of engagement and integrity. As speechwriters, we have access and influence. We can counsel our executives not only on the words they speak, but also on how to relate. We can help them create forums for robust dialogue, and we can work with communications colleagues to operationalize ways to empower employees to take action on causes they care about.

Raising your leaders' credibility starts by increasing the connection with employees. Consider introducing one or more of these four concepts to the CEO:

1. IN GENERAL, CURB YOUR ENTHUSIASM.

Ambitious, energetic leaders are eager to depict their organizations as agents of change. They see innovation as the Holy Grail for profitability and growth, and companies pour millions of dollars into these activities. Corporate strategists create and manage teams devoted to chasing, teaching and unleashing innovation. However, a majority of people report being suspicious of change. So, advise your leader to introduce new initiatives in stages. And, when speaking about change, acknowledge and validate the normal, human reactions, including fear and frustration.

2. SHOWCASE SUBJECT MATTER EXPERTS.

Since your audience trusts the opinions of learned professionals, tap into their wisdom and pepper your leader's speech with their stories. Go the next step and invite them to co-present to employee groups with your chief. Some of the most successful employee town hall meetings have been those where the CEO invites a panel of experts from within the company to introduce or explain a new strategy or initiative.

3. RALLY AROUND THE NOBLE CAUSE.

A startling 80 percent of survey respondents believe companies can take action to increase profits while improving social conditions. And they say the companies that best articulate the societal benefits they provide are the most trustworthy. Connecting your leader to your company's philanthropic endeavors—especially as they converge with employee efforts—establishes a bond with causes everyone cares about.

4. CHAMPION AN EMPLOYEE AMBASSADOR PROGRAM.

With trust in peers on a remarkable rise, harness the power of your people—and make it your leader's idea. An employee ambassador program is a formal approach to selecting and training high-performing employees to support a particular cause,

empowering them to launch and sustain a grassroots internal or external communications campaign, and rewarding them for their efforts. Leaders authorize and support employee ambassador programs, and then step aside to let the employees carry the message to colleagues, customers and the public.

For example, one Fortune 500 company's global fellowship program made a meaningful connection with employees by bringing these concepts together. The company deploys employees to nonprofits around the world for three-month stints as researchers, project managers and technologists. When the fellows were nominated by leaders only, the pool of qualified candidates was modest. Now, thanks to its new employee ambassador program and grassroots communications campaign, the program is experiencing a deluge of high-performing, well-qualified applicants. In fact, it commissioned a cohort of fellows that was 12 percent bigger than planned because of the caliber of employee applicants and leadership commitment to the cause. By making a profound impact on the world through its fellows, the program brings goodwill to the company and is a source of pride among all employees.

CONCLUSION: CONNECTION STARTS WITH TRUST

Yes, people are deeply skeptical, they generally distrust leaders, and they are wary of change. Against that backdrop, it's not enough to write rhetorically resounding speeches. In the era of a trust deficit, part of our job as communicators involves creating connections within the enterprise. This ensures that leaders have a ready task force of advocates to reinforce the message both inside and outside the organization.

Speechwriters need to help leaders grab people's attention, make them care, and encourage positive behaviors that lead the company to continued success and profitability. We can do this by engaging subject matter experts, acknowledging that change is difficult and showing the ways in which the organization contributes positively to society. We can do this by helping leaders show employees who they, the leaders, *really* are.

In the end, by marrying engagement and integrity, we can help turn the tide on declining leadership trust by working across it. In return, employees become more fully engaged, which makes them excellent ambassadors for the company and its mission.

DO YOUR LEADERS APPEAR TRUSTWORTHY?

You may be operating with integrity and the best of intentions; however, if your communications style is out of date, you could experience a crisis of confidence. People look for signs of relatability, approachability, authenticity and candor.

Ask your boss. Ask yourself:

- When delivering a speech, am I comfortable stepping out from behind the lectern?
- At the office, do I always make a point of greeting people as I pass them in the hallways?
- Did our last town hall meeting include a presenter who was not on the senior management team?
- Have I spoken openly to my team about a mistake I made, what I did to correct it and how I learned from it?

If you came up with more "Nos" than "Yeses" above, consider changing your approach to communications. Find opportunities for informal interactions with employees and get comfortable with the healthy give and take of a candid conversation.

ABOUT JILL VITIELLO

Jill Vitiello is a former speechwriter to the CEO of Equitable, now AXA Financial. Jill wrote about 150 speeches a year, many of them for internal audiences of employees and sales representatives. Today, she is the founder and president of **Vitiello Communications Group**, an agency specializing in employee engagement, leadership and change communications. Jill leads a team of communications professionals focused on crafting messages and helping executives weave their organizations' narratives to engage employees' minds and hearts.