

# THE COST OF MISSED OPPORTUNITIES

**Leaders have numerous opportunities to engage their employees, both formally and informally. But as leadership advisor Larry Robertson discovered from spending a few minutes in a lift with the CEO of a multinational, many forget this.**

The elevator in the headquarters of an Australian multinational stopped at level 28. A senior executive joined us. I didn't recognize him but he greeted John [not his real name] warmly and gave me a friendly nod. To my surprise, John responded with little more than a monosyllabic grunt and a faint smile. We continued our descent in silence.

On level 24, a smart, middle-aged woman entered. She smiled at each of us and asked John if he was feeling better. His reply, short and to the point, "Yes, thanks."

The elevator stopped several more times and filled up as more of the organization's staff joined us. John, his face expressionless and his eyes down, was at the back in one corner. Most of the newcomers were young, probably junior management and administrative staff. It was as if they sensed their boss was present – but in no mood for dialogue. Their earlier chattiness and openness, palpable as they entered the lift, evaporated.

We reached the lobby and, with sighs of relief, the others left John and me alone. "Have you got a moment?" I asked. "Sure," he replied. "You know what you and I have been working on these past few weeks isn't about media and presentation skills. It's about leadership. In that elevator," I continued, "there were almost a dozen members of your corporate family, most were crying out for recognition; acknowledgement from you as their CEO. It was an

opportunity to engage them and you ignored them."

John nodded, "Yes, I've heard some of your leadership ideas. You should speak with our HR people." I looked at him incredulously. "You just don't get it. Who is the most senior HR person in this company? You are, John!" He grinned and headed off to lunch.

We continued to work on investor briefings, media interviews and other "public speaking" activities. But, despite my efforts, John wouldn't accept that, as a leader, communication (not merely presentation) had to be his most necessary trait: a vital, core value that every leader has to practice relentlessly, whatever the pressure, if he or she is to succeed in bringing others with them. Like too many senior executives, he failed to see it.

Within two years, John's company got into difficulties, the share price halved, staff morale dropped and its reputation was severely damaged. It wasn't long before John lost his job.

## Culture starts at the top

The success of any organization starts at the top. Leadership quality has the greatest impact. There's a clear link between outstanding performance and outstanding culture. But that culture must be constantly nurtured and demonstrated, not simply talked about, by those at the top.

Beating the competition is not just about having the best game plan, or the best resources or technical skills, but the best team: teams of individuals who are skilled, but also appreciated, by their peers and their leaders.

Recent research confirms that Australian managers have a way to go to meet this challenge. Just 37 percent of employees say senior

executives communicate adequately<sup>1</sup>. Communicators have an important role here. Not just to project and protect your organization's reputation externally – but also internally. How?

First, as *advocates*. Align your communication goals with your corporation's business goals. Identify the proven relationship between winning cultures and winning performances to convince your senior colleagues to constantly uphold and exemplify all of the organization's stated values and to seize every opportunity to communicate spontaneously, naturally and informally.

Second, as *role models*. Communicate around the workplace in your own normal, affable style. Connect personally and meaningfully, and leave all your listeners with a clear sense that they really matter.

Third, as *coaches*. Remind all your colleagues that effective communication is a two-way process. To be successful, it requires awareness, confidence, connection, authenticity, openness, sincerity, clarity of purpose, simple language, brevity, genuine emotion and active listening. It requires being consistently purposeful, trustworthy and respectful.

So, review those media training budgets and allocate more time and resources to teaching managers some basic communication skills – such as engagement, conversation, listening, negotiation, emotional intelligence, collaboration, managing conflict, clarity, facilitation and, yes, presentation. scm

<sup>1</sup> Research conducted by Rodney Gray, Employee Communication & Surveys, Sydney [www.employee-communication.com.au](http://www.employee-communication.com.au)



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