THE CONSCIOUS COMMUNICATOR

# THE FINE ART OF NOT SAYING STUPID SH*T

## ADDING DEPTH TO YOUR ORGANIZATION'S COMMUNICATIONS


Second Edition

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FOREWORD BY ANTHONY FOXX

**Stupid sh*t rolls downhill.**

# CHAPTER 9
# LEADING THE LEADERS

*The art of communication is the language of leadership.*

***—James Humes, author and former presidential speechwriter***

Regardless of what leaders think personally, despite their true intent, when they speak, people listen. When they don't speak, people take notice. When they say stupid sh*t, people make it go viral. What leaders say or don't say affects the people they lead, the brands they stand for, and the legacies they work to build. For most people, the occasional misspeak is embarrassing. For leaders, misspeak can be devastating.

## SURVEILLING SPEECH

When leaders speak, they generally mean well. Even if they don't, most are savvy enough to realize that what they say matters—especially when they say stupid sh*t. Yet, every day brings a new screw up, a new apology for a screw up, or a new need to double down on dumb because of a screw up.

Often, we just assume leaders know better. After all, they wouldn't get where they are without stellar communications skills, right? Wrong. And nobody knows this better than the communicators who support them. Ask any executive speechwriter. What they *won't* tell you is how much hand holding and pearl clutching is involved in shepherding a principal to uncover and own a story enough to share it authentically. Ask any communications officer charged with supporting a CEO or senior leadership team. They'll tell you about the late nights and early mornings needed to keep egos, expressions, and edicts from creating chaos and the emergency interventions needed to fix things. They'll explain why they don't give the CEO global email access.

But if leading leaders is a goat rodeo for the people working directly with them, what does it mean for communicators further from the corner office, but not so far as to escape the fallout from communications missteps? When leaders say the wrong things or fail to say the right ones, there are consequences and repercussions for communicators in all segments—internal, external, marketing, PR, social, investor. Because that's the thing: stupid sh*t rolls downhill.

## MITIGATING MISSPEAK

What do we do when leaders say way too much or not nearly enough? It's helpful to start by thinking about what communication misspeaks look like in the first place and what might be behind them (spoiler alert: cognitive biases). Misspeak typically falls into one of four categories:

1. **Insensitive statements:** When leaders stop listening to what others think—be it ideas, criticism, or general opinions—they're subject to insensitive responses. Sometimes it's psychological hubris, the false-consensus effect, assuming that what

they believe is not only true but widely held as truth. Other times, they're suffering from confirmation bias, which the American Psychological Association defines as "the tendency to gather evidence that confirms preexisting expectations, typically by emphasizing or pursuing supporting evidence while dismissing or failing to seek contradictory evidence."[55] As author, organizational strategist, pragmatic theologian, and social capitalist Dr. Stephen R. Graves says, "in leadership, tone deafness is like a virus—you can get it through no fault of your own, but it's your response to it that determines how bad it gets."[56] Such was the case when a leader at a large restaurant chain sent an email to colleagues celebrating rising gas prices and inflation as good for business. His thinking was rising prices would force more people into the workforce, allowing the company to hire employees at a lower wage.

2. **Clueless comments:** No business leader in their right mind would intentionally insult potential customers, employees, or investors. But often, when asked to weigh in on an issue—especially in an internal event—leaders relax their guard, eschew formal briefings from communications, and just speak off the cuff. While that can be an authenticity bonus, there's risk in riffing when you're in a leadership position. Sans specific talking points, many leaders are subject to availability bias, relying on information that is most readily available, rather than that which is necessarily most representative.[57] We mentioned an example of this in Chapter Two. In a Zoom meeting,

[55] "APA Dictionary of Psychology." American Psychological Association Accessed March 21, 2022. https://dictionary.apa.org/confirmation-bias.

[56] Graves, Stephen R. "Are You a Tone-Deaf Leader?" Dr. Stephen R. Graves. n.d. https://stephenrgraves.com/articles/read/dont-be-a-tone-deaf-leader/.

[57] "Availability Bias." Catalog of Bias. n.d. https://catalogofbias.org/biases/availability-bias/.

the CEO of one of the largest banks in the U.S. exasperated Black employees when he reiterated that the bank had trouble reaching diversity goals because there were not enough qualified “minority” candidates.

3. **Dismissive remarks:** No matter where leaders start, by the time they reach senior level in most organizations, there’s an inevitable disconnect. For top leaders in the largest organizations, that disconnect can be significant. According to the Economic Policy Institute, since 1978, CEO pay has skyrocketed 1,322%, and in 2020, CEOs were paid 351 times as much as a typical worker.[58] Socially, economically, and professionally, they’re just in a whole different class, part of an entirely different ingroup. Even the most engaged and empathetic leaders may naturally fall prey to ingroup/outgroup bias, feeling more empathy for those who are in their group and less for those who aren’t.
4. **The silent treatment:** According to the 2022 Edelman Trust Barometer, distrust is the default now; nearly six in 10 respondents said they distrust something until they see evidence it is trustworthy.[59] It’s the spurious-until-proven-sincere principle. However, if people trust any institution, they trust business–more than NGOs, government, and media. Seventy-seven percent of people trust their employer most. However, most people think business is slacking on societal issues, especially climate change and economic inequality. It’s a strong case for why leaders cannot afford to stay silent on issues that matter to their stakeholders and align with their organizational mission.

[58] Mishel, L., & Kandra, J. “CEO pay has skyrocketed 1,322% since 1978: CEOS were paid 351 times as much as a typical worker in 2020.” Economic Policy Institute. Accessed March 19, 2022. https://www.epi.org/publication/ceo-pay-in-2020/.

[59] “2022 Edelman Trust Barometer.” Edelman. https://www.edelman.com/sites/g/files/aatuss191/files/2022-01/2022%20Edelman%20Trust%20Barometer%20FINAL_Jan25.pdf.

> Yet, in an increasingly polarized, damned-if-you-do-damned-if-you-don't world, it's easy to understand why leaders might fall prey to status-quo biases, keeping things as they are, and loss aversion, or going to great lengths to avoid a negative outcome—even if it's possible that the outcome could be positive.[60] That's exactly what happened when the CEO of Disney™ initially decided to stay quiet about Florida's "Don't Say Gay" bill.

Leaders don't generally set out to say something that's flat-out wrong. Rather, it's either insensitive, inadequate, or incompatible with the mission. It can be the result of cluelessness or ignorance. Whatever the intent, the impact of what leaders say means leaders can't afford to make mistakes.

## LAUNCHING LEGACIES

What many leaders know is that communication misspeaks have implications beyond the current media moment; they can tarnish a professional legacy.

Leaving a legacy is important to leaders. In its recent Global Human Capital Trends report, Deloitte found that when CEOs were asked to rate their most important measure of success, the number one issue they cited was "impact on society, including income inequality, diversity, and the environment."[61]

Launching that legacy is important to everyone else too. Sixty percent of employees want their CEO to speak out, shape conversation, and drive policy on key societal issues such as job availability and the

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[60] "APA Dictionary of Psychology." American Psychological Association. Accessed March 21, 2022. https://dictionary.apa.org/behavioral-economics.

[61] *Leading the Social Enterprise: Reinvent with a Human Focus: 2019 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends.* Deloitte. https://www2.deloitte.com/content/dam/insights/us/articles/5136_HC-Trends-2019/DI_HC-Trends-2019.pdf.

economy, wage inequity, technology and automation, and global warming and climate change. And 80% of the general population wants personal visibility from CEOs when discussing public policy with external stakeholders or describing what their companies are doing to benefit society.

Leadership legacies start with the leader's vision. Think about what a vision is, actually. It's the aspiration and articulation of the world one wants to see and a guiding beacon that directs internal decision-making; it's the *why*. Visions—at least the ones that drive successful organizations—transcend the terrestrial. They go beyond returning value to shareholders and making money. They are transformational rather than transactional. They have DEPTH. And that's where communicators can help.

## THE COMMUNICATOR'S ROLE IN HELPING LEADERS LEAD

How do we help leaders shape and share those visions? The DEPTH Model can help. It provides a less threatening way to help leaders understand why they say legacy-limiting stupid sh*t and discover more affirming ways to develop legacy-launching smart sh*t. It's the equal and opposite reaction to the biases that lead to misspeak.

### Shaping Vision with DEPTH

Let's start by examining which DEPTH principle each type of misspeak violates and how.

1. **Insensitive statements** are statements that are misinformed and misaligned with their mission and vision. Because they result from not knowing what's going on, they typically violate the EDUCATED principle. When it's a matter of losing sight of the audience, they go against the TAILORED principal as well. It happens; leaders are busy. Help them.

2. **Clueless comments** result from not knowing what's happening in the moment and, sometimes, being unaware of what others—even the leader themselves—have said previously. Being EDUCATED in communications limits misspeaks; being HABITUAL can make saying the right thing automatic.
3. **Dismissive remarks**, like insensitive statements and clueless comments, stem from just not knowing, not being EDUCATED. But they also happen when leaders lack or lose sight of the vision when they aren't PURPOSEFUL.
4. **The silent treatment** happens when leaders fail to see the real problem and how it's connected to the company mission, in violation of the DELIBERATE and PURPOSEFUL principles.

So, what can you do about these misspeaks? Use The DEPTH Model to stay ahead of the problem by building a reference library:

- *Create a list of key topics around DEI and social justice.* These should be topics that your leaders are best able to speak about based on who they are and what your company does, so analyze them with The DEPTH Model. The topics should be issues that you know will come up; make sure you know or develop your organization's position on them. Update this list by keeping an eye on current events, what others in your industry are saying, and the issues your leaders have tackled previously. Doing this step also helps build the habit muscle and, once implemented, builds the trail of proof points.
- *Turn the list into one-page briefs.* Each brief should include what the issue is, two to three sentences defining or describing it; why it's important; current dialogue on it, including opposing views on it; why your organization is making a statement about it; what your organization is doing about it; and links to the most current information you can find about it. Use The DEPTH

Model's *CONSIDER* questions to shape your position, and the *CLARIFY* statements to articulate that position. The format should be standardized for easy comprehension.

- Save the library on a shared drive that leaders can access. Include a field, "Updated on:" with a date, and review the briefs regularly, especially the ones you know leaders will need to respond to.

Proactively, make it a policy to include the most critical briefs in whatever regular information process your leaders use. If they have weekend "folders," start including briefs. Monday morning calendar reviews? Issue a brief. Make the briefs part of their routine to keep the issues top of mind.

Reactively, when you have to clean up a communications mess, have the briefs ready and make sure they are accessible to leaders and their staff. Use them to shape whatever response is necessary. And speaking of responses…How do you help a leader say sorry?

## SAYING SORRY WITH DEPTH

As children, most of us are taught to apologize when we make a mistake or say something we shouldn't. As adults and leaders, apologies—just like statements—carry a lot of weight. As communicators, it's our job to help our companies and leaders shoulder that weight.

A leader's apology can have political or financial implications for a company. It's never just for themselves; a leader's apology stands for the entire organization, from the employees to the board. As Barbara Kellerman, Founding Executive Director and (now) Fellow at the Harvard Kennedy School's Center for Public Leadership, states, "A leader's apology is a performance in which every expression matters, and every word becomes part of the public record."[62]

[62] Kellerman, Barbara. "When Should a Leader Apologize-and When Not?" Harvard Business Review. n.d. https://hbr.org/2006/04/when-should-a-leader-apologize-and-when-not.

There are four essential steps to a public apology:

1. Admit the mistake or misspeak
2. Accept responsibility
3. Acknowledge concern
4. Address with action

While these elements are present in any good apology, they are especially crucial if the misspeak concerns a social justice or DEI issue, both of which are sensitive by their very nature. When a product fails, it can be recalled, replaced and, if done correctly, the company can bounce back. The Tylenol® recall of 1982 is the textbook example of a company apologizing for a product problem. When someone laced bottles of Tylenol with cyanide and seven people died, Tylenol makers Johnson & Johnson went through all the steps in exactly the right way, and bounced back better than ever.

But a leader's misspeak mea culpa is a little harder to correct. For one thing, they usually can't hide behind the company; they generally must speak for themselves, personally. They must, in accepting responsibility and acknowledging concern, validate the seemingly subjective grievances of a particular group, the validity of which they may or may not believe in, personally or politically. And they must ameliorate for a personal misspeak with a company action that stakeholders may neither agree with nor feel obligated to follow through on.

As the following chart shows, The DEPTH Model serves as an objective framework for shaping an apology when the issue is more subjective.

**The DEPTH Model™ serves as an objective framework for shaping an apology when the issue is more subjective.**

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **ADMIT the mistake or misspeak** | **DELIBERATE** | Clearly ***define the problem*** — the true nature of the misspeak and the offense | Accurately ***decide on positioning*** |
| **ACKNOWLEDGE concern** | **EDUCATED** | ***Explore the history and context*** of the issue<br><br>***Engage other perspectives***, especially the perspectives of those most affected | ***Expand the conversation*** by identifying who was harmed and acknowledging the existence of the systemic inequities that shape such responses |
| **ACCEPT responsibility** | **PURPOSEFUL** | ***Position the purpose*** of the apology in relation to the company's values | ***Promote the purpose*** by explaining how the misspeak deviated from it |
| | **TAILORED** | ***Take stock of capabilities*** to determine if what you're promising is something you can actually do | ***Tailor your message*** to be actionable rather than aspirational |
| **Address with action** | **HABITUAL** | ***Hone your commitment*** to show how the action you're taking now is—or will be—part of an ongoing commitment | ***Hold the line*** going forward and defend the response if the issue resurfaces |

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## KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. Leaders' words go far and dig deep, affecting those they lead, reflecting on the brands they represent, and showing us who they are—the first time.
2. Communicators cannot control what a leader says in the moment, but they can use The DEPTH Model proactively and reactively to minimize misspeaks or mitigate their damage.
3. Conscious communicators help leaders choose their words consciously to support the company's mission and to avoid saying stupid sh*t.

## The Business of Business Is People: How Deeply Does Your CEO Understand? How Deeply Do You?

*by David Murray*

As a member of a corporate board, I'd be inclined to forgive a CEO who still struggled, even after the events of 2020 and 2021, to see the dramatic expansion of the chief executive's role into the realm of social responsibility.

Inclined to forgive the CEO—as I gently show them to the door.

Why inclined to forgive?

CEOs did not attend business school (or economics school or engineering school) in order to run social institutions. In their hard-driving early career years, their laser focus did not allow for a lot of contemplation of social issues, let alone the acquisition of cultural literacy. Precisely at what point on the hellbent climb of a CEO did we expect such people to develop a coherent and deeply felt personal philosophy on society's ills, and the role business could play in easing them? And *as* CEO, it's hard enough to make quarterly earnings *without* seeing oneself as a public intellectual and a moral leader.

Why show the door?

Because "thought leader," which was until recently the laudatory term for any CEO who took the time to pay public lip service to ideas beyond the immediate financial ken of the corporation, is now table stakes for any corporate leader who wants to survive, let alone thrive, in these redefined times. Over the last few years—in America, I actually trace this to the hyperpolarizing election of Donald Trump as U.S. president—people have been turning to CEOs for leadership, by default. The very economic self-interest that once made CEOs' views suspect to thinking people, now makes their views reliable, relatively speaking—as their self-interest includes a stable, at least moderately healthy society. And that compels CEOs to listen to, acknowledge, and satisfy angry or injured employees, customers, activist investors, and other powerful influencers who hold great sway on their permission to operate.

Such groups confront corporate CEOs at the most inconvenient times, often in impolite styles and with demands for more than words in return. Responding in the right tone and working with them with real substance is possible only for the CEO who has previously and continuously demonstrated an authentic and independent interest in social issues. Audiences can hear (and taste and smell and feel) the difference between, "I'm a corporate bean counter making this statement on another goddamn 'social issue' so I can get back to work," and, "I am always thinking, and have long been talking, about how our business interacts with the most difficult social issues of our time. In fact, what you're asking for dovetails very much with what we've been working on for several years…"

CEO watchers can easily identify examples of the former type, and also examples of the latter. Five years from now, the latter corporate leader will be the only kind left standing, the only kind who felt the job was worth the hassle, because they didn't see roiling social demands placed upon them as a "hassle" in the first place. They saw their CEO role as an incredible opportunity to use the vast economic and cultural influence of a modern corporation to make meaningful change in the world in which they operate.

"The business of business is business," Milton Friedman famously said. Milton Friedman, who is famously dead.

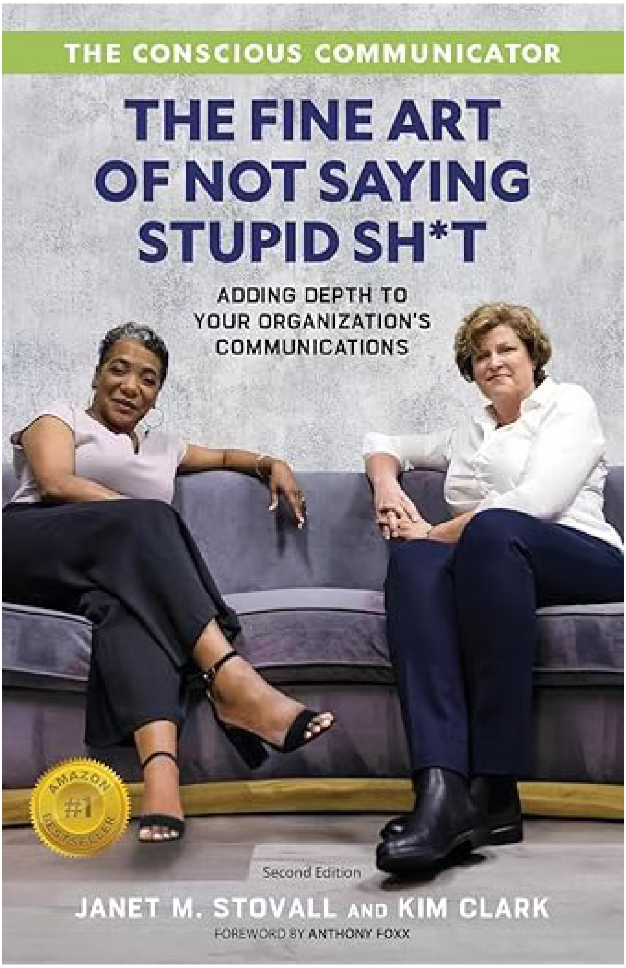
Obviously, modern corporate leaders *do* have terribly difficult, endlessly political jobs—that still *do* require them to make quarterly earnings. They need help in developing and articulating their ideas, in balancing conflicting demands and in focusing their energies and communications where they can do the most good. For that help, they must turn to communication professionals and other deeply culturally literate advisors—who must, themselves, believe fundamentally in the ability of corporate leaders to use their powers for good. Cynical or narrow-minded communicators will go the way of Milton Friedman, too.

If corporations are going to help make a kinder, warmer society—rather than a meaner, colder one—CEOs and their advisors both must drive themselves toward the psychically dangerous integration of their work with their intellect, their morality, their whole humanity.

It's a lot to ask. It's also the least, in exchange for corporate salaries and creature comforts afforded by so many to so few, that corporate leaders can do.

## Biography

*David Murray (he/him) is founder and executive director of the Professional Speechwriters Association and the Executive Communication Council. He's the author of the communicator's manifesto,* An Effort to Understand: Hearing One Another (and Ourselves) in a Nation Cracked in Half *(Disruption Books, 2021).*

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