



# 6 Key Communication Practices

to Build Trust and Inspire Your Team

FranklinCovey

# Even though our world has changed drastically, our leadership styles haven't kept pace.

Most organizations and teams today still operate from a leadership model rooted in “Command & Control,” focusing on positional power, hierarchy, and compliance.

But because of the accelerating disruption in society, the economy, the workforce, and even how we do our work, the old rules of leadership no longer apply. The “Command & Control” leadership model is outdated. We need to shift to a more relevant and effective approach: a “Trust & Inspire” leadership model.

You inspire intentionally when you connect with your people and, in turn, connect them to a sense of purpose, meaning, and contribution at work to help them reach new levels of achievement and fulfillment. Everyone has a purpose—something inside that drives them. Your job as a leader is to help your team members connect to that purpose. Once you do, they'll be committed and engaged with new energy and understanding.

A Trust & Inspire leader focuses on building relationships that develop capabilities and empower their team. One way in which leaders build these high-trust relationships is by using clear and effective communication practices—consistently.



# Leadership happens one conversation at a time.

One of the most impactful communication channels for leaders and their teams is the 1-on-1 meeting, where a leader's communication style can make or break the relationship—ultimately unleashing potential or stifling it.

When leaders conduct 1-on-1s, they sometimes fall into old Command & Control leadership habits—even if they're on the enlightened end of the Command & Control spectrum. As a result, team members will feel managed. But they want to be led.

When you use the following practices to shift to a Trust & Inspire leadership style, you'll engender heartfelt commitment, foster creativity, and tap into the passion of your people.

Drawing out motivations and challenges, building trust, and inspiring improved performance is hard. But when you make a commitment to build trust through your communication with these six practices, you can inspire those you lead and serve to become the best versions of themselves—and to produce their best work.



# 1. Ask open-ended questions that begin with “how” or “what.”

Closed-ended questions that require only a yes or no answer—for example, “Do you think we’ll meet the deadline?”—can be ineffective.

**PRO TIP:**

**Before each 1-on-1, have a list of two or three thought-provoking questions you can ask that begin with “how” or “what.”**

Questions that demand only a “yes” or “no” response align with a Command & Control style of leadership. They suggest, *I’m the boss and you’re not. I ask the questions. You give me accurate, concise answers.*

This type of communication can have its place. However, in 1-on-1s, where leaders have a great opportunity and responsibility to prioritize their direct report’s growth and development, you’ll want to use a different questioning style. By using open-ended “how” and “what” questions, you’ll significantly improve your odds of finding out what’s really going on with thoughtful, honest answers—and help your team members feel trusted and inspired to do their best.

Common:

*“Are you enjoying the project?”*

More Effective:

*“What are you enjoying most—and what’s been challenging—about the project so far?”*

Or:

*“How are you feeling about the project this week versus last week?”*

One exception: “How’s Project X going?” is a “how” question that rarely yields much beyond an automatic “fine” or “good” response. As is the case with “yes” and “no” questions, this line of questioning is likely to prompt direct reports to give the easiest response that will keep their managers happy and off their backs—especially in environments of low trust.

To yield a more meaningful status update, get more specific: “On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you say Project X is going, and what makes you say that?” or “What obstacles are you facing with Project X?”

“

Trust is the glue of life. It is the most essential ingredient in effective communication. It's the foundational principle that holds all relationships.”

– Stephen R. Covey



## 2. Draw out issues with follow-up statements and questions.

### ASK YOURSELF:

**What are some statements you can make that give your direct reports positive reinforcement for opening up and sharing?**

### Read between the lines.

If a direct report responds to an open-ended question with a short or curt response like, *“It’s fine”* or *“It is what it is,”* don’t just inwardly shrug and move on. Trust & Inspire leaders genuinely care about the people they work with—and they want to understand other people’s thoughts, feelings, experiences, and points of view. You can do this by showing you care—with well-crafted questions and follow-up statements—and that you’re asking with the intent to better understand their situation and provide support.

For example, if you inquire about someone’s workload and get a vague, one- or two-word answer, you might follow up with a comment like, *“I know you’ve got a lot going on, and I want to make sure you have the*

*support and resources you need.”* Or you could go with another question: *“Which project is giving you the most trouble?”* or even just *“Could you say a little more about that?”*

If you’re dealing with a more reserved or guarded team member, consider they may be dealing with non-work issues or are naturally shyer and quieter. Continue to give positive feedback and reinforcement if they choose to engage and share.

### 3. Don't sabotage your message with contradictory cues.

Your body language, tone of voice, and other non verbal cues can be just as important as the words that come out of your mouth—maybe even more important.

**PRO TIP:**

**Being self-aware enough to notice your body language and voice is difficult, so it may help to focus on one thing at a time.**

Say you ask your direct report about a challenge they're experiencing and tell them you want to help—but then you check your phone while they're speaking. You're sending a clear signal that you believe you have more important things to do. Or maybe you say you think your team member can reach their goal, but your shoulders slump and your voice trails off at the end of your sentence. With your body language and tone, you're displaying a lack of confidence in them.

To ensure your communication style builds trust and inspires your team, be fully present and authentic. Your words, tone of voice, and body language all need to be in harmony. People can tell when you aren't giving your full attention—and that's a sure way to erode trust. When speaking, make sure your words and actions align. For example, you might lean forward, smile, and use a genuinely curious tone of voice while asking your direct report about what they see as the next stage in their career. When in doubt, aim to be attentive yet calm. Maintain good eye contact, keep your arms loose at your sides, and use a confident, even tone of voice.



“

Leadership happens one conversation at a time. So, be mindful with each one.”

– Todd Davis  
author of *Everyone Deserves a Great Manager* and former Chief People Officer, FranklinCovey

## 4. Be wary of the word “why” when trying to explore people’s rationale for doing things.

Questions that begin with the word “why” can come across as threatening.

**PRO TIP:**

**Conversations that start defensively are rarely productive; people tend to reveal more when the other person seeks to understand them instead of judging them.**

As a leader, it’s important to understand what motivates your direct reports. When we seek to understand someone’s “why” or their intent, we show we genuinely care. We’re not judging or evaluating harshly; we just want to delve deeper.

However, questions that start with “why” tend to make people feel like they need to justify their actions or defend themselves after doing something wrong. They might inadvertently hear, “Why would you do that?” This defensive position can quickly erode trust. Try rephrasing your question using “how” or “what” instead.

Here are a few great questions that can help you understand someone’s “why” without actually starting with the “why” word:

- What matters most to you?
- What makes you want to get up in the morning?
- What do you do at work that brings a sense of meaning and purpose?
- When do you feel most alive?
- What’s your “why”?

Common:

*“Why did you share that assignment with Yao?”*

More Effective:

*“How did you decide to partner with Yao on the assignment?”*

Or:

*“What led you to partner with Yao on the assignment?”*

## 5. Use “we” and “us” instead of “you”—but tread carefully with praise and blame.

Send a critical message to your direct report: You’re on their side.

**FACT:**

**Strong leaders with loyal teams give their direct reports credit when things go well (“You really knocked this one out of the park”) and accept the blame when they don’t (“I really messed up on this”).**

Command & Control leaders use “you” language: *What can you do for me?* Conversely, Trust & Inspire leaders use “us” language: *What can we do together?* These subtle shifts foster connection and send a critical message to your direct reports: You’re on their side. Consider the huge difference between these two questions:

Common:

“How do you plan to reach that goal?”

More Effective:

“How can we work to accomplish that goal?”

The subtext of the first is, “*You’re on your own, pal.*” The second, on the other hand, says: “*We’re in this together.*”

Don’t forget to back up your use of “we” and “us” with collaborative behavior. Few things are as disheartening to team members as a boss who throws around team-oriented buzzwords but rarely offers support in a meaningful way.

One caveat: “We” and “us” language can be useful—but they can also backfire if you use them to take unearned credit or unduly share blame. “*We really knocked this one out of the park*” might rub a team member the wrong way if they spearheaded a project that required long hours to finish. In the same vein, “*We really messed up on this*” can feel demoralizing to team members when they had no say in the ultimate decision-making.

“

When we trust others,  
it's important that we  
communicate the trust  
we extend—both what  
and why.”

– Stephen M. R. Covey  
bestselling author of *Trust & Inspire* and *The  
Speed of Trust*



## 6. When there's an uncomfortable silence, wait 10 seconds. Then clarify.

Ever ask a question that opens up a giant, gaping void of silence?

**FACT:**

**Silence can be an indicator that you've hit on something difficult but critical.**

It's bound to happen, and it's bound to be awkward. But don't make the mistake of rushing to fill the silence. Sometimes, it just takes people time to gather their thoughts.

As a leader, it's not only your job to deliver results; you also need to elevate the growth of your direct reports. When you give people the time and space to figure out solutions to a problem or answer a question, you create the conditions for them to learn and grow. That said, it's not easy to sit in the discomfort of silence. Try silently counting to 10 and focus on maintaining calm, open body language. If the person finally speaks up, even if it's a one-word answer, be sure to affirm their contribution with an encouraging response like: "Sure, that makes sense," "I appreciate that insight," or "That's really interesting." Then, add a critical follow-up question that keeps them talking: "Could you tell me more about that?"

But what if your direct report doesn't break the silence? There are two more options to try before moving on:

- 1) Rephrase the question to better explain what you meant, or
- 2) Provide some optional responses to show that any answer is welcome.

For instance, if "What are a few things you think could be better about these 1-on-1s?" doesn't elicit a response, you might follow up with: "For example, are the updates to departmental meetings informative, or are they a waste of time? Could I be providing you with more feedback?" While you don't want to put words in your direct report's mouth, your suggested responses or rephrasing can help them better understand your intent, articulate their thoughts, or understand that you're open to any answer.

# Your job as a leader is to inspire, not merely motivate.

**FACT:**

93%

[PwC](#) found that 61% of workers say their employer's perceived lack of trust in them impacts their ability to do their jobs well, while 93% of executives say building and maintaining trust improves their bottom line.

125%

[Bain & Co.](#) research shows that inspired employees are 125% more productive than those who are merely satisfied at work.

Build trust and inspire your direct reports. The results will speak for themselves.

Inspiring individuals takes time and persistent effort—and trust doesn't develop overnight. However, you can take steps to build trust and inspire greatness in your teams by consistently using these communication practices in conversations with your direct reports. By extending trust to your teams and modeling high-trust behaviors, you can build stronger connections and inspire their efforts to unleash performance across your organization.

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