STYLE · JUDGMENT

Great Leaders Communicate Differently

Jim Petersen, PhD · September 28, 2026

How communication brings Character, Style, Judgment, Culture, Execution, and Life to life

Leadership is often discussed as though communication were a separate competency, something a leader either does well or needs to improve. Communication is more fundamental than that.

A leader's character may be strong. The leader may understand his or her preferred style, exercise sound judgment, build a healthy culture, and develop an effective strategy. Yet none of those qualities creates organizational impact until other people can understand them, trust them, and act on them.

Communication, then, is not simply one more component of leadership. It is one of the primary ways leadership becomes visible.

The Petersen Leadership Triangle rests on three foundational dimensions: Character, Style, and Judgment. The broader Petersen Leadership Model extends that foundation through Culture, Execution, and Life. Communication runs through all six. What leaders say, how they say it, what they choose not to say, and how well they listen reveal who they are as leaders.

Six communication practices are especially important for leaders who want to increase their influence and effectiveness.

1. Frame the message around what matters

A leader can have an excellent idea and still fail to gain support for it. Often the problem is not the quality of the idea; it is the way the idea is framed.

People interpret information through their own responsibilities, priorities, pressures, and objectives. Senior leaders are thinking about organizational performance, risk, resources, people, customers, growth, and long-term consequences. An effective communicator presents an idea in terms that matter to the person receiving it.

Rather than beginning with, "I want to explain this new initiative," a leader might begin with, "This could reduce the time it takes to serve our clients while improving consistency."

The underlying idea is identical. The framing is not.

This connects directly to **Style**. Effective leadership does not mean communicating with everyone in exactly the same way. Great leaders adapt their approach without compromising their standards or their values.

It also reflects **Judgment**. Good judgment requires understanding the environment in which a decision will be made. The communicator must ask, “What does this person need to understand in order to make a good decision?” That is a very different question from, “What do I want to tell them?”

The shift seems small, but it marks the transition from delivering information to communicating as a leader.

2. Be concise enough to demonstrate command

Knowledgeable people are often tempted to demonstrate their expertise by explaining everything they know. Ironically, the result is frequently the opposite of what they intend. Excessive detail obscures the central issue, and the audience starts searching for the point instead of considering the recommendation.

Strong leaders learn to simplify complexity. Conciseness is not superficiality; it is understanding a subject well enough to separate what is essential from what is merely interesting.

Here **Judgment** becomes especially important. The leader must decide:

- What does the audience need to know?
- What can be left out?
- What should be ready if questions arise?
- What is the central message?

In this sense, brevity demonstrates mastery. A leader who understands a subject deeply should be able to explain it in thirty seconds, three minutes, or thirty minutes. The amount of detail changes; the clarity of the central message does not.

Communication becomes one of the ways sound judgment is made visible to others.

3. Build understanding before the meeting

Many people assume that important decisions are made in meetings. Much of the real work happens before the meeting begins.

Experienced leaders often discuss significant ideas one-on-one with key stakeholders before presenting them to the larger group. They ask questions, surface concerns, test assumptions, and learn where resistance may exist. This is sometimes called “socializing the idea.”

Done poorly, it becomes political maneuvering. Done well, it is responsible leadership. The difference comes back to **Character**. The purpose is not manipulation; it is understanding. A leader of strong character does not quietly engineer agreement. Instead, that leader seeks out perspectives that can improve the proposal and prevent unnecessary surprises.

This also connects to **Culture**. In a healthy culture, people do not encounter every major idea

for the first time when the slide appears on the screen. Leaders build relationships in which discussion and dialogue happen continuously.

By the time an important decision reaches a formal meeting, the strongest leaders already know which questions are likely to be asked.

4. Make a recommendation

One of the clearest transitions from contributor to leader is the move from identifying problems to recommending action. Consider the difference between these two statements:

“We could do A, although B might work, and there are some arguments for C.”

“I considered three alternatives. Based on what we know today, I recommend B, and here is why.”

The second statement does not claim infallibility. It demonstrates **Judgment**.

Leaders are expected to decide with imperfect information. They should acknowledge uncertainty, but uncertainty cannot become an excuse for indecision. Sometimes the honest answer really is, “It depends.” Leadership requires finishing the sentence: “It depends on these factors, and given the situation we face today, this is what I recommend.”

That gives others something concrete to examine, challenge, improve, or approve.

The Petersen Leadership Model places **Execution** after Judgment for a reason. Organizations do not benefit from what their leaders merely considered. They benefit from what people decide and then do.

A recommendation creates movement.

5. Develop people who can do what you do

The most surprising communication lesson has little to do with speaking.

Some people become so good at a particular function that the organization grows reluctant to move them. They have made themselves indispensable. That sounds like a compliment. It can become a trap.

Leadership requires a change in perspective, from “Look what I can accomplish” to “Look what the people around me are becoming capable of accomplishing.”

This principle connects three dimensions of the model:

- **Character** determines whether leaders are secure enough to develop talented people who may one day equal or surpass them.
- **Culture** determines whether knowledge is shared or hoarded.
- **Execution** determines whether the organization has capability beyond any single individual.

One of the clearest signs of leadership maturity is leaving a position stronger than it was when you arrived. The lesson can be stated simply:

> *If the organization cannot afford to lose you in your current role, it may never believe it can afford to promote you out of it.*

Great leaders therefore share knowledge, delegate responsibility, coach others, and deliberately develop successors. Their legacy is not indispensability. It is capability.

6. Communicate at the level you aspire to lead

People form impressions of someone's leadership long before the next title arrives. They listen to what that person talks about. Does the conversation stay focused on tasks? Or does it reflect an understanding of customers, people, strategy, financial consequences, organizational priorities, and the future?

There is nothing wrong with being known as reliable. Reliability is essential. Senior leadership, however, requires something more: perspective.

This is where the full Petersen Leadership Model is especially useful. A leader operating mainly at the level of Execution asks, "What needs to get done?" A broader leader also asks:

- **Character:** Is this consistent with who we say we are?
- **Style:** How should I lead these people in this situation?
- **Judgment:** What decision best serves the organization?
- **Culture:** What behaviors will this reinforce?
- **Execution:** How will we turn the decision into results?
- **Life:** What kind of leader, and what kind of person, am I becoming in the process?

That broader perspective changes how a leader communicates. The conversation moves from completing assignments to understanding consequences.

This is not pretending to be more senior than one is. It is learning to think beyond the boundaries of one's current job.

Communication as the connecting thread

These six practices show why communication should not simply be added as another box in a leadership model. It is already present throughout the model.

- **Character** is communicated through consistency.
- **Style** is communicated through adaptability.
- **Judgment** is communicated through clarity and recommendations.
- **Culture** is communicated through what leaders repeatedly reinforce.

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Execution is communicated through priorities, accountability, and action.

- **Life** is communicated through the example a leader ultimately sets.

Leadership becomes visible through all six dimensions. That leads to an important conclusion:

> *People cannot follow leadership they cannot understand.*

The strongest leaders do more than have good ideas; they make those ideas understandable. They do more than make good decisions; they explain the reasoning that allows others to act. They do more than achieve results personally; they build people capable of producing results long after they have moved on.

That is why great leaders communicate differently. They understand that communication is not merely the transfer of information.

It is the transfer of leadership.

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