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Review

Tell-and-sell or ask-and-listen: A self-concept perspective on why it needs leadership communication flexibility to engage subordinates at work

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Abstract

Beneath the verbosity of modern leadership theories, there is a simple truth: leading people is essentially about communication. The respective communicative philosophies underlying leadership theories can be broadly separated into two camps: one arguing that leaders should tell-and-sell and one urging leaders to ask-and-listen. In the present essay, we first define the two communication approaches. Second, we outline how both approaches manage to engage subordinates but in different ways. Third, we review the appropriateness of each of these communication approaches under different circumstances, outlining why communicative flexibility is needed. Lastly, despite the advantages, we discuss that leaders will struggle to adopt communicative flexibility due to widespread simplistic leadership schemas—in research and practice.

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Asking, Listening, Questions, Communication, Leadership.

Introduction

Depending on the hierarchical level, communication constitutes approximately 70–80% of managers' daily work [1,2]—the majority of which happens with subordinates [3,4]. While such communication often involves instructing or informing subordinates, the ultimate objective of leadership communication is engaging subordinates so that they want to and will contribute to the collective goals of the organization [5].

It is notable, then, that the concrete importance of communication is often obscured by the verbosity of contemporary leadership theories. Indeed, many theories are remarkably devoid of outlining concrete leadership communication behaviors [6,7]. That said, leadership theories do—if sometimes implicitly—make assumptions about the most effective way to communicate. By and large, these can be divided into two camps: namely, whether leaders should motivate subordinates through *tell-and-sell* versus *ask-and-listen*. However, the field lacks theorizing that integrates both kinds of leadership communication.

While some older leadership theorizing does somewhat incorporate fundamentally different types of leadership communication, it generally takes an instrumental tack. For instance, participative leadership theory [8] recommends different kinds of leadership communication ranging from autocratic to full group participation that is to be deducted via a decision tree leading into different recommended communication branches depending on whether the leader has all the necessary information or needs the group's full commitment. As informative as such accounts might be for leader decision-making, what is missing is a truly integrated account of how different kinds of leadership communication can actually engage—that is, motivate—subordinates [9].

The present article attempts to provide such an integrated account of the two main approaches to leadership communication. To that end, we first offer definitions of our core constructs (i.e., tell-and-sell/ask-and-listen). Second, we link both communication patterns to a central motivational mechanism: namely, subordinates' "self-concept" [10]. In essence, we outline that

leadership effectiveness stems from subordinates (a) personally identifying—and hence wanting to engage—with the goals of the organization and (b) feeling like they (can) master behaviors that contribute to achieving those goals. Accordingly, we map how leaders who use tell-and-sell versus ask-and-listen speak to the corresponding different elements of subordinates' self-concept: namely, (a) self-construal and (b) self-efficacy. Third, following from the above, we outline how the motivational utility of these different communication types changes based on the subordinates' needs. Finally, further drawing on self-concept theorizing, we critically reflect on why widespread simplistic schemas about leadership may prevent leaders from flexibly switching between both communication patterns.

Definition of tell-and-sell versus ask-and-listen leadership

Somewhat related to how Waldman and Bowen [11] mapped out paradoxical leadership philosophies, that is, to control versus to let go of control, we contend that there are scholars and practitioners who subscribe to one of two leadership communication approaches: tell-and-sell or ask-and-listen. That is, the question of how to approach leadership communication is answered fundamentally differently depending on the philosophy with which leaders approach it. In the following, we will articulate the often-implicit assumptions underlying both communication types.

"Tell-and-sell" refers to a behavioral pattern, whereby leaders' communicative acts generally seek to provide direction (e.g., communicating a vision, outlining ambitious goals, judging what is wrong or right; i.e., "tell") while also illustrating the value of that direction (e.g., by using engaging rhetoric, orchestrating the delivery context, appealing to personal advantages; i.e., "sell").[1] Here, it is assumed that the leader "knows what's best" and therefore retains control. In this tradition, research emphasizes the value of directive leadership [12], charismatic leadership tactics [13], or vision communication and sense giving [14].

In contrast, "ask-and-listen" refers to behavioral pattern, whereby leaders' communicative acts seek to elicit contributions in the form of input, opinions, and other thoughts (e.g., posing autonomous-supporting questions, guiding self-reflection, inviting others to share what they think is the right thing to do; i.e., "ask") while also focusing attentively on the response, usually without judgment (i.e., "listen") [note that theoreticians and laypeople seem to converge on what such good listening entails [15], so that people self-generate insights and solve issues on their own. Metaphorically speaking, questions are the sparks and listening the subsequent fuel to keep the fire going.[2] Here, the assumption is that subordinates "know what's best". Consequently, research in this stream often focuses on empowering [12,16], humble [17], respectful [18], or servant leadership styles [19], with the concrete behavioral configuration of respectful inquiry [20] underlining many of these.

Table 1 summarizes the main differences between tell-and-sell versus ask-and-listen leadership. Note though that leaders who adhere to a tell-and-sell approach can still ask or listen; they just use different types of questions [20—22] and listen to responses with different intentions [20,23] due to their different underlying intentions (see Table 1). Research streams in the two traditions, therefore, operate fairly siloed from each other, with occasional exceptions such as Kearney and colleagues investigating the interplay of vision communication and empowering leadership [24], and Lorinkova and colleagues focusing on the short- versus long-term effects of directive versus empowering leadership [12].

Both tell-and-sell and ask-and-listen leadership can help in motivating subordinates via elements of their self-concept

The way that individuals perceive themselves (i.e., their self-concept) has a profound impact on not only their goals and aspirations but also on the thoughts, emotions, and behaviors they exhibit when pursuing these goals [25]. This is the basis for identity-oriented leadership, whereby leaders' effectiveness flows from their ability to influence their subordinates' self-concepts along two broad dimensions: inviting them to aspire toward collective goals and helping them believe that they can contribute to said goals [10,26]. In the following sections, we first provide a brief definition of the two dimensions (i.e., self-construal and self-efficacy) and then outline how they are affected by the two types of leadership communication.

Self-construal refers to how people generally think of themselves—or more specifically, what the dominant or salient way of thinking about oneself is. This ranges from individual to collective: in the former self-construal, people mainly think of themselves as the significant entity (i.e., striving to protect and further their own goals); in the latter, a person experiences a sense of oneness with a collective (i.e., a social identity with, for instance, a family, a sports club, or an organization) and, consequently,

[1] Notably, this approach is different from a mere command-and-order leadership style where leaders do not want or feel the need to "sell" the bigger objective to subordinates.

[2] The combination is often overlooked by "pure" listening researchers, even though most of their paradigms in fact do involve starting questions.

Table 1

Two fundamentally different understandings of leadership: Tell-and-sell versus ask-and-listen.

	Tell-and-sell	Ask-and-listen
Content of the communication pattern	1. Provide direction (e.g., by communicating an inspiring vision, outlining ambitious goals, and judging what is wrong or right) 2. Sell the value of joining in on this mission (e.g., by speaking to the sentiments of the collective and using rhetorical questions that make people aware of their personal advantages).	1. Elicit input, opinions, and (self-)reflection (e.g., by posing autonomy-supporting questions and inviting others to share what they think is the right thing to do) 2. Focus on the response without judgment (e.g., by active listening and paraphrasing) so that people can gain insights and resolve issues on their own, resulting in a sense of competence.
Underlying understanding of leadership	Leadership is essentially about sense-giving. Leadership is seen as something that manifests in largely unidirectional (mostly group) communication through which subordinates receive a clear identity in terms of a collective self-construal and, accordingly, adopt the collective goals.	Leadership is essentially about (joint) sense-making. Leadership is seen as something that manifests in bi-directional (mostly individual) communication through which subordinates develop a more agentic sense of self (i.e., a sense of self-efficacy) that is necessary to reach goals.
Underlying intent of communication	Control subordinate	Support subordinate autonomy
Referent	We	You
Addressed part of the subordinate self-concept	(Collective) Self-construal (*Additionally* relational self-construal)	(Personal) Self-efficacy (*Additionally* relational self-construal)
Types and role of questions	Closed questions to make a point (e.g., rhetorical questions).	Open questions to invite (self-)reflection.
Role of listening	Leaders listen to respond. Listening is thus understood as a technique to understand how others can be rhetorically engaged (for the collective). The underlying assumption is that mostly the leader has the answers to issues at hand and the leader's job is to communicate them in a convincing way.	Leaders listen to understand. Listening is thus understood as a technique to provide space to allow (joint) sense making of one's role (within the collective). The underlying assumption is that mostly the subordinates have the answers to issues at hand and it is the leader's responsibility to bring them out.
Typical organizational context	Traditional organizations, very hierarchical working environments, and exploitation-focused organizations.	Humble organizations, agile working environments, and exploration-focused organizations.

concentrates on the goals of the collective in their striving [10].[3]

Self-efficacy captures individuals' beliefs about their capacity to organize and implement actions that are necessary for achieving their goals [29]. Given their links to perceptions of personal control and agency, strong self-efficacy beliefs increase the probability that people will strive to accomplish specific goals and persist in goal-oriented behaviors [29–31].

While both tell-and-sell as well as ask-and-listen are inherently relational processes because they require back-and-forth exchanges between the leader and the subordinate and, as such, both likely contribute to the subordinates' relational self-construal (i.e., their relational identification with the leader), there are notable fundamental differences: the former being useful for addressing subordinates' collective self-construal and the latter for supporting subordinates' self-efficacy. To illustrate: the visionary rhetoric of tell-and-sell can paint a compelling collective future that makes subordinates envision themselves as part of it [32–34]. Here, the meta-message is: "we are one". Speaking in the plural (i.e., "we", "our", and "us") specifically signals here that the leader is including the subordinate in their vision for the collective [35]. In short, such leadership communication not only establishes what the group's norms and aspirations are but also helps subordinates see themselves as part of it, that is, to develop a more collective self-construal at work. By contrast, ask-and-listen engages the subordinate in a

[3] Whereas this fundamental differentiation between the focus on oneself versus the collective is also discussed in the context of cross-cultural [e.g., Ref. 27] or individual differences [e.g., Ref. 28], we go beyond such general context factors and concentrate here on the role of leadership communication as directly influencing subordinates' self-construal at work.

(self-)reflective dialogue [36]. Here, the meta-message is that the subordinate is a "worthy" conversation partner who is not only encouraged to contribute but appreciated for it. Because of the experienced autonomy in the process but also the sense of accomplishment in answering, such leadership communication not only heightens subordinates' self-esteem [37] but also cultivates a more efficacious sense of self [33,38].

Effective leadership communications should flexibly cater to subordinates' self-concept needs

The notion that different forms of leadership communication cater to different outcomes aligns with classic situational leadership theorizing [e.g., Refs. 8,39]. The key notion of situational leadership is that circumstances alter the effectiveness of various types of leadership. Hersey and Blanchard [39], for instance, theorized that subordinate maturity is a relevant qualifier in the link between supportive and directive leadership on the one side and effectiveness on the other. Their point was that leaders should supply directive leadership to less mature subordinates, but can slowly transition into more supportive and participative leadership as subordinates grow—with leaders able to delegate tasks to their most mature subordinates. While the authors' concept has yet to receive empirical support [40], we borrow their notion that leadership communication should be geared to what subordinates need in the situation.

Within the above-introduced self-concept perspective on leadership effectiveness, leaders should logically support both subordinates' collective self-construal and their sense of self-efficacy. The first ensures that subordinates subscribe to the collective goals; the second ensures that they feel a sense of agency in goal pursuit. In line with the notion of situationally appropriate communication as outlined above, leaders should, therefore, choose an approach that matches subordinates' needs. For instance, subordinates who do not see themselves as part of the collective need to be first convinced by way of tell-and-sell, that is, a compelling visionary rhetoric may help them identify with the organization. On the flip side, some subordinates may identify with the organization and therefore want to engage, but cannot see how they can themselves meaningfully contribute. Because they do not perceive themselves as self-efficacious, they would benefit more from the encouraging communication inherent to ask-and-listen that makes them realize that they can meaningfully contribute to the goals of the collective. Only when *want* and *can* are combined, subordinates *will* engage.

Why are we not seeing more communicative flexibility among leaders?

As outlined in the previous section, effective leadership may entail a "both-and" approach that integrates the tell-and-sell and ask-and-listen approaches depending on subordinates' needs. Granted, this idea of communicative flexibility is not entirely new [e.g., Refs. 12,24]. So why is it that, in reality, leaders find it so difficult to combine both approaches in a balanced way [41,42]?

To answer this question, we need to contrast the functional and attributional aspects of leadership [39]. Functionally speaking, asking open questions and listening attentively would seem to produce effective leadership [e.g., Refs. 17,20,43]. But those same qualities may run counter to the schemas that people generally hold about effective leaders and therefore keep them from exhibiting such behaviors [though observers seem to recognize listening as part of good leadership, 44–46]. Indeed, people seem to hold implicit leadership theories (i.e., notions about what leaders should and should not do) that are fairly resistant to change. As part of that, they emphasize attributes such as being decisive and charismatic rather than humble and inquisitive [47]. When such narratives circulate, they reinforce the image of the decisive leader who is in control [48] and become part of subordinates' socialization and subsequent understanding of leadership effectiveness. Accordingly, a manager who utilizes autonomy supportive ask-and-listen runs the risk (or at least, fears the risk) of losing control [11], of being perceived as someone who is incompetent, indecisive, and simply not leader-like [48,49]. Indeed, it seems that leaders fear a competence penalty in other's perceptions that outweighs any humility premiums that they would stand to gain from asking questions [50]. And at the very least, they may fear overstepping with too straightforward (or sensitive) questions [51]. Furthermore, the general narratives may also influence leaders' own sense of leader identity, that is, who they should be in order to justify their role in contrast to who they might want to be [52]. Unfortunately, once leaders subscribe to a certain communication norm, it tends to feed back into their thoughts, thereby substantiating their communication pattern even more [see, for instance, how talking and listening versus writing and reading influence intuitive versus analytical thought 53].

Given the prevalence of these simplistic narratives, we expect most managers to engage in more tell-and-sell rather than ask-and-listen. As such, organizations (and societies) will need to make a substantial effort to change the narratives around leadership in order to enable the ask-and-listen approach. Critically, especially those tasked with the educational responsibility of developing leaders (such as business schools) need to update their curricula to also adequately train leaders in asking high-quality questions and listening responsively [20,54]. Of course, it is possible that (certain) people may overcompensate by swinging too far away from tell-and-sell toward the ask-and-listen. This then would inevitably result in their subordinates feeling highly

self-efficacious but likely being somewhat lost as to for what cause.

Conclusion

Unfortunately, simple narratives on what is the right type of leadership communication are dominating not only the discourse in leadership practice but also in leadership theories. Fierce ideological battles are fought from the trenches of both sides. The sides need to come to peace with each other and each acknowledge the value of the respective other approach. Maintaining communicative flexibility is an ongoing struggle that requires resisting simple narratives of all kinds.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

No data was used for the research described in the article.

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