



Communication Intensive for Leaders

A powerful program that gives leaders the tools, feedback, and practice to permanently improve how they communicate with and influence others.

by Debra L. Howard

Leaders are told they must motivate their employees, set clear expectations, support diversity and inclusion, and influence others. To do these well, leaders need to be good communicators, especially in difficult situations. Most are not.

There are so many examples of difficult conversations managers face on a regular basis, it's puzzling that we don't receive more help with how to do them well. Rarely are children taught about communication skills. As adults, if we're lucky, a generous colleague or a manager gives us pointers, or we pick up some tips in a book or at a training.

But that is rarely enough. In my 25 years of working with leaders as an executive coach, I've determined that they almost always have one or more tools missing from their communication toolkit, which is causing many of the challenges they bring to me as a coach.

NOT YOUR TYPICAL TRAINING PROGRAM

Unfortunately, how we communicate with others reflects a complex, mostly unconscious set of beliefs and behaviors that we learned from our parents, teachers, and bosses, and that we have been practicing and perfecting since we were kids. It's very difficult to see ourselves accurately as communicators, and to change our default behaviors.

A typical communication training program might be eye-opening, but it almost never changes the deep-seated behavior patterns we keep reinforcing over the course of our careers.

This program not only gives leaders insights about what they are doing (and not doing) when they communicate in stressful situations, it also gives them a chance to put what they have learned into practice to anchor their new skills before returning to the business-as-usual blur of their professional and personal lives.

PART 1: COMMUNICATION SURVIVAL SKILLS

We begin with an all-day, in-person deep dive into the best practices of effective communicators, which is available to everyone interested in participating: there's no maximum size, and non-managers are welcome. (We can also do this virtually in four 2-hour sessions.) The training is memorable and lively, includes powerful models for improving communication, and gives people multiple opportunities to participate in small-group activities and discussions.



TOPICS AND GOALS

Participants learn and practice the following communication skills:

- Suspending judgment to explore someone’s mindset and beliefs (and to become more aware of their own)
- Comfortably delivering candid and constructive feedback, as well as positive feedback
- Structuring difficult conversations to maximize the chances for success
- Asserting with confidence, and discovering when listening can be more effective than “selling and telling”
- Crafting skillful questions that uncover and clarify information, increase the strategic thinking of others, and build commitment to actions and solutions
- Using listening (the most powerful, and least used, communication skill) to better understand people and problems before jumping to solutions
- “Calling the process” when the conversation starts to go off the rails, or doesn’t seem to be working
- Setting and negotiating expectations with employees, peers, board members, and clients to improve quality, productivity, and results, and to minimize misunderstandings

The participants also develop personal action plans documenting what they learned and intend to work on when they return to the office.

PART 2: COMMUNICATION BOOTCAMPS

But we don’t stop after teaching the do’s and don’ts: After the initial eight hours of training, participants are divided into groups of four, and each group attends a daylong Communication Bootcamp practice session with an experienced executive coach.

During the Bootcamps, participants are recorded as they role-play difficult conversations. They review the recording with their three peers, and receive immediate feedback on how they did and what they could have done better. Finally, the coach chimes in to give them pointers for how to improve. Then the participants get to practice what they just learned during a second round of role-playing and recording. This gives them multiple opportunities to put their new skills into action, to experiment with different techniques, and to receive feedback from multiple perspectives. Graduates of the training describe it as intense and transformational—it profoundly shifts not only how they think about communicating with others, but what they actually do when they return to work.

AN INTENSIVE APPROACH

The Communication Bootcamps are highly effective, with:

- An unusually high trainer-to-participant ratio (1:4)
- Recorded role-plays followed by in-depth analysis and feedback to anchor the concepts taught
- Real-life situations prepared in advance by participants



- Multiple opportunities for each participant to practice
- A highly experienced executive coach as trainer
- Peer feedback from a small group of participants who trust and know one another well
- The development of stronger peer relationships

A SMALL GROUP OF CAREFULLY SELECTED LEADERS

The Communication Bootcamps are designed for four executives or managers who are comfortable working together and who trust each other to keep any sensitive information shared during the session confidential.

Usually they are peers; if someone attends who has no peers, such as a CEO, he or she typically invites three trusted members of his or her leadership team.

To ensure confidentiality, the recordings are destroyed immediately following the session.

SCHEDULING THE BOOTCAMPS

Depending on how many groups of four leaders are attending, the Communication Bootcamps can be held on consecutive days, or stretched out to occur over a longer period, to better accommodate people's schedules. However, it's best to complete them as soon as possible after the Communication Survival Skills training.

For clients who want all of their leaders to attend the Bootcamp on the same day, we bring in additional coaches (one per group of four) to facilitate the sessions concurrently.

The Bootcamps can also accommodate three people, if it's not possible to divide the participants into equal groups of four.

ADDITIONAL OPTIONS

Some clients invite one or more departments (or their entire organization) to attend the Communication Survival Skills session, to give staff at all levels access to the training. Then a smaller group of leaders continues with the Bootcamps.

We customize each Communication Intensive to make it as relevant and helpful as possible for the participants.





About the Workshop Leader

Debra Howard founded her consulting business in 1991. She specializes in executive coaching for managers and leaders, organizational assessment and redesign for accelerating growth, and action-packed training for improving team and individual performance. A substantive and spirited presenter, and skilled facilitator, Deb enjoys sharing her extensive knowledge about management, leadership, and organizational effectiveness. She is known for a no-nonsense approach to training that focuses on permanent improvement and change.

For more information, visit www.debrahowardconsulting.com