

Three Communication Superpowers Great Leaders Master

By **Antoni Lacinai**

How leaders turn empathy, clarity, and energy into the everyday behaviors that build healthy, high-performing teams.

"It's you, it's you!" the man said, walking briskly toward me, crossing a busy street in Stockholm.

"It's me, it's me", I answered and said, "Who are you?" He smiled. "I was in the audience when you presented at our conference in Miami. You were awesome!" He paused and then said the words that have haunted me for more than 25 years: "I don't remember anything you said, but you were awesome!"...

It was an important lesson back then when I still had a normal job in marketing at a global tech company. I took it to heart and started to upskill myself. Now, a quarter of a century later, I am speaking on stages all over the world and coaching leaders and teams in how to improve their communication when they lead, serve, and collaborate.

Let's face it: Communication is hard, and sometimes we despair. In my work, I meet leaders from different industries across cultures, and many are frustrated, saying things like, "Why aren't they as passionate as I am?" or "How could they possibly misunderstand me?" or "What's wrong with them?" It turns out it has little to do with them and a lot to do with a general lack of excellent communication skills.



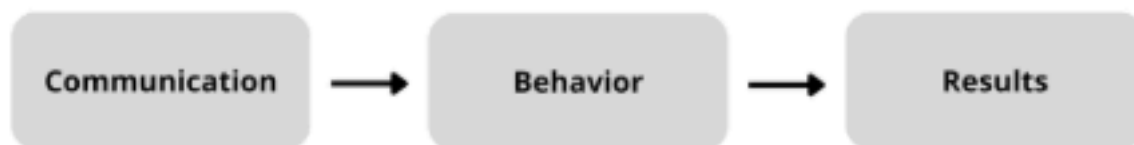
Antoni Lacinai is a global keynote speaker who helps leaders and teams communicate with clarity, empathy, and energy — and turn communication into behaviour and results.

Antoni Lacinai is a global keynote speaker and leadership communication expert. He helps leaders and teams turn communication into action, engagement, and measurable results.

His work focuses on how leadership communication shapes behaviour, strengthens collaboration, and improves performance. Antoni equips leaders with practical ways to create clarity, build trust, and move people to act.

He works with leaders and teams across industries worldwide.

If you are in HR, you have a great opportunity to help these leaders. In a recent piece for Fast Company, I argued that you cannot upskill your culture — you can only upskill the leaders whose conversations create it. The mechanism is simple:



Communication shapes behavior. Behavior drives results.

Strategy documents tell you what an organization intends. Conversations tell you what is actually happening on the ground.

If you, at HR and L&D, accept my argument, a harder question follows: what exactly do you train leaders to do? “Better communication” is a vague target. After more than two decades of working with executives and teams across industries, I have come to believe that there are three skills that successful leaders possess. I call them the three communication superpowers: **empathy**, **clarity**, and **energy**. Each one is trainable and within your control. Here is what each looks like in action, and what HR and L&D can do to build them.

Empathy: The Power of Presence, Caring, and Connecting

Empathy, according to me, is the most important superpower. It is also the most misunderstood of the three. It can often be confused with weakness, niceness, or people pleasing. It is neither. Empathy is the discipline of giving the person in front of you your full attention long enough for them to feel that they actually matter to you. If people feel seen, respected, and listened to, they will be more engaged, and engagement is the bridge between communication and behavior.

There are some real challenges, though. First, the more stressed you are, the harder it is to stay present and to show real interest. How many times have you thrown out an answer to a question without really listening? How much patience do you have with people when you are pressured for deadlines and bosses’ demands on you?

Second, it is the most fragile of the three superpowers. As soon as someone feels superior to others, empathy disappears. People will, of course, notice it immediately, and that person will quickly be disliked. Motivation declines, performance decreases, and people do just the bare minimum (this is what Quiet Quitting is all about). If you hear leaders spending more time communicating what they feel entitled to (corner office, best parking space, fruit baskets...) and less time on how they can serve their teams, you should view this as a red flag.

After almost all of my keynotes, leaders come up to me, saying, "I must be more present, I must listen more, and speak less." This is strong self-awareness. It might sound soft, but it is not.

What can you help these leaders with? Here are two behaviors that show your empathy in action:

- **Be interested instead of interesting.** Ask questions and listen to understand, not to respond. If you spend your time crafting responses, you will lose 20-50% of what the other person is saying. This is called next-in-line listening. Instead, ask follow-up questions. Show your interest by nodding, smiling, etc. Ask if you understood them by repeating the messages back. Don't look away with a clear disinterest. Don't interrupt when they want to ask you something; wait until they've fully asked their questions. Basically, show that you care.
- **If you want information, ask open questions.** Open questions start with why, what, which, who, when, and how. You can also say "Explain to me..." or "Share with us..." When you ask an open question, you have a 90% chance of an answer with more than one word compared to 60% if you ask closed questions (can you, will it, have you... etc.). One of my favorite questions is "What's important to you right now?" It can open the door to a deep and meaningful conversation.

Clarity: The Power of Speaking "Simple but with Substance."

Most leaders overestimate their own clarity. They have, for instance, lived inside the new strategy for months. The team has heard the headline once, in an uninspiring forty-slide deck, in week three of the quarter. The leader believes the message has landed. The team has already forgotten the priority order. When a leader says, "I said so, how can you not get it?", they don't understand that it is the sender's responsibility that the receiver understands. And not only understand but also remember. Here's the kicker: People cannot act on what they don't remember. That is exactly what happened to me, that day in Stockholm, more than 25 years ago ("I don't remember anything you said, but you were awesome!"). Nothing happened after my presentation. Nothing. And it was my fault.

Clarity is often confused with transparency. As professor Martin Gutmann and I argued in an earlier Fast Company piece, the two are distinct and different muscles. Transparency is about disclosure — telling people what is happening. Clarity is about direction — making sure people understand what to do with that information, and why it matters.

The lack of clarity is probably the biggest waste of any organization today. Surveys have shown that we spend one day per week just handling misunderstandings. A study from Cornell University found that the more corporate jargon you use, the worse your decisions will be. This is serious. Here are three things you can do to sharpen clarity:

- **The one-sentence test.** Before any important communication — a town hall, a strategy update, a project kickoff- write the core message in one sentence that you want people to remember a week later. If you cannot find it, you are not ready to speak. The day before I wrote these lines you are now reading, I was coaching an HR boss on her upcoming workshop, and I asked her how she would introduce the group work. She went on a long business jargon tirade until I stopped her and said, "What do you really want to say?" She

struggled for a while, and finally said, "Well, what I really want to say is..." and then she gave me a clear, easy-to-understand sentence. She looked surprised. I smiled. "Say that," I told her.

- **Paint the picture.** Make people see what you see, hear what you hear, and feel what you feel. The more you can visualize your message, the easier it is to both understand and to remember. Storytelling is borderline magic. Metaphors and analogies are not far behind. Make people feel smart, and they will follow you anywhere.
- **3 is the magic number.** Blood, sweat, and tears. Veni vidi vici. Sex and drugs and rock 'n roll. We remember things in three - even if it wasn't three. The three musketeers were actually four. Churchill didn't only say blood, sweat, and tears. He also added the word toil. Completely forgotten, of course, since it is an abstract word that cannot compete with the three body fluids. Try this to see if you are clear. Ask three people on your team, separately, what the top priority is this quarter. Or what the core message was from your last briefing. If you get three different answers, the message is not landing.

Energy: The Power of Pitch, Pace, Pauses, and Postures

Energy is the oldest form of human communication. Long before words, our species read posture, tone, breathing, and facial micro-movements to decide whether the person in front of us was safe and worth following. This assessment is still running in the background in every meeting room and every video call. People read your energy way before they process your content.

This is the superpower leaders most often dismiss. They focus on what they say (and often fail, using endless slides and complicated language). The team is reading *how* leaders say things. A leader who announces a new strategy in a flat, distracted voice, showing zero body language, will make people think that the strategy is not worth caring about. A leader who delivers tough news with steady eye contact, an open body language, and a calm tone signals that the situation is serious but survivable.

There are tons of things you can do, but they boil down to two things. First, show that you care (I know, I am repeating myself, but for good reasons, plus it enhances your memory when you read it) by leaning forward, nodding, raising your eyebrows, etc., when in conversation. Second, show that you believe in what you are saying. If you don't seem to believe it, why should I? Here are two things you can focus on:

- **Vary your voice.** If your voice is like a steady breeze, people will go into sleep mode after a short while. Vary your pitch, pace, and volume. Add pauses, emphasis, and articulation. This will signal that you are passionate about your message and increase clarity.
- **Use meaningful gestures.** Move your hands from A to B so that the transition is clear. Raise your arm if you show a difference from what you had previously. Smile with your eyes and mouth when conveying positive messages. Extend your arms out and palms up to show that you include people. Use palms down to state a message. Don't lift your nose up in the air, as you will appear arrogant. Don't look away all the time, and don't psycho-stare at one person either.

Basically, you want to leave people with more energy after meeting you. Over time, leaders develop a reputation in their organization as either an energy giver or an energy taker. That reputation shapes who applies to join their team and who quietly looks for the exit.

What HR and L&D Can Actually Do with This

The three superpowers are trainable skills, which means they respond to the same conditions as any other skill: deliberate practice, feedback, and positive reinforcement over time.

What if you build empathy, clarity, and energy into the language of your leadership competency framework? It's good to share a common language. Then, make sure they are assessed in real conversations. Self-rating questionnaires are good, but real observations are better. Observe leaders running an actual meeting. Score the behaviors, not the intentions.

Make sure all leaders are personally accountable for their communication. Only then will real change happen. Train managers to coach these behaviors during their one-to-ones with direct reports. The fastest way to scale leadership capability is to embed it in the recurring conversations that already exist. And track the right outcome. Engagement scores, retention, internal mobility, and the volume of upward feedback are all strong indicators.

What Comes Next?

For now, the invitation is simple. Help your leaders excel in these three superpowers. One is not enough. They need to be good at all three. Energy without clarity creates clowns. Clarity without empathy breeds arrogance. Empathy without energy leads nowhere.

Remember: Communication shapes behavior. Behavior drives results.

Thank you, and I wish you great success!

