



Hitting the 'pause' button to give leaders time to think

by Kim Griffin

With deadlines to meet, goals to exceed, decisions to be made, priorities to manage, and people to lead, many leaders are literally running to keep on top of their overstuffed agendas. As such, it's understandable that they sometimes forget to hit the virtual 'pause' button to carefully think about how their decisions, actions and communications impact others and how they're perceived within and outside of the organization. In this 'insta-everything' age, those perceptions could help determine the current and future reputation and influence of the leader. Here are three examples of busy leaders who forgot to hit the 'pause' button before they acted.

Remembering the bad, forgetting the good. When leaders communicate, people listen.

When leaders communicate poorly, people remember. Recently, a service leader held a town hall to announce a new process improvement initiative. This is a fine approach; however there was a major hiccup. The leader who announced the initiative was not a strong presenter. The verbal and non-verbal cues during the town hall gave the impression that he was neither confident nor an advocate for this large-scale change. Afterwards, people were talking less about the initiative and how they may be impacted and more about the 'train wreck' they saw on the podium. Fast-forward a year, and that leader is working extra hard to demonstrate his support of the initiative with his peers, managers and employees. Assuming the leader knew he was not a strong presenter, if he had hit the 'pause' button to think about his skill gaps and how he would be perceived, he may have prepared or approached his presentation very differently.

Using a sledge hammer to swat a fly. Leaders get angry and frustrated just like everyone else. Strong leaders need to be aware that their anger or frustration could easily cloud their decision-making ability. When a marketing leader who managed a remote-based team couldn't get in touch with a couple of employees for an issue, he decided that home-based offices are not going to work for his organization and he would put an end to it. He sent out an email stating that his department would be required to report into their local office every day. Such a declaration was not well-received since working remotely was considered a real perk by his team. Employees felt the leader was really overreacting to a one-time event, and they were being unjustly punished as a group because of a few individuals. The leader needed to hit the virtual 'pause' button to really think about what how he should react to the situation and to what extent. The leader needed to consider past actions and behaviors, future implications, and the perceptions of the entire team. After taking the time to think things through, perhaps he would come to the same decision. If so, then the question becomes how to communicate the message with a clear, tactful and professional voice.

Kickstarting the rumor mill. When leaders don't hit the 'pause' button to develop clear communication plans, they risk sending mixed messages to the wrong audience and kicking off the rumor mill. When a company recently announced they were breaking ground for a very large, state-of-the-art site for one of its divisions, the project leader sent out a broadcast message to everyone announcing the new site. It was very exciting news. While the announcement included the departments that would be relocated to the site, the building was so large that there would be additional capacity. The other sites were left with the distinct impression that their sites may be shut down and they may be asked to relocate. While not true, the rumor was persistent and the leader's team spent a long time trying to debunk the myth. Again, taking the time to think about the right level of detail through the right vehicles at the right time may have led to a different communication approach.

Where, when and how leaders decide to hit the 'pause' button may differ. It's critical that leaders have the foresight to think about upstream and downstream implications and perceptions of their actions, decisions and communications. Doing so can make them super-stars within and outside the organization.

Kim Griffin is director of Change Management at Ally Solutions Group.