



# **LEADERSHIP IS COMMUNICATION**

**Central Florida Leaders Perspectives on the  
Impact of Communication in the Workplace.**

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# INTRODUCTION

**James Humes** was a speechwriter to five U.S. Presidents and lectures all over the world on leadership. He's makes this statement:

“The art of communication is the language of leadership.”

In the average workday, there are dozens of interactions with co-workers, superiors, and subordinates and while managing multiple people and projects, interpersonal communication cannot be avoided. Whether communicating details of menial tasks, conducting business while playing golf, or seeking funding for billion-dollar projects, leaders within successful organizations understand the importance of communicating effectively; they know that when communication is off-target, opportunities are missed.

Communication has other major implications as well. According to a 2014 About.com survey, the top three reasons employees are dissatisfied with their jobs are all communication-related including: Lack of direction from management (38 percent), poor communication overall (14 percent), and constant change that's not well communicated (12 percent). This survey makes it plain to see how crucial it is for leaders to communicate effectively, and why there are often disconnects between front-line workers, management, and senior level leadership.

Spitzberg (1983) argues that in all interpersonal settings, people judge behavior by its appropriateness, or how well an act fits situational rules. If behavior is not appropriate, then the offender is either thought to be wilfully defying rules, or simply ignorant of them. People judge the effectiveness of communication within the confines of behavior, and in fact, as one of its major components. Effectiveness in general is based upon goal oriented behavior (McCroskey, 1982a). Therefore if communication accomplishes a goal, it is mostly then judged to have been successful; if it does not accomplish a goal, it is deemed to have failed.

In a recent Harvard Business Review article, authors Boris Groysberg and Michael Slind argue that effective leadership is a conversation. They posit that the command and control approach to management in recent years has become less viable, and postulate that traditional corporate communication must give way to a process that is more dynamic and more sophisticated, and most importantly a process that is *conversational*.

**If the statement by James Humes is true, in order to successfully speak the language of leadership one must first master the art of communication. These leaders loudly echo this refrain and have their own reasons as to why they argue that communication is at the top of their list of important behaviors to get right. This paper will examine the content of their responses.**



# HOW DID WE GET HERE?

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My mouth got me into a lot of trouble as a kid. I was short, small in frame, and liked to show off what I believed to be a superior intellect. My father, a man prone to physical violence as a way of discipline, did not take well to my loquacious ways and I often found myself at the receiving end of many a severe thrashing from him and various and sundry bullies. It was in the 6th grade on the advice of a friend that I should perhaps give more thought before I speak and consider the consequences of my communication. With that recommendation, I started talking less, began speaking more positively, and started giving thoughtful communication real prominence in my everyday life, this made a great change in all aspects of my life, even as a kid. I became a student leader, a leader in my church - and as an adult, a leader in my community; it all began with an overhaul of my communication efforts.

I earned a Bachelor's degree in Business Administration in 1985 and spent 11 years as what I would call, an "average accountant." I did not hate accounting, nor did I love it; however, I was always far more interested in speaking, writing, and other forms of communication. In 1996 I completed a Master's degree in Communication, and embarked on a career as a broadcast journalist, where my interest in communication and communication styles increased significantly. As a business and political reporter, I saw government and corporate leaders rise and fall. Many rising and falling because of one thing, their ability to communicate their vision and inspire the legions they led. I have always been fascinated with leaders, both great and fallen, and have felt that their style of communication deserved a deeper dive. This research is the start of that plunge, and I posit that those who desire to be great leaders should spend much of their time learning how to be great communicators. Leaving the world of TV news 10 years later, I embarked on a career as a spokesman for a large law enforcement agency and obtained a Doctoral degree in Sociology. My fascination with communication and devotion to sociological research has led me to this study.

## The Study

I interviewed 16 Central Florida leaders to gain their perspective on successful leadership communication, and asked them these six questions:

1. On a scale of 1 to 10 how important is communication to you professionally?
2. When others are communicating with you, what do they do that annoys you the most?
3. What is the best communication advice you ever received?
4. In communicating, what do you believe that others may disagree with?





5. Intentionally or unintentionally, is there anything non-verbal you do when communicating with others?
6. What communication skill do you wish you possessed, and why?

These leaders manage a diverse populous of the workforce in various disciplines. Fourteen of the interviews were face to face, only two, Carol Craig of Craig Technologies and Tom Sittema of CNL Financial, were both interviewed via telephone. Initially, my goal was to create one document to chronicle the themes of their statements from all six questions; however, there was so much rich data that I made the decision to report the data of one, no more than two questions per report. In this paper, I analyze the first question:

### **On a scale of 1 to 10 how important is communication to you professionally?**

If the statements of these top leaders signal one main idea it is this:

*Nothing is more important in leadership than communication - nothing.*

## **Q & A and Takeaway**

The six questions I asked these Central Florida Leaders encompass themes in which I had personal and professional interest. As this white paper addresses the first research question only: **On a scale of 1 to 10 how important is communication to you professionally?** - I will also discuss the conversation which transpired after the perspective on the scale was supplied.

### **Major takeaway:**

None of the 16 people interviewed ranked the importance of communication in their role as a leader less than a nine out of ten. In fact, only four gave communication the rank of “at least” nine. All others gave it at least a ten; some say ten isn’t a high enough ranking. The goal of the sociologist always is to determine and report information as objectively as possible; however, I chose to challenge these responses to confirm the rank I was given to solidify similarities and pinpoint outliers in the data.



# LEADERS IN HEALTHCARE



**Terry Shaw** is the Chief Operating Officer and Chief Financial Officer for Adventist Health System, and the first senior executive in Central Florida to accept the invitation to be interviewed for this study. Adventist Health System is a faith based healthcare organization with 46 facilities in ten states, and employs nearly 80,000 individuals. According to Becker's Hospital Review, Adventist Health System is one of the largest non-profit health systems in the United States, serving more than 4.7 million patients annually, and employing more than 75,000 employees.

On the scale of one to ten, Shaw ranks communication as a "nine at least." He argues that communication can be a messy project, especially with so many different cultures and age groups that are to be managed. He goes on to elaborate, stating that as difficult as the process might be, figuring out how individuals and groups communicate is a must:

**...every age group's different so generation y, generation x, baby boomers, post baby boomers, everybody that works has a different methodology of learning.**

Shaw also argues that with an organization that is so large, managers on every level must be effective in their communication, if not the whole system breaks down. One of his primary goals is to get his senior leaders equipped to communicate effectively and efficiently, he says it is not an easy job:

**Making sure all of your executives out there are equipped to say the right thing at the right time is full time work.**

If Shaw's words are correct, I argue a dual point at the start of this research, **1) if communication is so vitally important, leaders should work on their communication skills continuously and not assume their current method of communication is effective, it should be ever evolving. 2) Senior leaders must demand that anyone who supervises individuals within their organization receive continual communication training.**

**Tony Jenkins** is the Market President for Florida Blue (Blue Cross Blue Shield of Florida). He gives communication a rank of **10 plus**. Jenkins, a former Disney and CSX executive, is responsible for the health care of thousands in Central Florida. Jenkins argues that his style of communication has to be transparent and clear for many reasons:

**Health is personal, it impacts not just someone's individual life but it impacts their family unit as well. It impacts your quality of life; it impacts your ability to take care of any situation that comes up regarding something important: Health status. So, communication regarding that has to be clear, it has to be understood, it has to be timely – my communication has to be the same**



For Jenkins, he advises that his model of doing business is a communication-led approach, transparency and clarity in all messages. He argues that this is the only way to do business and also to communicate *effectively*.

**Lars Houmann** is the Executive Vice President of the Florida Division of Adventist Health System. Adventist Health System had revenues of more than 400 million dollars in 2015. Houmann has held several roles in the past, including CEO of Florida Hospital. He ranks communication as nine and a half. He says that everything that he does is connected and that great communication must be a core value:

**Communication is the outward expression of who you are, what you believe in, what you aspire and is one of the few ways to get people to connect to a common goal, common work if you will, so, from a professional level, communication is everything.**

In this statement, Houmann argues the intrinsically personal nature of communication in a portion of the statement which I believe bears repeating:

*Communication is the outward expression of who you are, what you believe in.*

He also sees communication as vehicle that people need if tasks are to be accomplished. Perhaps the portion of the statement of this leader that carries the most weight is the final sentence:

“ from a professional level, communication is everything. ”



# LEADERS IN GOVERNMENT AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

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**Joe Kilsheimer** is the Mayor of Apopka. In a run-off election in 2014, Mayor Kilsheimer unseated Mayor John Land, who had been one of the longest serving mayors in the history of Florida. John Land had been Mayor of Apopka for 61 years. Florida notwithstanding, Land was second longest serving mayor in the nation's history. When Kilsheimer took office, he found what he deemed an "unengaged public." The town of Apopka (northwest suburb of Orlando) had grown massively and Mayor Kilsheimer, a former newspaper journalist, understood that to change the culture, he had to change the way he communicated as the new mayor. When asked on a scale of 1 -10 how important communication was to him professionally, he gave the highest ranking:

**It's probably why I got elected. Prior to my getting elected as mayor, I was city commissioner for two years. I got elected to the city council here in April of 2012 and my kind of signature issue was the city wasn't doing enough to engage the public.**

Kilsheimer ran on the premise that he would "open up" the city of Apopka, and a make it a more welcoming and engaged city. Kilsheimer went on a campaign to engage individuals at city council meetings, and to be as "open as transparent as possible." Using the power of communication as his primary tool, he allowed input at meetings that was rarely granted any time before. Kilsheimer and Tony Jenkins of Florida Blue report a similar lesson that they have learned regarding communication: **Transparency is a must**. In other words, the receiver has got to have the confidence that what they are hearing is unadulterated information. When this takes place, the very important lines of communication are wide open.

**Jerry Demings** was elected the first African American Sheriff in the history of Orange County, FL. With more than 2,300 personnel, it is one the largest law enforcement agencies in the southeastern United States. He is responsible for the safety of over a million residents and the 62 million guests who visit the area's world class theme parks. He was also recently elected as President of the Florida Sheriff's Association. He ranks communication as a ten and argues that communication can break down complexity and create an environment of cohesion:

**It is absolutely critical that I have the ability to communicate effectively, internally to my staff as well as externally, with a county being a thousand square miles and being a very diverse county in terms of tourism. I believe that communication is absolutely critical to our ability to be able to reduce crime, not just with deputies but community involvement as well.**



Demings, a former detective, hostage negotiator, Public Safety Director, and Police Chief of the City of Orlando, speaks to what many other executives argue is ***the portability of good communication*** – it has to travel. It is not just important for the purposes of positive ROI internally, but it has to move outside of the organization to add value to the goal and mission of the organization externally.

**Mike McKinley**, Chief of Police for the City of the Apopka, is known for his straight talk. He also ranks communication as a ten on the scale and argues it is most effective when it is used to clarify expectations. He posits that communication should rule in every facet of law enforcement, and community involvement.

**If they know what your expectations are through good communication and the way you should deliver it to the operation and administrative side, then everything will go smoothly.**

The emphasis on *going smoothly* in McKinley's statement echoes in the comments of other leaders in this document, as well as the sentiment that crystal clear communication undergirds, and is the bedrock of corporate efficiency.

**John Mina** is the police chief for the City of Orlando, where the city has evolved from the hub of Florida's citrus industry in the 19th century to a destination tourism town in the 20th century. With a bustling city, the chief, a former SWAT Commander, must have his men and women in uniform to always be aware in order to deal with a diverse population. Chief Mina also commanded troops through the horrific Pulse Nightclub shooting that claimed 49 innocent lives. He ranks communication as his top priority, even higher than training and policy:

**...because all those things fail if there is no communication. Your training, your policy; it's great to have a written policy but if that policy is not communicated well then they will fail. In dealing with the city's chief of staff and deputy chief of staff can sometimes be a challenge, that's why I have to make sure I always deliver the right message.**

Mina's comment also speaks to the end result of what takes place when communication is off, there is failure. He points to the importance of communication not just in motivating those who report to him, but also to those to whom he reports.

**Larry Krantz** is the Police Chief for the City of Casselberry. Krantz has managed aviation units, major patrol divisions, tactical and SWAT units, and has headed the internal affairs unit of a large law enforcement agency. Krantz stated that communication has been at top of his list since he was a rookie deputy:

**...in order to instructively manage or handle incidents that you were responding to or people seeking your advice and counsel, you had to be able to effectively communicate to them, part of that was listening and giving good clear direction, something that would**





**move them in the direction that they needed to go.**

Once again, the mention of clear and open discussion is at the forefront of a response. Additionally, we find the insertion of what other leaders mentioned, perhaps not as pronounced as Krantz, is the importance of listening. We will discover later in this research that listening is one of the most crucial skills these leaders argue must be mastered in order to be successful.

**Dave Ogden** took over the City of Windermere Police Department amidst scandal and corruption. The city's former police chief had been sentenced to eight years in jail for lying on the witness stand during the child rape trial where a friend of his was the defendant. Ogden had a mess on his hands and had to gut the entire agency, especially in order to find men and women he could trust. With this aim, he knew he had to get the right people in the right place and restore the confidence of the community; he had to be on the top of his communicative game:

**When we came to police department, it was probably the one of the lowest rated (small) police departments in Central Florida-- if not the state. But I had to communicate to my personnel, communicate to the citizens, and to those people above and below that this would be the best small police department they could ever have.**

Since Chief Dave Ogden took the reins at WPD and through an aggressive communication and training campaign with his new staff and the community, he has changed the culture of the department and now it is ranked one of the best small police agencies in the state of Florida.



# LEADERS IN EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY SERVICE

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**Barbara Jenkins** is the superintendent of 10th largest school system in the country, Orange County Public Schools. She leads 23,000 employees, 13,000 of which are teachers; she is responsible for the education of over 200,000 students. Jenkins is in the process of building multiple new schools and is heading the renovation of many more. A local magazine ranks her as one of the most powerful persons in Central Florida. She too ranks communication as a ten and a most valuable asset:

**That's all I do most days, communicate with my staff, communicate with teachers, communicate with parents, communicate with business entities and leaders in our community because gaining their support and certainly making sure they have a clear understanding of expectations is critical to our success.**

Here again is the mention of communication in all aspects of leadership, both internally and externally. This comment can be linked to the thrust of the comment of Lars Houmann that communication as a leader becomes *who you are*. In other words, it defines and identifies you as a leader. Jenkins, like others, also argues clarity in communication as a central theme.

**Dan Wilcox**, President of the YMCA of Central Florida puts communication at “9 or ten.” The YMCA of Central Florida employs 2,600 people and serves more than 67,000 kids; it has more than 22,000 volunteers and touches over 400,000 central Floridians. With his wide reach in the community, Wilcox argues the temptation would be to try to reach people electronically. He isn't opposed to that approach, but with communication being so high on his list, that can't be his first inclination:

**I don't know that we are communicating more effectively with one another because I think too often we rely on technology to replace good, old communication, and just really sitting down and talking to someone.**

Wilcox argues that the “personal touch” of communication is at the heart of success and suggests that when you are reaching into the community, communication becomes uniquely relational:

**We're working a lot of times with young families, young children...so communication is critical and a part of communication is getting to know what peoples goals or interests might be so it's not just presuming everybody has the same idea so it's probably more about the relationship then it is about the communication.**



Here we find an overt mention of what has more of an undercurrent mention from other leaders, and that is the importance of learning the needs of others in order to have a greater impact in communicating with them. This is important for leaders, connection. Wilcox suggests that the ensuing relationship from this open connected experience is what he sees as having the greatest impact for him as a community leader.

**Deb German**, M.D. faced an incredible task: She was asked to build from scratch, that's academically and structurally, a new medical school for the University of Central Florida, the nation's second largest University. She arrived on scene in 2006 and in that year, the UCF Medical School had one employee, Dr. Deb German herself. She says that since the scale I gave her to rank communication was only 1 -10 she would stay within the guidelines and give it a ten. But says if truth be told it's a 14, it's that critically important. To get the school built, she knew the messages she was giving and receiving had to be spot on. But ultimately she knew if she didn't listen, she was doomed:

**Communication means talking, listening, evaluating, understanding, rethinking because of new understanding and moving forward. There is a kind of communication which is you have your point and you wanna make it to the world and, and that's just the projecting of information. But even in that situation, if you're marketing and you're trying to project something, if you're not also listening you may be saying the wrong things to make a point and if you understand the audience, for example, you can make a better pitch, if you will. So I think all communication is two-way.**

Here is the mention again of the importance of listening as a leadership tool, and the focus on communication not just being an issue of outgoing clarity, but incoming clarity as well. German argues, if you are not listening, you may be saying the wrong things. Finally, there is this idea Dr. German mentions which is pervasive in the interviews; *communication...means rethinking because of new understanding*. I would argue this statement alone deserves a full study. This is the communication that takes place within one's self to change communicative directions in order to achieve ultimate success.



## LEADERS IN COMMERCE



**Tom Sittema** is Chief Executive Officer of CNL Financial Group, which since its inception, has formed or acquired companies with more than 33 billion dollars in assets. Sittema is also Chairman of LIFT Orlando, an agency that helps low-income families build a better life through education, mixed-income housing, community wellness, and economic development. Early in his career, Sittema would not have ranked communication very high, but now as a CEO, he has changed his tune:

**It's a ten. I will tell you ten years ago, I would have put it as a five or six, today it's got to be a nine or ten. So much of what leaders do is problem solve on complex issues and then have to communicate complexity in a way that that makes it simple to understand, so good communication is *mission critical*.**

The key words “mission critical” in the abstract does not appear significant; however, a closer analysis of Sittema’s words gives credence to its mention. Much like the discussion of Terry Shaw from AHS, there is this mention of the importance of communication to the entire organization – meaning everyone has to understand how critical it is to communicate effectively both organizationally and interpersonally. It also mirrors the comment of Apopka Police Chief Mike McKinley in his “everything will go smoothly” statement.

**Carol Craig** is president of Craig Technologies, which is based in Brevard County. Craig’s company handles more than 50 million dollars annually in defense contracting. Craig Technologies is a service based, minority woman owned business. Carol is often on national TV shows discussing defense technology and is herself a former naval flight officer specializing in anti-surface and sub-surface warfare. Craig gives communication a ten. She admits she is an impatient person, and has learned that to be successful she had to master one discipline: The art of listening.

**...a lot of people say the same thing when it comes to communication, especially as a leader, you should be listening most of the time-- you should listen as twice as much as you speak. Like, it really comes down to the fact that you're communicating, especially as a leader, you should be listening, really listening.**

Here Craig gives yet another mention on the importance of listening; this should indicate how crucial it is for leadership communication. Having met with Craig on multiple occasions it is obvious that she is certainly high energy and feeds off of the people in the room. She argues that being quiet and listening, ***really listening*** are keys to successful leadership.



**Jacob V. Stuart** is the President of the Central Florida Partnership and is believed to have effected monumental change in a number of strategic areas in Central Florida, including: Healthcare, regional leadership, technology, transportation, international business, regional research, and workforce development. Stuart oversees the Florida's Super Region, which had a Gross Regional Product (GRP) for 2014 of \$323 billion dollars, which was larger than Atlanta (\$320 billion) or Miami (\$296 billion). He says communication is a ten on the scale and that he always communicates on an **emotional** level. He has to talk to, and negotiate with, private, public, and government officials on any and all major initiatives for Central Florida. He argues that if he isn't his best when it comes to communication he has failed:

**When I am out in the market selling, cause that's what I am doing, selling ideas, trying to galvanize support. I have to use examples that are meaningful to the audience, statistics are fun but it's the emotional side, that's success. Communication is huge, written and spoken.**

In the analysis of Stuart's comment is the implication of simplicity and clarity, which has been mentioned in the comments of other leaders. When the audience, be it an individual or corporate group, needs to be moved to make a decision; Stuart moves to the huge upside of clear emotional communication, which he argues is more important than statistics.

**Phil Rawlins**, the founder and President of Orlando Soccer, had his work cut out for him. After having purchased the rights of the Professional Soccer team in Austin Texas, he brought the team to Central Florida. He had to convince community leaders, get local sponsors, and prove that a professional soccer team was sustainable in Orlando. To seal the deal, Rawlins did what he does best: Communicate for success. He gives communication a ten, and equates communication with the sport itself:

**It's a business of communication, therefore communication with your people, whether that's players, fans, employees, peers, it doesn't matter, it's all about communication, it is the most important thing we do.**

The final statement of Rawlins is an appropriate way to conclude this portion of my communication research, *"it's all about communication, it's the most important thing we do."* Like all other interviewees Rawlins sums it up; nothing is more important than communication to the leader – not process, not training, not policy, nothing. If it is dealing with peers, county commissioners, soccer players, patients, or 3<sup>rd</sup> graders – communication is king.





## CONCLUSION

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This research clearly extrapolates the following regarding the perspective of these Central Florida leaders:

1. On a scale of one to ten, communication is at least a nine, but more likely a ten.
2. Communication needs to be crystal clear, if not it is lost.
3. If leaders do not effectively listen, they can easily pass along bad data.
4. Communication reveals who you are as a leader.
5. Communication is the most important tool leaders can use.

I began this research with a quote by James Humes, noted historian, and Presidential speechwriter; I will end with another Humes quote:

*One secret of leadership is that the mind of a leader never turns off. Leaders even when they are sightseers or spectators, are active; not passive observers.*

If this line of thinking is parlayed into the huge stakes of communication, I doubt these leaders would disagree. I argue that leaders must never turn off their minds as they think about the way they communicate with others, and they must continually take steps to improve their communication skills. **Communication is Mission Critical**; leaders have a duty to their organizations, to their colleagues, to the public, and to themselves to always be cognizant of opportunities that may come their way, and how they can be successfully managed with well executed communication experiences.



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## ABOUT JEFF WILLIAMSON COMMUNICATION:

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**Jeff Williamson Communication  
was created with one goal, to help  
individuals communicate more  
effectively.**