

## **SPL as Communicators**

Bill Gates (1999) wrote in his book “Business @ the speed of thought” that information is the digital nervous system of an organization. Expanding on this concept it can be argued that communication is the life-giving oxygen of a vibrant organization. In the absence of communication an organization will slowly be dying. Thus, communication is arguably the most important characteristic of an effective leader. Yukl (2013) emphasizes this point and states that leaders should have effective communication skills, optimism, ambitions, and integrity.

Communication is also the glue that provides the cohesion to the Scholar-Practitioner-Leader approach. Kouzes and Posner (2007) argue that effective leaders possess the skill to communicate in a clear and concise manner that inspires people to act on a common goal. Robinson (2001) states that “Leadership is exercised when ideas expressed in talk or action are recognized by others as capable of progressing tasks or problems which are important to them” (p.93). Without communication, including leadership communication, there will be no action. Taking action(s) is what defines one’s practice in becoming an effective leader.

The link between communication and practice is an integral part of being a scholar-practitioner leader. Mayfield and Mayfield (2017) concluded that “regardless of perspective or culture, most scholars agree that leadership creates and manages meaning” (p. 4). Leadership communication can impact therefore in various ways on an organization, from building the reputation to destroying it as it happens in the case of companies such as Enron and Arthur Andersen. A leader's reputation is likely to have a major influence on determining an organization’s reputation - indeed, both reputations are closely intertwined, especially given perceptions of the leader as crucial in building relationships with stakeholders and as chief communicator (Kitchen & Laurence, 2003; Ulmer, Seeger, & Sellnow, 2007).

From a scholarly perspective leaders and practitioners must understand the ontological perspectives of both leadership and communication. Leadership has a long and rich history and is being studied from various perspectives and different frameworks. In a post-modern world the

meaning of leadership is changing and the SPL model represents an emerging approach and new dimensions to leadership development and studies.

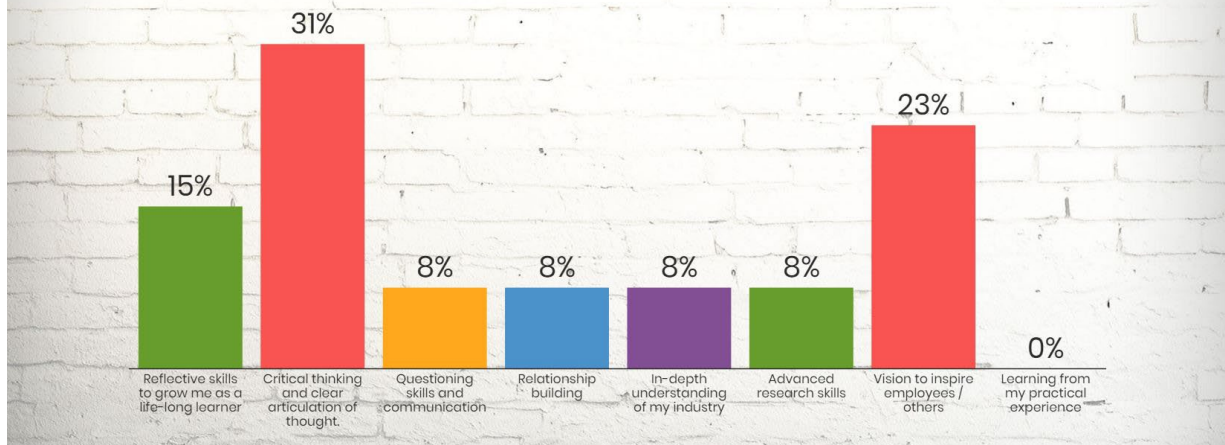
Scholar-practitioner-leaders need to appreciate the theory of communication and as practitioners master its application. Communication theory can be studied from different ontological perspectives such as realist, nominalist or social constructionist perspective. From an ontological perspective the SPL framework is shaped by a social constructionist view, an approach that attempts to bridge objective and subjective reality and a view that reality is what participants create together. Leadership communication is mostly informed by a discursive leadership style which is at its core also social constructionist.

Communication can be used in different ways including conversations, discussions, dialog, debate and deliberation. Each of these constructs has a different purpose and outcome and it is important to realize this in order to be an effective SPL communicator. Organizational conversations about challenging and complex issues often lapse into a debate and “such exchanges do not activate the human capacity for intelligence” (Isaacs, 1993, p.25). On the other hand, dialog is a much better medium to promote deeper inquiry. Dialog is a discipline of “collective thinking and inquiry, a process for transforming the quality of conversation and, in particular, the thinking that lies beneath it” (Isaacs, 1993, p.25). Vogt, Brown and Isaacs (2003) elaborate on this point and powerfully argue that questions open the door to dialog and discovery and “can lead to movement and action on key issues by generating creative insights” (p.1).

The role and impact of questions in organizational learning have been extensively researched by leading experts such as, Marquardt (2005), Nadler and Chandon (2004) and Leeds (2000). Despite the attention to the power of questions in opening ways for effective dialogue it appears that it is not the case. In a small non-representative sample of 13 doctoral students who were engaged in a SPL program communication skills were not viewed as the most important. Only 8% viewed communication and questioning skills as the most important while critical thinking (31%) and a vision to inspire others (23%) were the top two most important elements. (See attached graph.) While this small non-representative sample must be interpreted with caution it does give an indication that leaders do not understand the role communication plays in being a truly effective leader. It also indicates that leaders as practitioners have limited skills, such as questioning skills, to promote dialog and open up deep conversations that will lead to organizational action.

## What are the most important aspect of the SPL for you?

Mentimeter



In conclusion: Communication, and a clear understanding of its different constructs, must be a key focus for scholar-practitioner-leaders. As scholars we need to understand the theoretical foundations of communications, as practitioners we need to develop the skills and apply the techniques, and as leaders we need to ensure that our collective discussions lead to action. Fairhurst (2008) states that “Wherever there is opportunity for power and influence—in new or traditional organizational forms, with individuals or groups, or with formal or emergent leaders—attributions of leadership are not just possible but likely” (p.518). Similarly I am of the opinion that the SPL model adopted by the School of Advance Studies opens up many new possibilities for research about leadership. This include the shifting of the leader / follower power balance brought about by social media, the role of communicative action in leadership practice, and the relevance of the SPL model itself in comparison with other leadership frameworks. We at SAS and the Research Centers are looking forward in collaborating with you on embarking on this exciting journey of learning and discovery.

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