

Kevin L Cecil / Artifact Five / Communication & Commitment Module

Artifact Five Summary – Communication & Commitment Module of the TEAM Leadership Model

This artifact is a derivative of the overarching TEAM Leadership Model. The five artifacts that make up the model are Training, Education, Accountability, Management, and are underpinned by the artifact Communication and Commitment. The modules as they currently exist are the culmination of twenty-eight years of executive leadership experience and concurrent leadership education. They are a representation of a living document and concepts which have evolved over time as my experience and education have occurred. They are oriented towards the past (experiences), present (orientation), and future (application). As with organizations, no aspect of the TEAM Leadership Model is effective as a stand-alone concept. The elements of the model work in synergy with and complement one another.

Rationale for Selection

Program Outcome:

The Team Leadership Model is composed of interlocking concepts that compliment and support each other. The fifth element of the model is Communication & Commitment. Communication involves sharing information that is relevant to the goals of an organization. Communication works best when it is strategy focused, clearly articulated, communicates expectations, and open, direct and respectful. When communicating, leaders, and followers for that matter, need to take the high road by using emotional intelligence, empathy, critical thinking, and the pursuit of context. Effective communication loops allow all members to speak their truth to those in power. As aligned with DEL outcome 4, communication is the process of developing ethical practices by leaders, followers, and the entire organization. This type of mentality ensures those in power are held accountable for how they use that power (Badaracco, 2013).

The other side of this element is the concept of commitment and how that is a by product of effective communication. By continually seeking to generate and critically evaluate new knowledge, organizations can clearly identify what are the most important ideas and communicate those ideas to others as expressed in DEL outcome 6. Doing so combines communication and commitment which results in accountability. An organization that practices effective communication drives commitment. By ensuring goals, feedback and values are understood, leaders can obtain the dedication of team members. This derivative of communication creates mutual trust. People value organizations that are open and transparent in their communication. Commitment is enhanced by such open

communication and more likely to hold themselves accountable by committing to their roles and responsibilities. If everything is communicated as clearly as possible then everyone involved understands expectations with less ambiguity. As stated by Boulton et al (2015), 'If strategy is to have any effect it has to influence the day-to-day activities of the people inside the organization' (Pg. 161). This approach is transformational because communicating knowledge responsibly drives commitment.

Link To Knowledge:

Communication and Commitment are greatly influenced by the willingness of leadership of an organization to clearly define objectives. Another critical aspect of it is that two-way communication empowers those involved to understand how important they are to the mission. This is much preferable to someone operating within an environment and feeling like they are merely a cog in the machine. Metaphorically anyone who is a member of an organization serves as a part of the greater machine. This form of ethical commitment on the part of the organization to communicate with a goal of ensuring limiting ambiguity as much as possible involves comprehensive listening. When trust is established through effective communication, team members are more likely to exercise comprehensive listening to understand and retain messages (Johnson, 2018). Because they understand the values and goals of the organization, they are more committed to receiving information and providing feedback as a part of the process.

Personal Growth and Development:

As I developed as a leader my ability to utilize sensemaking to seek understanding and make sense of events or challenges I zeroed in on the importance of communication. As discussed by Ring and Rands (1989), sensemaking helps people to develop cognitive maps of their environment. These maps, or mental frameworks, enable people to interpret, organize, and navigate in complex environments. The journey to this realization is a combination of experiences where my communication was not on the mark and the results of an objective were not meant. A mental framework serves to help us make connections to differing factors in our environment. Communication increases those connections and provides the opportunity to answer questions about ambiguous aspects of the subject. I found that an increased focus on communication helped avoid stumbling blocks in achieving objectives. These experiences are the reason that Communication and Commitment serve as a combined module of the Team Leadership model, and it supports all other aspects. Focusing on communication within organizations proved to be a much better driver of positive outcomes.

Connect to Broader Leadership Context:

The most effective communication is strategy focused when clear expectations are articulated and confirmed through feedback from team members. Communication that is open and respectful builds rapport and commitment. Members of an organization who know they can provide feedback without attribution will trust leadership. When tough messages must be delivered, leaders who take the high road and do so with emotional intelligence, empathy, and critical thinking will enhance commitment. This pursuit furthers understanding across the team that leadership is focused on ensuring the organization conducts itself in institutional contexts.

To achieve the type of commitment that drives effective organizations leadership must be engaged with their team. Sitting behind a desk or inside of conference rooms and sending out dictates is not communication. Engaging requires leadership that interacts directly with their colleagues as much as possible. This interaction reflects an intensity of purpose on the part of leadership which further builds commitment to the mission. It teaches team members to view communicating and engaging as foundational to cohesiveness within the organization. Something as simple as setting time aside to walk around and ask employees how they are doing has an amazing impact on morale. Leadership may not be able to solve every problem for their organization but the point is that they will listen to feedback and implement anything that makes sense. Lawler (2003) observed that ‘great leaders set up a win-win situation, a virtuous spiral’ and that ‘the most effective managers lead in ways that focus both on the organizational results and employees’ (Pg. 205). This summarizes very well the way effective communication and engagement drive commitment across organizations.

Executive Summary

Presenting Situation:

As an example of this in action we can look at the actions undertaken by the leadership of the 130th Airlift Wing to counter DUIs within the organization. This was in response to an increase in DUIs leading up to March of 2019. Although the penalty for getting a DUI was very severe and communicated clearly by state leadership, they continued. Basically, the policy was that anyone who was convicted of a DUI who was a member of the West Virginia National Guard, Army or Air, would be discharged from the organization. The 130th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron (AE) had previously used a tool prior to encourage members to be good Wingmen to each other. This consisted of yellow business card sized “Wingman Cards”. The unit handed out these cards to all their members. When the number of DUIs increased again, this idea was brought forward by their leadership as something that could be done across the wing. They were modified to show the wing organizational info. On the following unit training assembly weekend (UTA) the senior

enlisted leadership posted themselves on the gate to hand them out to every member as they arrived. The Command Chief was accompanied by junior enlisted members as well.

During the event the 130th Airlift Wing Public Affairs Office (2019) interviewed the Command Chief to get the perspective on what the initiative was about. The Chief explained that intent was to share information with members who could use the cards to call a Wingman if they found themselves in a situation where they needed help. Whether it was related to alcohol or some other circumstance, it was something they could keep in their wallet with contact information available to help them. On the front of the card there was contact information for Military One Source, the DOD Sexual Assault Prevention office, local taxi services, UBER, and the DOD Safe Hotline. On the reverse side there were blocks to write the number of their First Sergeant, Supervisor, Chief, Commander, and Wingman. The intent was twofold with one aspect being to provide them with this info in an easily accessible format if they should need it. The other aspect was to emphasize that DUIs were not acceptable behavior. The underlying impact was the willingness of the leadership within the organization, at all levels, to engage directly with the team. It demonstrated their commitment to providing any available tools to help them be successful. As stated by the Command Chief, the purpose of the program was to engage directly with team members to emphasize the importance of committing themselves to personal accountability and professionalism. He also explained that the organization wanted members to understand that they truly cared about them and that if only one person used the resource, then it would well worth the time and effort involved to provide it.

Contextual Analysis:

In the lead up to this effort the communication across the 130th Airlift Wing was about the intent of the program and whether anything could be misconstrued by members of the organization. The concern put forth was that the cards could be seen by some as “get out of jail free cards”. While acknowledging this concern, the creators of the initiative explained that they were not just focused on DUIs, but also to provide other information about sexual assault, suicide, and other topics. Collaborative rationality was embedded in the process as it consisted of inclusive communication, informed, based on authentic dialogue, and sought durable outcomes (Innes & Booher, 2018). While seemingly relatively small as an initiative, the messaging behind the actions taken conveyed to the team that leadership placed emphasis on their wellbeing. Communication identifying commitment on the part of leadership asked for commitment in return for a common goal.

Executive Leadership Decisions and Actions:

During the debate about the efficacy of the initiative, all stakeholders were given the opportunity to express their concerns. The broader context of the initiative was explained and debated and modifications to the cards were made to create consensus. Every organization has a climate of opinion (Danville & Manville, 2012) that drives debate and communication. A key part of accommodating that environment is to continually point towards what the objective of the mission is in the broader context. The air wing exists to fly cargo missions to support the enterprise level mission of the Air Force. Every member of that effort is vital to that mission so providing them with an alternative to making a bad decision was worth the slight perception that they could “get out of jail free”. The question was put forth and asked if leadership would prefer a member to make a bad decision and deal with all that followed, and of course negatively impacted the mission. This type of conversation focused on making ethical decisions to impact the organization, community and institution in a positive manner. It responsibly communicated knowledge to others by reinforcing the idea that personal accountability for individual actions is paramount. This message was enhanced by providing a source to refer to when an individual may be at that decision making point. Understanding that leadership was committed to their wellbeing and encouraging of making good decisions without attribution increased cohesiveness within the organization.

Outcome and Impact:

This effort was collaborative across all spectrums and required the agreement and consensus of multiple stakeholders. The team that came together to create this initiative established Teachable Points of View (Tichy and Bennis, 2007) to establish present and future behavior and values. While it cannot be entirely attributed to this initiative, the numbers of DUIs were reduced in the following months. Members of the organization received information that re-emphasized the negative effects that some decisions could have on themselves, their organization, and the broader mission. The commitment the organization communicated to them about it’s willingness to provide unique tools to give them options rather than take chances was positive. The result is that people received this message and understood its intent to enhance their wellbeing.

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