

Practitioner's Corner

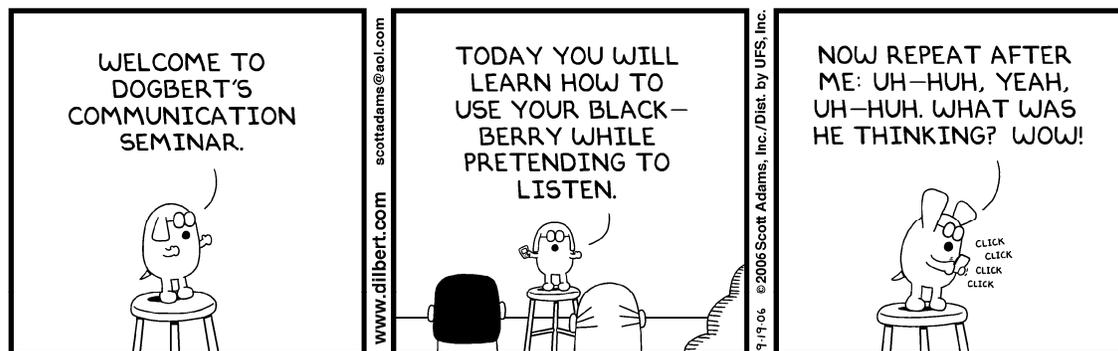
The Frustration Phenomenon: Exploring Leader–Follower Relationships in the Information Age

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This article highlights a study that explored the extent to which leaders and followers perceived that their relationships were compromised by the use of hi-tech communication instruments. Using phenomenological methods, the study concluded that within the U.S. Department of Defense sample examined, leaders and followers often perceived their relationships were compromised by distractions associated with e-mail communication and the use of instruments such as computers, Blackberrys, and cell phones. When the leader–follower relationship was compromised, lack of respect and commitment were primary factors. Body language and workload were also significant.

Due to the vast array of media options available, leader–follower communication has changed significantly in the last decade. A recent research project attempted to explore how such changes might affect the leader–follower relationship (Shirey, 2007). Twenty years ago, most leaders and followers communicated either face-to-face, through written correspondence, or via telephone. Today, the laptop computer, Blackberry, cell phone, and other text- and voice-messaging devices have made it possible for people to work and stay connected almost anytime and anywhere.



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The Frustration Phenomenon

Although rapid advances in information technology have significantly improved connectivity between supervisors and subordinates, in some organizations, leaders are frustrated by workers who do e-mail under the table during office meetings (“*The Crackberry Backlash*,” 2006). Conversely, some followers are frustrated by leaders who are distracted by incoming messages on their computers or Blackberrys while they pretend to listen during face-to-face meetings (Siegel & Langworthy, 2005). These illustrations suggest that the use of electronic communication devices can cause friction between leaders and followers and potentially affect relationships.

Given the potential problem for both leaders and followers, a study was conducted to explore the extent to which leaders and followers perceive that their relationships are compromised when attention is diverted by instruments associated with advanced communication technology (ACT) and what specific factors affect these perceptions. Compromise of the leader–follower relationship was defined as anything that threatened or impaired the rapport between leader and follower. Low-level compromise might be illustrated by the leader or follower momentarily diverting his or her attention away from the other due to the perceived need to look at a Blackberry for an incoming message. When one’s attention is diverted, a noticeable distraction occurs between leader and follower; it is recognized by a lack of eye contact or other body language and communicates a momentary shift in priority. In contrast, high-level compromise can be characterized by consistent behavior that frustrates either the leader or follower sufficiently enough to create a memorable, negative impression.

Leader member exchange (LMX) and social presence theory were helpful in trying to understand whether or not leader–follower relationships were compromised by advanced communication devices. LMX theory is focused on the quality of the interactions between leaders and followers and directs attention to differences that might exist between the leader and followers (Northouse, 2004). Using LMX theory, the quality of the leader–follower relationship can be associated with characteristics such as trust, respect, and commitment (Northouse). If levels of trust, respect, and commitment are low as a result of behavior associated with the use of ACT, one might also expect the overall quality of the leader–follower relationship to be low. Social presence theory evolved from research that examined how factors such as facial expression, posture, and other nonverbal cues affected the efficiency and satisfaction of various communication media (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Facial expression and posture in this context is described as the perceived appearance of a person’s face or body and its ability to influence communication in the leader–follower relationship. For example, workers distracted by e-mail during meetings risk compromising leader–follower relationships based on the lack of interest communicated by their body language.

Interviews were conducted to collect data to determine the quality of relationships based on the factors of trust, respect, and commitment. In addition, data were collected to determine the extent to which relationships were compromised based on facial expression, posture, or other nonverbal cues (social presence theory). Participants included 13 men and 7 women who work for the Department of Defense (DoD). They ranged in rank from young enlisted to general officer. All of these interviews provided data from the follower perspective. Thirteen additional interviews provided data from the leader perspective.

Evidence of a Leader Causing the Follower to be Frustrated

The following example from a follower interview captures many of the reasons followers perceived their relationships were compromised as a result of behavior from their leader.

I am an executive assistant for this Air Force guy. And, every time I go into his office, he's got his computer in front of him, his Blackberry in his hand, and I'm just trying to get some minor details with what stuff I need to do like travel arrangements. And, if an e-mail pops up, it pops up both on his Blackberry (and his hand starts vibrating) and on his computer screen. So, chances are great that he quickly loses interest in whatever I'm saying and pays more attention to that. . . . I feel less important than whatever is going on. . . . Usually, he'll trail off, and I'll either just sit quietly until he comes back to realizing that I'm still there, or . . . I just take that as a clue that something important has come up. . . . I know he is trailing off because he's a fairly talkative guy; . . . I know when he just starts giving me that, "Yeah . . . uh huh . . . yeah," . . . short quick answers instead of going into depth about what he is trying to go for. That is a good sign he's really not paying much attention and thinking about something else. . . . It's humbling when you see that something else jumps up on the priority list instead of someone that is standing directly in front of you. I think it belittles me whether he realizes it or not. It is hard to get used to, but I don't take it too personally. That's just how it makes me feel.

This particular incident highlights a number of issues associated with relationship compromise. The leader is clearly absorbed with electronic media and less interested in personal interaction from his subordinate. The superior's behavior is perceived by the subordinate as detrimental to their working relationship. There are numerous physical and verbal clues to make the subordinate perceive that she is less important than the e-mail message of the moment and unable to accomplish her job. Finally, the word "belittled" is a strong indicator that the subordinate perceives the relationship is compromised due to the superior's behavior.

Evidence of a Follower Causing the Leader to be Frustrated

In contrast, leader interviews highlighted that interruptions by followers using Blackberrys and cell phones sometimes negatively affect relationships. This was illustrated by the following incident during a video teleconference (VTC):

On a VTC, you can see people who have forgotten the camera is on them, and [this] guy is sitting there working on his Blackberry. You can see him not really looking at the slides, not really engaged, and you can hear that interference (beeps and squeaks, audio interference) caused by the Blackberry signal on the VTC. I called that guy out . . . because it was distracting to me and everybody else. . . . But, it kind of makes me feel [like], . . . "We didn't call you here to let you catch up on e-mail. We got you here because we are trying to make a corporate decision and get everybody else's input." So, . . . it frosted me a little bit.

This subordinate was so absorbed with his Blackberry that he did not realize it was causing an audio distortion on the VTC distracting others. The leader perceived that the subordinate's priorities were misplaced. When a superior describes feelings toward a subordinate as "frosted," it is reasonable to assume that some compromise in the relationship has taken place.

In summary, leaders and followers consistently provided evidence that ACT often compromised leader-follower relationships. Of the 20 participants, 80% described incidents

where their relationship was compromised or negatively affected as a result of leader distractions. The following terms were routinely used to express their feelings: annoyed, irritated, frustrated, unprofessional, devalued, rude, and belittled.

Factors Related to Relationship Compromise

Given that leaders and followers often perceived compromise in their relationships due to advanced communication devices, it was important to consider what factors might be related to the problem. Looking back to the trust, respect, and commitment factors associated with LMX theory, the role of respect and commitment in relationship compromise appeared significant.

Respect

Study participants provided several examples to indicate distractions associated with advanced communication instruments are an important factor related to respect. To describe a leader distracted by his Blackberry while chairing a meeting, one follower reported, "it degraded our relationship. I think I lost a little respect for him. It was his meeting, his conference, and he wasn't devoting his full attention." Referring to a different incident, another follower shared a similar perception, "It tends to just say the individual [leader] doesn't care to be here; he doesn't respect what's going on. It just makes you feel, 'Why am I sitting here?'"

In addition to Blackberrys, participants cited cells phones as devices that often affect respect between leaders and followers. The following story emphasizes the point.

The cell phone is a detractor. I find that the cell phone calls people get tend to be more personal, rather than professional. . . . That does put a strain on the relationship. I find that some of the younger people that work for me don't see that as an issue. I understand an emergency. But, a call to ask someone to pick up a dozen eggs or something can wait. In this case, I do feel disrespected. If it happens one time and the person apologizes, that's okay. But, when it happens multiple times, . . . then I have to call them in and explain to them, and I wonder about the individual.

It is important to note that this example highlights the difference between a one-time distraction and behavior that occurs repeatedly.

Another leader offered a transparent assessment of his journey to balance the demands of a high workload and still demonstrate respect for his subordinates.

I was letting e-mail control my life to such a degree that when people would come into my office, I felt a little bit offended by being interrupted all the time. So, when people would come into my office and interrupt me in the middle of something, I would half-listen to them and finish doing what I was doing, because the interruptions were always so frequent that I could never get anything done. I've learned that I was being very disrespectful to those people that were coming into my office.

This leader recognized that e-mail was "controlling" his behavior at the expense of relationships with his subordinates. Respect was often mentioned when describing the quality of the leader-follower relationship in an ACT environment.

Commitment

Although leaders and followers are generally committed to maintaining good relationships, the evidence from this study indicated that the use of ACT by both leaders and followers often raises concerns regarding commitment. Followers often perceived leaders were not committed because they were distracted by ACT devices during face-to-face conversations. One follower noticed such behavior when her leader, while trying to get to know her during a business trip, asked personal questions while looking at his Blackberry. The subordinate offered the following perception, “the personal questions he asks, he doesn’t really care about the answers to them. . . . He doesn’t really seem to be committed to the relationship, just going through the actions.”

Likewise, as in this next example, leaders often perceived followers were not committed. I once had an employee with a personal cell phone that he brought to work. . . . He would get personal phone calls on his cell phone at work during meetings. I did not care for that, and it was distracting. I had to let this person know that he had to turn the cell phone off at work. I had to address it with his immediate supervisor.

This leader felt that the follower’s lack of commitment was serious enough that it needed to be addressed with the follower’s immediate supervisor. Digging deeper into what phenomena might influence such a negative perception from followers with respect to the commitment of their leaders, workload emerged as a contributing factor that affected both leaders and followers.

Busyness or Workload

The lack of commitment perceived by workers is related to workload. In other words, some leaders and followers are so committed, they risk compromising relationships to do what they perceive is more important business on an ACT device. The following illustration provides a perception of a subordinate so intent on answering e-mail with his Blackberry during a conference that he compromised his relationship with the leader giving a briefing.

In the middle of the briefing, one of the individuals had their Blackberry on . . . [and] put it on the desk at the wrong location, and it started causing static through the speaker system in the conference room. I literally had to stop and say, “Whoever has their Blackberry on, please either turn it off or move it away from the speakers.”. . . And, these people had been told in advance to turn off their Blackberrys. It . . . strained [the relationship] a little bit until we talked in the hallway afterwards. What was interesting was the individual at first didn’t see anything wrong with what he did.

Busyness appears to be related to body language that communicates unconstructively, and in the absence of extenuating circumstances, tends to compromise the leader–follower relationship. In an effort to integrate the themes of busyness, distraction, and relationship compromise, it appears that as workload increases, the tendency for ACT-related distraction during face-to-face meetings is higher, as is the potential for relationship compromise. Given the rapid advances in information technology and the increased opportunities for workers to be constantly connected to a variety of ACT devices, this is significant.

Body Language

Body language was perceived as the most important factor for leaders and followers who routinely use ACT devices. It communicates a level of commitment and respect in their relationships. In describing one incident where body language negatively affected the relationship, a participant said, "Certainly, eye contact went away." In an effort to identify what might diminish eye contact, another interviewee offered, "Anything that pulls people's eyes away from people you're talking to can hurt the dialogue of the conversation." One participant summarized the phenomenon well: "Eye contact is a big one. If he's got his eyes looking at the computer screen or Blackberry, I don't have his full attention." One participant described how such distractions affect the quality of a conversation:

If I'm constantly looking at my watch or looking at the door or if distracted, it can impact the quality of the . . . communication that we are having. Clearly, for example, if you're in here talking to me and I just happen to look [at an e-mail on my computer monitor] to see who it's from, it takes away from my attention on you and takes away from the issue . . . we are talking about.

It's interesting that this respondent compared distractions associated with e-mail with distractions caused by someone looking at their watch. Such behavior was often perceived as rude.

Leaders and followers consistently provided negative perceptions of those who multitask and demonstrate with their body language that they are preoccupied. A heavy workload or busyness may be a factor in causing such a distraction. One leader shared this illustration of how busyness can be a barrier to communication: "If someone comes into my office, I get up out of my desk and move away from the computer. I know my eyes will get distracted by the computer, and that will be disrespectful to the people." Another participant added, "When things are not going right, body language is more important." Sometimes body language enhances message clarity. All respondents provided evidence that body language is an important factor related to relationship compromise.

Conclusion

This study offers evidence that leaders and followers often perceive their relationships are compromised due to ACT-related distractions. Lack of respect and commitment appear to be important factors, as are workload and body language. Some final practical points for leaders and followers to consider include the following:

1. Computers, Blackberrys, and cell phones can affect relationships, especially when workload is high. In such situations, there is a tendency to either compartmentalize our focus on or be distracted by these ACT devices.
2. While using ACT devices, body language is an important indicator of respect and one's commitment to the relationship. A momentary distraction like looking at one's watch is generally perceived as harmless; however, consistent distraction compromises relationships.
3. Discipline with ACT devices is required to avoid compromising relationships. This might mean ensuring such devices are not able to distract attention from the person with whom one is meeting.

ACT will likely continue to expand at exponential rates. Such progress promises to improve our connectivity and our lives. However, based on the conclusions of this study, one might pause to consider that persistent connectivity also has the potential to negatively affect relationships. As ACT continues to expand and influence the behavior of workers, it will be increasingly important for leaders and followers to consider the effects of technology on communication and their relationships.

About the Author

Dr. Joe Shirey earned his Ph.D. in organizational leadership from Regent University and is currently working as an independent consultant with the Air Force and several nonprofit organizations. His interests are in strategic planning, leader–follower relationships, communication, and organizational change. He recently submitted two papers for the Pfeiffer Annual: Consulting titled, “Exploring the Compromise of Trust When Using E-mail” and “Sink or Swim: Surviving the Organizational Challenges Caused by the Rapid Advances in Information Technology.”

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