

The Language of Leadership:

How to Successfully Communicate your Leadership Skills at Interview

Leadership interviews often fail not because candidates lack experience, but because they struggle to **communicate** their leadership approach with clarity, confidence and consistency. Feedback such as “*not strategic enough*” or “*didn’t demonstrate leadership skills*” is vague and unhelpful, leaving candidates unsure how to improve. Yet if you’ve reached interview stage, you already meet the essential criteria for the role, in other words, on paper at least the Skills, Knowledge and Experience — what you must now show is how you **lead people to excel and succeed by delivering through others**, not just manage tasks.

Following many years in leadership roles and now as an interview coach, I frequently help leaders hone their leadership communication skills. This concise guide is my approach, designed to help you demonstrate through the language you use and consistency in your approach to how you lead others, that you are the type of leader who makes things happen... through sound judgement, clear communication and ability to inspire and motivate others. What follows is a simple, realistic framework which will help you reflect on your leadership, to have been successful thus far I believe that you will have worked this way – just simply haven’t thought about it this way before. This is based on my research and real-life observations over many years in the Private Sector, Not for Profit and Royal Navy.

1. Leadership vs Management — A Simple but Important Distinction

Leadership is about *people*: inspiring, motivating, **adapting your style** to the situation. **Management** is about *process*: organising, planning, delivering structured outputs.

In short, we lead people to do things and we manage stuff! You may be a great manager who ensures everything happens on time, reports are diligently crafted, emails responded to immediately, budgets meticulously updated.....but you rarely take time to leave the desk and engage with others, listen to your teams/company’s heartbeat.

Strong candidates will show they flex their leadership style — Directional when urgency demands it and people need to feel their leader is in control, Collaborative when solving complex problems working towards common goals, Transformational when driving and embedding change.

Good leaders remain consistent in their behavioural traits or the core foundations which underpin how they operate, how they work with others and these are the core foundations.

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2. The Core Foundations of Leadership

Panels look for leaders who behave consistently, build trust, and create safe environments where people speak up. Unpredictable leaders create fear and silence; consistent leaders create confidence and ideas. *Such consistency in turn builds trust and respect... uncertain thoughts amongst staff perpetuate fear and confusion... limiting new ideas.*

Key Leadership Skills

These #6 traits should appear naturally throughout your interview answers:

#1. Setting Direction & Storytelling

- Translate complex objectives into a clear, motivating vision.
- Explain the “why”, not just the “what”.
- Use real examples to bring the vision to life.
- Select your communication delivery method thoughtfully.

#2. Embrace the Diversity Around You, Active Listening

- Being a good leader means you don't know it all, you simply employ the diverse skills, knowledge and experience you know you will need to make things happen.
- Create space for people to speak freely.
- Invite challenge and diverse thinking – Asking who has any good ideas or who has done this before **is** OK.
- Listen even when you think you know the answer. You create time for people and listen attentively because you crave diverse thinking and input ... you make people feel included.

#3 Be Inclusive

- Be visible, accessible, approachable and listen.
- Staff will be less likely to speak up if they are concerned about what you might think, say or do i.e. If you take offence to their views and challenge.

#4. Make Good Decisions – Be Decisive

- Avoid indecision.
- Gather information, analyse options, invite challenge, assess risk, decide.
- Use the input from staff to shape your decisions.
- Be Fair - Fair leaders earn trust even when decisions are tough.

5. Delegate Well

- Deliver through others by knowing your people, let them take ownership of their work and suggest their own ways of achieving it.
- You set the standards but crucially help others to get there.

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- Empower people, support, share problems, suggest solutions and build confidence.
- Be visible.

#6. Identify and Remove any Blockers impeding or likely to impede progress.

- Because you are in tune with what needs to be done, you are also able to see any blockers which will get in the way of the teams work, and you remove them.
- You also identify opportunities to make life easier for everyone, and you seize them.

.....and also..... You Celebrate Success / Share Problems

3. Communication — Your Most Powerful Tool

Great leaders adapt their communication to the audience. Before speaking, consider:

- Who is my audience?
- What do they already know?
- What do I want them to think or do?
- What is the best format?
- How will I check understanding?

When we communicate, we want the receiver to do or think something as a result, otherwise it's just waffle. Choose your language, use action orientated words and back them up with evidence, be concise.

4. Voice, Body Language & Presence

Panels judge not just *what* you say but *how* you say it:

- Vary pitch and pace.
- Pause for emphasis when you make key points.
- Lean in, maintain eye contact, ensure the panel are able to keep up and make notes.
- Use expressive but controlled gestures.

Actors understand the importance of volume, pitch, timing... this is what you need to be thinking about and practicing.

Softly spoken candidates can still be compelling by using powerful words, pausing, eye contact and purposeful movement. Having worked with, and watched many softly spoken people communicate, those who command immediate attention tend to speak slowly, pausing frequently, using powerful language and being committed in what they are saying – in other words leaving everyone in no doubt what was going to happen. Raising one's voice / shouting to be heard is not the answer.

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5. Bringing It All Together in Interview Answers

Every answer should:

1. Show adaptability of leadership style.
2. Demonstrate core foundations (listening, inclusion, fairness, decisiveness).
3. Use concise, action-focused language.
4. Include a short, relevant example.
5. Reinforce how you get the best from people.

Weaving the language of leadership into every answer... reassures a panel that you have a simple approach to a complex subject.

6. Practice Leadership Interview Questions

- What is your leadership style and when have you adapted it to a difficult situation?
- What would your team say about your leadership?
- How do you inspire and motivate people?
- How do you successfully deliver through others?
- How do you manage poor performance?
- How do you make decisions under uncertainty?
- How do you embrace diverse ideas?
- How do you build trust?
- When have you thought strategically?
- When have you shared a compelling vision?

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