

Before We Blame the Output

What AI Reveals About Organizational Communication

Marcy Fetzer, PhD, SHRM-SCP

Leadership Communication Ecology

Organizations devote enormous attention to outputs. Leaders evaluate performance, teams assess decisions, clients judge deliverables, and employees are held accountable for whether work succeeds or fails. When the result is disappointing, responsibility usually settles on the person or system that produced it. We blame the employee who misunderstood, the team that failed to execute, the meeting that produced no decision, or the artificial intelligence tool that generated an inaccurate response. Far less attention is given to the communication environment that made the disappointing outcome likely.

An output does not begin when it becomes visible. A poor decision may have started with incomplete information, an unclear question, conflicting priorities, or a concern someone did not feel safe raising. A missed deadline may have followed a request in which urgency was assumed but never communicated. By the time the result appears, the conditions that produced it may have been developing through dozens of earlier interactions.

Every meeting, email, question, response, correction, and silence teaches people something about how an organization works. These interactions shape what people notice, what they believe matters, what they understand, what they feel safe enough to say, and what they expect will happen when they speak. The quality of organizational outputs is inseparable from these conditions.

This helps explain why organizations can employ intelligent and committed people while repeatedly producing confusion, duplication, poor coordination, and weak decisions. The problem is often not a lack of knowledge. Most organizations possess extensive knowledge about their customers, employees, operations, and challenges. That knowledge, however, is distributed across individuals, teams, documents, and conversations. It does not automatically become shared understanding.

Information may exist without being accessible to the people who need it. It may be accurate but outdated, abundant but poorly organized, or disconnected from the decision being made.

Employees may know something is wrong but not know where to raise it. Teams may hold different parts of the same problem without a setting in which those parts can be combined. The organization has information, but its communication environment prevents that information from becoming collective knowledge.

The same problem appears when organizations introduce artificial intelligence. A company may give an A.I. system access to thousands of documents, messages, and recordings and assume that access is equivalent to understanding. It is not. The system may retrieve information without knowing which source is authoritative, which conclusion has been superseded, or which issue matters most. More information does not necessarily create better judgment. In a disorganized environment, it may simply allow confusion to travel faster.

When an A.I. tool produces a weak answer, the technology may be at fault. These systems make errors and require oversight. Yet the failure may also expose a problem that already exists in the organization. Records may be fragmented, decisions poorly documented, and important context trapped in private conversations. The tool does not create these conditions. It makes them visible.

Human employees have long compensated for unclear environments. Experienced colleagues learn which document is current, which priorities are real, and which requests contain histories or expectations that were never stated. They translate vague instructions, reconcile contradictions, and fill gaps through intuition and relationships. Because this work happens quietly, leaders may never see how much effort is required to make unclear communication usable.

Artificial intelligence is less likely to perform this invisible repair unless the necessary context is explicit. It may follow the stated instruction rather than the unstated intention, rely on the most accessible information rather than the most meaningful information, or produce a fluent answer based on outdated assumptions. The output becomes a mirror reflecting the quality of the inputs and the environment through which they were created.

An input is more than a fact or piece of data. The wording of a request is an input. The deadline is an input. The source of information, the history surrounding the issue, the leader's tone, the response to a clarifying question, and the consequences of making a mistake are all inputs because they shape how people interpret situations and decide what to do.

Attention is also an input. Leaders shape organizational attention through the questions they repeatedly ask. When they focus only on speed, employees learn to prioritize speed. When they ask who is responsible before asking what happened, people learn to protect themselves. When leaders ask what the organization is learning, people become more attentive to evidence, patterns, and improvement.

Organizations cannot act on everything they know. They act on what becomes visible, discussable, and important. A company may possess extensive knowledge about customer dissatisfaction, operational risk, or employee exhaustion, but that knowledge will not influence decisions if attention is continually directed elsewhere.

Responses matter just as much because every response becomes an input into future communication. When leaders receive bad news with curiosity, people learn that difficult information can be raised early. When leaders respond with blame or dismissal, people learn to soften, delay, or conceal it. When disagreement is explored, people become more willing to challenge assumptions. When it is punished, apparent agreement replaces honest understanding.

Over time, these patterns become more influential than formal statements about culture. An organization may claim to value openness while punishing people who question senior leaders. It may promote innovation while making experimentation nearly impossible. Employees respond not to the values written on the wall but to the responses they have learned to expect.

The resulting environment shapes outputs predictably. A workplace that encourages inquiry, candor, reflection, and constructive feedback is more likely to produce learning and adaptation. One dominated by ambiguity, urgency, fear, or excessive control is more likely to produce hidden uncertainty and preventable mistakes. The final outcome may carry one person's name, but it often reflects a much larger system.

Consider a team told to move quickly without being told which trade-offs are acceptable. Employees must choose among speed, quality, cost, and risk without knowing how leadership would rank them. If they move cautiously, they may be criticized for being slow. If they act quickly and something goes wrong, they may be criticized for being careless. The eventual output is judged as an execution failure, even though ambiguity was built into the assignment.

A similar pattern occurs when leaders ask employees to take initiative after years of correcting them for acting without permission. The request for initiative is one message, but the organization's recurring responses have taught a different lesson. When leaders later complain that people lack ownership, they are criticizing an output the environment has repeatedly trained people to produce.

Organizations also create poor outputs when decisions are fragmented across channels. One part may appear in a meeting, another in an email, and an important qualification in a private message. Different teams act from different versions of reality. When coordination fails, the problem is labeled poor execution, even though it began with a failure to create shared meaning.

This is how organizations demand outputs that their own inputs make improbable. They discourage dissent and complain that no one warned them. They reward constant responsiveness and wonder why strategic thinking is weak. They flood employees with messages and criticize them for missing what mattered. They centralize decisions and lament the absence of initiative. They provide artificial intelligence with fragmented context and conclude that the technology cannot understand the organization.

Improving outputs requires more than demanding greater effort, accuracy, or accountability. It requires leaders to examine how meaning is being created. A clear assignment should establish why the work matters, which sources are relevant, what constraints exist, what trade-offs are acceptable, and what a useful result should make possible. It should also create room for questions, challenges, and the identification of missing information.

Complex work also requires feedback before the final output is complete. Leaders cannot provide an assignment, disappear, and then judge the result as though the original request contained everything necessary for success. Assumptions need to be tested, evidence reviewed, and interpretations adjusted. Delegation without feedback is often abandonment presented as empowerment.

The same applies to A.I.-assisted work. Users should ask what sources informed the answer, what assumptions were made, what may be outdated, and where uncertainty remains. They should invite the system to identify contradictions rather than smooth them over. These practices are not simply better prompting. They are habits of responsible communication.

As artificial intelligence becomes more integrated into work, more employees will perform functions traditionally associated with management. They will define assignments, provide context, establish standards, evaluate evidence, give feedback, and remain accountable for outcomes. The ability to create a productive communication environment will become essential far beyond formal leadership roles.

Artificial intelligence may prove valuable partly because it exposes the difference between the communication leaders believe they provide and the communication others actually receive. It can reveal when records are fragmented, priorities conflict, or requests depend on information that exists only in someone's mind. It can show that many disappointing outputs are not mysterious failures but predictable expressions of the environments that produced them.

Before blaming an employee, a team, a meeting, or a machine, leaders should examine the conditions surrounding the result. What information was available, and what was missing? Which source was authoritative? What had people learned to prioritize? Which questions felt safe to ask? What assumptions remained unstated? How had previous responses shaped the willingness to share concerns or admit uncertainty?

These questions do not eliminate individual responsibility. They place it within the system that shaped the individual's choices. People and tools remain accountable for their work, but leaders are accountable for the environment in which that work becomes possible.

Organizations cannot continually create fragmented inputs and expect integrated outputs. They cannot produce ambiguity and demand precision, discourage openness and demand foresight, or restrict context and demand sound judgment. Before we complain about what was produced, we should examine what we repeatedly made possible.

Part of the Essays on Communication Ecology series