

Leadership Communication Ecology

How Conversations Shape Organizations

A communication-centered framework for understanding communicative agency, organizational learning, and possibility.

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Leadership Communication Ecology

For many years, I found myself returning to the same question: Why do some organizations become places where people flourish, contribute, learn, and imagine new possibilities, while others slowly lose their curiosity, trust, and sense of possibility? It is tempting to look for the answer in organizational structures, strategic plans, leadership styles, or the personalities of individual leaders. Each of these matters, yet none fully explains the organizational worlds people experience every day.

Over time, I came to believe that the answer is often found in something far more ordinary and, for that reason, much easier to overlook. It is found not in a single conversation, but in the thousands of conversations that quietly shape an organization over time. Every question asked, or left unasked, matters. Every response, meeting, explanation, hesitation, and silence becomes part of an accumulating pattern that teaches people what is safe, what is valued, what is expected, and what is possible.

Organizations, from this perspective, are living communication ecologies. They are continually shaped through recurring patterns of communication and response. These patterns open some paths while quietly closing others. They encourage some ideas to move while allowing others to disappear, and they strengthen some people's capacity to participate while teaching others that their participation is unlikely to make a difference. Long before organizations formally shape behavior, their communication begins to shape imagination.¹

Leadership Communication Ecology offers a way to understand this process. It explains how leadership philosophies become embedded in the everyday communication of an organization and how those recurring interactions influence what people are willing and able to contribute, what the organization can collectively understand, and which futures it can imagine and pursue.

Leadership Philosophies Become Real Through Communication

Organizations do not experience a leadership philosophy primarily as a statement, value, or formal declaration. They experience it through the questions leaders ask, the ideas they acknowledge, the disagreements they permit, the explanations they offer, and the ways they respond when people contribute knowledge. As these interactions repeat, a leadership philosophy gradually becomes embedded in recognizable patterns of communication and response.

A leader may say that collaboration is important while routinely making decisions without meaningful consultation. Another leader may speak less explicitly about collaboration but consistently seek different perspectives, respond constructively to disagreement, and explain how employee contributions influenced a decision. Both leaders may claim to value collaboration, but only one is creating a genuinely collaborative communication ecology.

This distinction matters because stated values do not automatically become lived organizational realities. Employees learn what leaders actually value by observing what repeatedly happens when people communicate. They notice which questions receive thoughtful consideration and which are quickly dismissed. They observe whether concerns invite curiosity or defensiveness, whether mistakes create opportunities for learning or occasions for blame, and whether disagreement is treated as a contribution or a threat.

People also notice what happens after they speak. They see whether their ideas are examined, whether genuine questions are asked, and whether their contributions enter the discussion or influence a decision. They also recognize when a concern is politely acknowledged and then quietly abandoned. Leadership Communication Ecology therefore shifts attention from what leaders say they believe to what people repeatedly experience.

The theory does not treat one meeting, message, or conversation as sufficient to define a communication environment. A single positive interaction cannot erase years of dismissal, just as one poor response does not necessarily define an otherwise constructive environment. What matters is the pattern people encounter over time and the expectations that pattern creates.

When a question is welcomed, people learn that inquiry is possible. When disagreement is explored rather than punished, they learn that existing interpretations can be reconsidered. When knowledge is acknowledged but never influences deliberation or action, they learn that speaking may be permitted without being consequential. Eventually, people begin to anticipate the likely response before they ask a difficult question, share an unfinished idea, name a concern, or challenge an assumption. They no longer have to consciously decide what can be said because the communication ecology has already taught them.

Every Response Teaches Something

A foundational process in Leadership Communication Ecology is the recurring communication-response pattern. Organizational communication does not end when a message has been delivered because every contribution produces, or fails to produce, a response. That response communicates something about the value of the original contribution and about the likely consequences of communicating again.

A suggestion that receives serious consideration teaches a different lesson from one that is routinely ignored. A concern that produces thoughtful inquiry teaches a different lesson from one that produces blame. A dissenting interpretation that changes a decision teaches a different lesson from one that is

heard politely but excluded from meaningful deliberation. In every instance, the response becomes part of the meaning of the original communication.

This is easy to miss when attention is focused only on what was said. A leader may believe that an employee was given an opportunity to speak because time was provided during a meeting. Yet the more consequential lesson may be found in what happened after the employee spoke. Was the contribution explored or quickly redirected? Did others engage with it? Did the leader ask a genuine question or immediately explain why the idea would not work? Was the contribution connected to a decision, or did the conversation continue as though nothing had been said?

The response teaches the employee, as well as everyone watching, what the invitation to speak actually meant. Communication and response therefore form a recursive process. People communicate partly on the basis of what they have learned from previous responses, and leaders and colleagues then respond to the forms of participation that emerge. Those responses reinforce, revise, or constrain the expectations that will shape future participation.

Through repetition, these patterns become increasingly durable and begin to function as an informal structure governing organizational interaction. People gradually learn what is safe to say, what is worth saying, who is likely to be heard, which forms of knowledge are considered legitimate, and whether communication can change anything. These lessons are rarely established through formal policy alone.

An organization may have an open-door policy, a suggestion system, an employee survey, or a stated commitment to transparency. Yet people learn what those commitments truly mean through experience. They learn whether the door is genuinely open, whether suggestions receive serious consideration, whether survey feedback influences action, and whether transparency extends to difficult or inconvenient information. Eventually, the lived communication ecology becomes more influential than the formal statement.

The Difference Between Speaking and Having Influence

KEY DISTINCTION

Communication as expression allows a person to speak. Communication as influence allows what is spoken to enter the organizational processes through which meaning and action are created.

Leadership Communication Ecology introduces the concept of communicative agency: the perceived and practical capacity of organizational members to participate in ways that can meaningfully influence collective understanding and coordinated action. Communicative agency involves more than simply being allowed to speak. It reflects whether a person's communication has a realistic opportunity to become part of the organization's processes of interpretation, learning, decision-making, and action.

An employee may be technically free to express an idea while having little reason to believe that the idea will receive serious attention. A team may be invited to provide feedback while repeatedly observing that decisions remain unchanged. A leader may encourage candor while becoming defensive whenever uncomfortable information is introduced. In each situation, expression remains possible, but communicative agency is constrained.

This distinction is important because organizations often evaluate communication by asking whether employees had an opportunity to contribute. Leadership Communication Ecology asks a deeper question: Could that contribution become consequential? Could it change what others understood, introduce knowledge that altered a decision, challenge an assumption, redirect attention, reveal a risk, or make a previously invisible possibility available for collective consideration?

Communication as expression allows a person to speak. Communication as influence allows what is spoken to enter the organizational processes through which meaning and action are created. Recurring communication-response patterns establish boundaries around that influence. Some boundaries are explicit and necessary, including formal authority, reporting relationships, confidentiality requirements, and decision rights. Others are informal and learned through experience.

People gradually discover which topics can be questioned, which assumptions remain protected, which voices carry credibility, and how far disagreement can travel before it encounters resistance. They learn when a leader is genuinely inviting discussion and when a question is largely ceremonial. They recognize which meetings allow new interpretations to emerge and which exist primarily to affirm decisions already made.

People also learn to interpret silence. Silence may signal reflection, uncertainty, disapproval, avoidance, or the quiet disappearance of an idea. Whatever its intent, repeated silence becomes part of the communication ecology because people must decide what it means for their future participation.

These communicative boundaries are not fixed. They are continually produced and reproduced through interaction. When leaders respond to contributions with curiosity, explanation, visible consideration, and appropriate action, the boundaries of communicative agency may expand. More people become willing to participate, more knowledge enters collective deliberation, and additional possibilities become available to the organization.

When leaders respond with dismissal, avoidance, punishment, or silence, those boundaries may contract. Knowledge becomes less likely to move, existing interpretations become less likely to be challenged, and the organization's range of perceived possibilities narrows. Over time, people may stop sharing what they know, not because they no longer care, but because the communication ecology has taught them that communicating is unlikely to make a difference.

Communication Shapes Organizational Possibility

CORE PROPOSITION

Leadership Communication Ecology treats communication as the mechanism through which organizations continually create or constrain their future possibilities.

Organizational possibility refers to what an organization can collectively imagine, understand, discuss, coordinate, and ultimately become. Possible futures do not enter organizational life on their own. They must be communicated. Someone must ask a question, recognize a problem, connect previously separate forms of knowledge, challenge an accepted interpretation, or articulate an alternative course of action.

Whether that contribution becomes consequential depends on the communication ecology into which it enters. An idea may be insightful, but if the ecology does not allow it to travel, it may remain isolated. A warning may be accurate, but if the person offering it has learned that uncomfortable information is unwelcome, it may never be voiced. An organization may contain all the knowledge necessary to solve a problem and still remain unable to act because that knowledge cannot move across communicative boundaries.

A knowledge-rich organization may therefore remain unable to learn. It may employ highly capable people while repeatedly constraining their communicative agency. It may possess the information needed to recognize an emerging problem while lacking the communication-response patterns required to bring that information into collective awareness.⁷

Leadership Communication Ecology treats communication as the mechanism through which organizations continually create or constrain their future possibilities. Communication expands organizational possibility when it enables knowledge to circulate, interpretations to be reconsidered, assumptions to be examined, and people to coordinate around new understandings. Communication constrains organizational possibility when it prevents knowledge from becoming collectively available, protects dominant interpretations from examination, or teaches people that contributing will have little organizational consequence.

This is why ordinary organizational interactions matter so deeply. A meeting that welcomes a difficult question may make a previously unconsidered future visible. A supervisor who asks one more question instead of offering another answer may allow important knowledge to surface. A colleague who explains rather than blames may preserve someone's willingness to contribute, while the silence that follows an uncomfortable truth may teach an entire group not to speak the next time.

These moments often appear small because they happen every day, yet over time ordinary conversations create extraordinary environments. The communication ecology shapes more than the immediate exchange of information. It influences what the organization becomes capable of noticing,

understanding, discussing, and doing. Long before an organization chooses among possible futures, its communication ecology has already influenced which futures can be imagined and treated as attainable.

Every Organization Contains Multiple Ecologies

Although it is useful to speak of an organization's communication ecology, no organization contains only one uniform communication environment. Countless communication ecologies emerge within teams, departments, professional groups, reporting relationships, and informal networks. Each develops through its own recurring patterns of communication and response.

A person may experience considerable communicative agency within a trusted team and very little agency when interacting with senior leadership. One department may welcome experimentation while another treats uncertainty as incompetence. A leader may create a highly participative ecology with direct reports while those direct reports reproduce more restrictive patterns within their own teams.

These local ecologies influence one another and together create the larger organizational world people experience. Ideas may move freely within one group but encounter resistance at a departmental boundary. Knowledge may travel upward through one leadership chain and disappear within another. Employees learn not only how communication works in their immediate environments but also how far their contributions are likely to travel across the organization.

This helps explain why people working in the same organization can describe it in dramatically different ways. One person may experience curiosity, responsiveness, and meaningful participation, while another experiences silence, defensiveness, and constraint. Both may be accurately describing the organizational world they encounter each day because they inhabit different communication ecologies.

Leadership Communication Ecology therefore pays attention to both local interactions and broader systemic patterns. Leaders shape the communication ecologies closest to them, but they also participate in the wider ecology of the organization. The broader environment emerges through the interaction of these overlapping communicative worlds.

How Leadership Communication Ecology Extends Existing Ideas

Leadership Communication Ecology builds upon several well-established ways of understanding organizations. It does not attempt to replace theories of sensemaking, structuration, organizational culture, psychological safety, or employee voice. Instead, it asks a distinct communication-centered question: Why does some communication reshape organizational life while other communication does not?

Sensemaking

Sensemaking helps explain how people interpret ambiguous events and construct meaning. Leadership Communication Ecology extends this idea by examining why some interpretations become organizationally consequential while others disappear. An employee may recognize a significant problem, articulate it clearly, and share it with others without changing the organization's collective understanding.²

Organizations are continually filled with interpretations that never become part of collective understanding. People notice problems, identify possibilities, and make connections that remain local or private. Leadership Communication Ecology directs attention to what happens between the formation of an interpretation and its organizational consequence. It examines the communication-response patterns that allow meaning to travel, gain legitimacy, influence others, and become connected to coordinated action, or cause that meaning to stop.

Structuration

Structuration theory explains the recursive relationship between structure and agency. Leadership Communication Ecology provides a more communication-specific account of that recursion. Through repeated cycles of contribution and response, people learn the boundaries of their communicative agency. Their later communication then reproduces or modifies the ecology, which in turn shapes future participation.³

Communication is therefore not simply something that happens within an established organizational structure. It is also one of the processes through which communicative structures emerge and become durable. What eventually appears to be a stable pattern of openness, silence, challenge, or deference may have been built through countless ordinary encounters. People repeatedly enact what previous responses have taught them to expect, and those enactments help sustain the ecology that follows.

Organizational Culture

Organizational culture theories help explain the formation and influence of shared assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of understanding organizational life. Leadership Communication Ecology asks how those assumptions emerge communicatively. People learn what the organization values by repeatedly observing what can be discussed, what receives attention, how uncertainty is handled, and which forms of participation produce consequences.⁴

From this perspective, culture can be understood partly as an emergent property of communication ecology. What people eventually describe as “the way things are done here” is often the accumulated residue of recurring communication-response patterns. Before an assumption becomes widely shared, it must be learned, and people frequently learn it through repeated encounters with the communication environment.

This does not mean that culture can be reduced entirely to communication. It means that communication is central to the processes through which culture becomes visible, shared, reinforced,

and changed. People learn what the organization celebrates, avoids, protects, rewards, and refuses to discuss through their interactions with others.

Psychological Safety

Psychological safety helps explain whether people feel willing to take interpersonal risks, such as asking questions, admitting mistakes, offering ideas, or expressing concerns. Leadership Communication Ecology accepts the importance of this willingness while asking an additional question: Does speaking alter organizational possibility?⁵

People may feel safe enough to express themselves but gradually discover that their contributions have little influence on collective understanding or action. An organization may permit open discussion while repeatedly failing to integrate employee knowledge into decisions. In such an environment, expression may be psychologically safe but organizationally inconsequential.

Feeling safe enough to speak is essential, but it is not the end of the process. People must also see some relationship between their contributions and the communicative life of the organization. Without that relationship, invitations to speak may eventually feel hollow, even when the interpersonal environment remains courteous. Leadership Communication Ecology therefore examines both the willingness to speak and the ecological conditions that allow communication to matter.

Employee Voice

Employee voice theories focus on the expression of suggestions, concerns, opinions, and ideas intended to improve organizational functioning. Leadership Communication Ecology extends the analysis from expression to organizational consequence. Voice becomes meaningful not simply when it is offered, but when the surrounding ecology allows it to enter collective interpretation and coordinated action.⁶

An organization may conduct surveys, hold listening sessions, invite questions, and maintain suggestion systems while still creating an environment in which people see little evidence that their communication matters. Leadership Communication Ecology asks not only whether channels for voice exist, but what those channels repeatedly teach people about the consequences of speaking. It focuses on whether contributions are acknowledged, examined, circulated, integrated, and connected to action.

Leadership Is Ecological Influence

LEADERSHIP IMPLICATION

Every response contributes to the world in which people will communicate tomorrow.

Leadership Communication Ecology does not reduce leadership to individual communication skill, nor does it suggest that leaders control every interaction occurring within an organization. Communication

ecologies are shaped collectively, and organizational members at every level participate in their creation. Nevertheless, leaders exercise disproportionate influence over the ecology because their responses carry unusual interpretive and organizational weight.

When leaders respond to organizational members, they do more than address the immediate message. They demonstrate how communication works within the organization. A thoughtful question can signal that further inquiry is welcome, while a defensive reaction can warn others against raising similar concerns. A request for additional perspectives can widen participation, while an unexplained decision can narrow the perceived value of future contribution. A visible connection between employee knowledge and organizational action can strengthen communicative agency across the system.

People do not learn only from the interactions in which they participate directly. They also watch what happens to others. They notice who is interrupted, whose ideas are credited, which concerns receive follow-up, and how leaders respond when someone names an uncomfortable truth. One interaction can therefore shape the expectations of many people beyond those who were speaking.

Through these recurring responses, leaders continually influence the boundaries within which organizational communication occurs. Their most enduring influence may be found not in a single speech, decision, or message, but in the communication ecology their repeated actions help create and sustain. Leadership becomes consequential as it shapes the environment through which people learn what communication can make possible.

This view invites leaders to understand communication differently. Communication is not merely a tool used to deliver information, explain decisions, or motivate people. It is an environment leaders help create. Every response contributes to the world in which people will communicate tomorrow.

Learning to See the Ecology

One of the challenges of understanding communication ecology is that its most important patterns often appear ordinary. Meetings happen, emails are exchanged, questions are answered, decisions are announced, and people move on to the next demand. Because these interactions are familiar, their cumulative influence can remain invisible.

Learning to see the ecology requires a different kind of attention. It means noticing not only what people say, but what happens to what they say. It requires observing how ideas move, where questions stop, which assumptions remain protected, and whose knowledge becomes part of collective understanding. It also requires listening to silence as carefully as speech.

This way of seeing demands patience because the ecology is not contained in one moment. It becomes visible through repetition. A single meeting may appear inclusive, but a series of meetings may reveal that employee contributions rarely affect decisions. One defensive response may be an exception, while a recurring pattern of defensiveness may define a communicative boundary. The meaning lies in the accumulated pattern.

Leadership Communication Ecology is therefore more than a way to evaluate leaders or diagnose organizations from a distance. It is an invitation to pause, observe, and see the organizations we inhabit with new eyes. Each of us participates in communication-response patterns, and each of us helps teach others what communication is likely to accomplish.

The ecological question is not simply whether we communicated. It is what our communication made possible. Did it increase understanding? Did it allow knowledge to move? Did it enlarge someone's capacity to contribute? Did it open a path that had not previously been visible, or did it quietly close one?

Conclusion

Leadership Communication Ecology explains how leadership philosophies become embedded in organizational life through recurring patterns of communication and response. These patterns shape communicative agency by teaching organizational members what can be said, what is likely to be heard, and whether communication can influence collective understanding and coordinated action.

As these experiences accumulate, they establish communicative boundaries that determine which knowledge can move, which interpretations can gain influence, which assumptions become shared, and which possibilities become available to the organization. The theory therefore places communication at the center of organizational emergence.

Organizations do not become open, collaborative, learning-focused, or innovative merely because leaders claim to value those qualities. They become those things when recurring patterns of communication and response make them organizationally possible. Long before a leadership philosophy becomes culture, structure, learning, or coordinated action, it becomes a pattern of communication. Through those patterns, the organization gradually becomes what its communication makes possible.

This understanding changes the questions we ask about leadership. Instead of looking only at what leaders intend, we begin to examine what people repeatedly experience. Instead of asking only whether communication occurred, we ask what became of it. Instead of focusing solely on whether people were allowed to speak, we consider whether their communication had the capacity to shape understanding and action.

Perhaps most importantly, Leadership Communication Ecology invites us to notice the organizational worlds we create together. Every conversation contributes to those worlds. Every response teaches something, and every silence leaves a trace. Together, these interactions open some futures while quietly making others less imaginable.

The question, then, is not only what kind of organization we hope to build. It is also what kind of communication ecology we are creating through the ordinary interactions of each day. What world are we creating together, and what worlds have we quietly made impossible?

THEORETICAL GROUNDING

Reference Notes

Leadership Communication Ecology is presented here as an original conceptual framework. The notes below identify established literatures the framework engages and extends; they do not imply that the framework has yet been empirically validated as a distinct theory.

1. Communication as constitutive of organization. The claim that organizations are produced and sustained through communication aligns with communication-as-constitutive scholarship. LCE builds on this premise by proposing recurring communication-response patterns as a foundational process through which communicative environments become consequential. See Putnam and Nicotera (2009).
2. Sensemaking. Sensemaking scholarship explains how people convert ambiguous circumstances into meanings that orient identity and action. LCE extends the question from how interpretations form to how a communication ecology allows some interpretations to travel, gain legitimacy, and shape coordinated action. See Weick, Sutcliffe, and Obstfeld (2005).
3. Structuration. Structuration theory describes the recursive relationship through which agency produces structure and structure conditions later action. LCE specifies communication-response patterns as a communication-centered recursive process that shapes subsequent participation. See Giddens (1984).
4. Organizational culture. Culture scholarship explains how shared assumptions develop, persist, and influence organizational life. LCE emphasizes the recurring communicative experiences through which members learn what is valued, protected, rewarded, and discussable. See Schein and Schein (2017).
5. Psychological safety. Psychological safety concerns a shared belief that interpersonal risk taking is safe. LCE accepts the importance of willingness to speak while distinguishing that willingness from communicative influence: whether speaking can enter collective interpretation, learning, and action. See Edmondson (1999).
6. Employee voice and leader openness. Voice research examines the decision to offer improvement-oriented information, concerns, and ideas, as well as the leadership conditions that encourage or suppress speaking up. LCE extends the analysis from expression to the ecological conditions that determine whether a contribution becomes organizationally consequential. See Morrison (2011) and Detert and Burris (2007).
7. Organizational learning. Organizational learning depends not only on the presence of knowledge but on processes that allow organizations to detect, examine, and correct assumptions and action patterns. LCE focuses on the communication ecology through which distributed knowledge can, or cannot, become collective learning. See Argyris and Schön (1978).

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