

Effective Communication – Part 7: Leadership in Action



Bringing It All Together

Over the past six weeks, we've explored the heart of Barnlund's transactional model — communication as dynamic, continuous, circular, irreversible, unrepeatable, and context-dependent (Barnlund, 1962; Wrench et al., 2022). In this final capstone piece, we shift from theory to practice.

How do leaders bring these principles to life?

How does understanding communication as meaning-making — not message-sending — strengthen safety, trust, and culture?

Let's look at real-world leadership moments where transactional communication made the difference.

Aerospace Case Study 1

The Check Airman Who Changed the Conversation

A captain in training struggled during high workload scenarios. His instructor noticed that the more corrections he gave, the more anxious the captain became — and performance declined further.

Instead of “sending better instructions,” the instructor paused and said:

“Tell me what you’re experiencing right now.”

The captain admitted he felt flustered, behind the airplane, and afraid of disappointing his evaluator.

That moment changed everything.

The instructor adjusted pacing, tone, and expectations, focusing on the *meaning* the captain was assigning to the situation — not just the technical tasks. Confidence returned, performance stabilized, and the training became collaborative rather than corrective.

Leadership in Action:

- Recognizing communication as a transaction, not a transmission
- Reading private cues (stress, self-evaluation)
- Matching communication to the learner’s internal state
- Building psychological safety to support performance

This is Barnlund in the real world — *meaning made together*.

Aerospace Case Study 2

The Director of Maintenance Who Shifted the Narrative

After several near-miss safety events, the Director of Maintenance realized his daily briefings were falling flat. Techs were nodding along, but decisions on the floor weren’t aligning with his intent.

Rather than issuing “clearer directives,” he held a stand-up and asked:

“Walk me through how you’re interpreting what I’ve been saying.”

The responses surprised him.

His reminders about efficiency were being heard as pressure to finish quickly.

His updates about customer expectations were heard as “we can’t disappoint them,” creating unintended stress.

His calm, analytical delivery was being interpreted as disinterest.

Armed with this insight, he rebuilt the communication flow:

- Explicitly clarified values (safety is a core value, never to be over-ridden by perceived stress to satisfy a customer or boss)
- Encouraged questions and sense-making (psychological safety)
- Adjusted his delivery to match the team's needs
- Invited techs to shape the briefing together

Performance improved significantly. Not because he changed his intended *message*, but because he changed the *transaction*.

Business Case Study

The Executive Who Transformed a Meeting Culture

A senior leader noticed that during leadership meetings, her team rarely disagreed with her proposals. Projects bogged down later because concerns surfaced only after decisions were made.

Instead of blaming “lack of engagement,” she examined the **context** she had unintentionally created:

- She spoke first.
- She offered strong, well-developed views.
- Team members didn't want to contradict her.
- Her efficiency created a pace that limited shared meaning-making.

At the next meeting, she decided to be a facilitator of ideas instead of a director. She realized the best plans forward would be ones that the team felt like they owned through participation in the design. She opened the next meeting with:

“The company needs your opinions to better define the problems and develop the most practical solution”

The change was transformative.

Team members felt ownership.

Conflicting interpretations surfaced early — where they belonged.

Better decisions emerged because meaning was co-created rather than assumed.

Leadership in Action:

- Reducing authority gradients
- Creating conditions for shared meaning
- Valuing insights before consensus

This is transactional communication at the organizational level.

What These Leaders Have in Common

Across each story — flight deck, hangar, and boardroom — leaders demonstrated four core abilities:

1. They read cues beyond the words

Emotional tone, timing, stress load, silence, posture, workload, culture.

2. They understood that meaning is co-created

They didn't assume understanding — they built it collaboratively.

3. They adjusted communication to the situation

Different conditions require different approaches.

4. They considered communication as a critical tool in individual and team performance

Not just for information exchange, but for shaping culture, performance, and trust.

The WYVERN Connection

At WYVERN, this perspective is embedded throughout our Safety Leader Training and Flight Leader coaching.

Communication isn't a checklist item — it's a *leadership behavior* that directly influences culture, safety performance, and resilience.

When leaders learn to navigate meaning, not just messages:

- teams align faster
- misunderstandings decline

- psychological safety grows
- risk awareness sharpens
- safety culture strengthens

This is where communication and leadership meet.

Closing the Series: From Concepts to Practice

This seven-part series has shown that communication is far more than talking — it is a living, adaptive process that shapes how teams work, decide, and stay safe.

Leadership in Action brings everything full circle:

- Communication is how leaders build trust.
- Communication is how culture is created.
- Communication is how organizations stay safe.

And for aerospace — where ambiguity carries risk — leaders who master this form of meaning-making create the strongest safety cultures. Download our [Effective Communication Summary](#).

If you are not subscribed to our weekly newsletters, subscribe now at the bottom of this page. For further resources and guidance on implementing Safety Management Systems, contact WYVERN, THE industry expert. Attend our [SMS Training Workshops](#) or ask about our SMS software. [Contact us for a FREE SMS demo!](#) Together, we can elevate aerospace safety and create a safer future.

References

- **Barnlund, D. C. (1962).** *A Transactional Model of Communication*. In L. A. Thayer (Ed.), *Language and Communication: A Book of Readings*. New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston.
- **Wrench, J. S., Punyanunt-Carter, N. M., & Thweatt, K. S. (2022).** Overview of Interpersonal Communication. Interpersonal and Group Dynamics-Loyalist College.