



How Leaders Talk When the Outside World Can't Hear—and Why It Matters

To BCG's network around the world,

We write most of these Weekly Briefs with action in mind. Whether we focus on resilience, AI, climate, or navigating the economy and geopolitics, the emphasis is typically on what leaders can do to create value and accelerate progress in their organizations.

I think it's also important to reflect on the very challenging, nuanced, complex, and sometimes ethically complicated issues that leaders need to wrestle with, especially in disruptive times. Today, I'd like to address the complexity of authentic leadership, thinking less about what we do as leaders and more about what we say. And while there is plenty of attention paid to public statements, I'm focusing here on what we say in private.

I believe the true test of an organization's values and culture is how individuals behave when no one is looking, how leaders talk to other leaders when no one else can hear. None of us is perfect, but

it's worth stepping back from time to time to reflect on this front. Doing so can allow us to see how we might better strengthen our organization's culture and live our purpose, driving the kind of value creation that will stand the test of time.

Authentic and Purposeful Leadership

Given the extent of disruption underway, now is a uniquely important time to consider the authenticity of how we lead. As leaders juggle the approaches of the past with the possibilities and risks of the future, it's easy to feel the confusion of competing agendas. Ideally, we can demonstrate consistency in words and deeds—whether in private engagement or in public discourse.

The good news is that leaders who tend to create separate public and private personas are finding it harder to pull that off in today's world. The impact of social media, platforms like Glassdoor, 360-degree feedback, and more sophisticated HR practices are increasingly making it more challenging to be a statesman in public and verbally abusive or disrespectful in private.

But demonstrating and modeling leadership in private dialogue goes beyond how we treat our people and work with our teams. It also includes how we engage within the C-suite as we deal with competing priorities that trade off near-term profits and longer-term commitments. It includes how we negotiate and work with customers and suppliers, how we weigh in on policy issues, how we communicate behind closed doors with public officials, and how we guide our business associations.

Many companies work hard to align their external purpose-driven narrative with their internal conversations. But even with positive intent, stated goals sometimes get ignored in private narratives, or deprioritized in order to focus on narrower self-interest. I have always admired leaders who were ready to challenge “group think” on difficult topics. It's not easy to deliver uncomfortable messages that run counter to the pressures of the moment or push back on veneers that cover self-interest. But it's a big part of building a sustainable culture in which values drive value.

Asking the Tough Questions of Ourselves

I would encourage you to find some time to reflect on your private dialogues in the months ahead, ideally with others who will be candid with you. Consider the following questions:

- Do we have enough time in our agendas to engage on the tough issues and tradeoffs?
- Do we create an environment where it's safe to raise even very sensitive issues and our most senior leaders are role models on how to navigate them?
- Are their real consequences for bad behavior, and if so, does the broader organization see it that way?
- Are we transparent about the logic behind the choices we make, so others in leadership and beyond can learn from these experiences?
- Are our industry associations advocating for policies aligned with our stated goals? If not, are we using our full muscle, including working with our like-minded peers, to move them in a different direction?

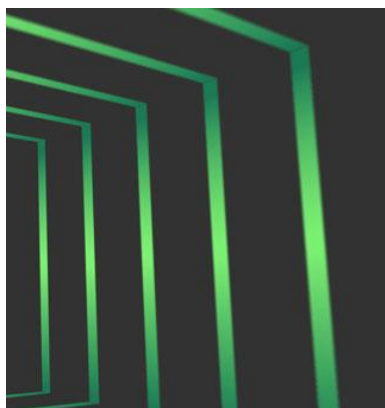
Now, more than ever, with so much uncertainty in the air and major changes on the horizon, leaders need to speak in private as they advocate in public, voicing and living a common narrative and pursuing the same purpose.

Until next time,



Rich Lesser
Global Chair

Further Reading



Build for the Future

BCG's research reveals six key success factors and the steps companies need to take to drive innovation, gain competitive advantage, and build for the future.

[Read more](#)



CEO Outlook 2023: Caution, Optimism, and Navigating the Road Ahead

Global uncertainties—from talent shortages and macroeconomic concerns to financial crises and inflation—are creating a challenging environment for companies.

[Read more](#)

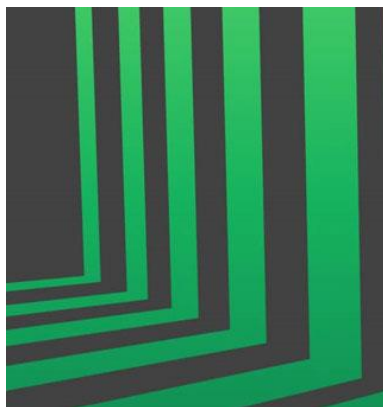


Expanding Our Reach, Enhancing Our Impact: BCG's Annual Sustainability Report

We are putting the power of BCG to work in order to make a difference in the world.

[Read more](#)

Join BCG for a LinkedIn Live Event



Beyond the Buzz — Navigating Generative AI's Promise and Peril

Join our experts on May 11 as they simplify generative AI, highlight areas where it can deliver real value, and explore the challenges of putting it to work.

[Register now](#)
