

They are All Moments of Truth

"Whoever is careless with the truth in small matters cannot be trusted with important matters."

- Albert Einstein

"How you arrive matters."¹

- David Avrin

In 1987, an important book was written by then SAS (Scandinavian Airlines) President Jan Carlzon called *"Moments of Truth."* Businesses around the world connected with Carlzon's ideas, especially the concept that every moment you have with a customer is special and important. From the book:

"Last year each of our ten million customers came in contact with approximately five SAS employees, and this contact lasted an average of 15 seconds each time. The SAS is 'created' 50 million times a year, 15 seconds at a time. These 50 million 'moments of truth' are the moments that ultimately determine whether SAS will succeed or fail as a company. They are the moments when we must prove to our customers that SAS is their best alternative."¹ (Carlzon, 1989)

We can remember buying *"Moments of Truth"* in bulk and conducting brown bag discussion sessions to discuss how its concepts could and should change how we view our businesses. We think the idea of moments of truth also applies to how great leaders connect with employees, customers, and other stakeholders. In this chapter, we will dive deep into this topic and offer you and your fellow leadership team members several techniques for optimizing your impact on others.

Be Fast or Fail

There is an important difference in how relationships and trust are built at various levels in the organization that will affect leadership team success. Most of the time and for most people, relationships between supervisors and frontline team members build over time. They train and retrain employees, coach them, check in on them daily, see them at team meetings, and build familiarity at informal birthday cake gatherings and other conversations. The same scenario plays out between supervisors and middle managers and to a somewhat lesser degree between middle managers and frontline employees. They get to know and trust each other slowly and naturally. This is how most work relationships are fostered.

It is different, however, for senior leaders. You might see employees only once and for a moment. At a communication briefing. At the stockholders' meeting. Walking through the manufacturing plant. Passing each other in office hallways. Your reputation, which is how people come to know you, is created through

¹ From Jan Carlzon's, *Moments of Truth*, pg. 3.

these moments of truth and this means that you need to be able to build credibility, connection, and trust very quickly. Figure 5.1 shows this dynamic.

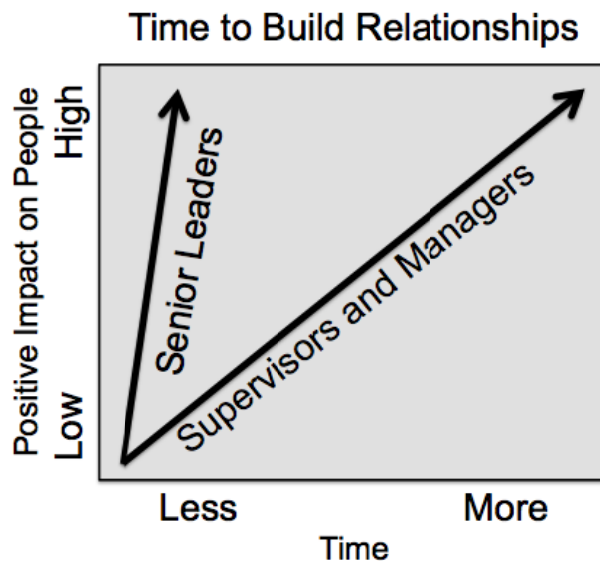


Figure 5.1 The speed at which senior leaders need to build relationships with employees who they see only on occasion

Relationships with those we work closely are built over time. We see these folks often and get to know them in much the same way that friendships are built in our personal lives. When you communicate with employees only once in a while, they form impressions about you based what they see and hear. You only have an instant (or a few instances) to connect with and be deemed trustworthy by employees, customers, and many stakeholders.

Every day you come in contact with or are observed by dozens of people. You are being closely watched and listened to – even when you walk from your office to the parking lot! Each observation is a valuable moment of truth. Your employees form their opinions about you, the leadership, and the company based on these moments.

Daily moments of truth are each opportunities – precious conversations and micro-conversations. You can use the time you have with and in front of employees to be proactive or responsive. Proactive situations include planned communications meetings. Reactive situations include problem solving, responding to questions, and chance or informal meetings.

Here's a recent and true story about a reactive moment of truth for a plant manager and client of ours involving a burp, a termination, and a sleepless night. We were doing some leadership development work at a manufacturing site. The senior leadership team had established a good reputation with its employees as being open, caring, fair, and trustworthy. On this particular day, the senior team was hosting an important client for a plant tour and meeting. The plant manager was just inside the production side of the plant talking to someone about the details of the tour. Their client was expected to arrive at any moment.

At the same time, a production worker unaware the plant manager was nearby walked by and let out a loud and long burp. Shocked, horrified, and surprised, the plant manager freaked out and told the employee he was fired and directed him to get out.

For the next several hours, rumors flew around that an employee had been fired for burping. We even heard about it during the training class. In this case, the rumor was true. That night, the plant manager did not sleep well and felt bad about what he had done. He came to work the next morning knowing he needed to respond to the stories that were still circulating throughout the plant. The first moment occurred when the employee burped -- the plant manager botched that one. The second moment of truth occurred the next day and had the potential to either improve or wreck his reputation, credibility, and trustworthiness.

The plant manager got his senior team together and shared what had happened, how he felt, and that he wanted to make it right. He called the fired employee to the plant and into a one-on-one meeting. He apologized and offered him his job back. He told him how he felt and that he was wrong to respond in the way he did. He shared how he was on edge because of the client tour to provide some context but not an excuse. The employee accepted his apology and his job back. Immediately after his meeting with the fired employee, the plant manager asked his senior team to hold employee meetings to share what had happened, how the decision was wrong, and how they were going to make it right. They were open and real and dealt with it quickly. This moment of truth built the character and credibility of the plant manager and entire leadership team.

Every moment of truth has the ability to build or tear down trust and connection. Years worth of good efforts can be ruined with a single knee-jerk remark or uncensored comment not intended for public consumption. Think about the politicians who have seen their careers tarnished and who have lost campaigns after a nearby microphone picked up a comment they did not intend to share. In our organizations, these faux pas tend to occur in hallway conversations, as people are filing out of meeting rooms, when tensions are high, and when email rants are forwarded, printed, and shared beyond what the sender intends.

Even planned moments of truth can inadvertently wreck your credibility if they do not make people feel comfortable or cared for. One statement, one smile, one handshake, one moment. Leadership team members need to learn how to come across well in record time.

Successful Moments of Truth

You need to quickly create a positive impact with each moment of truth, but what does that mean? What purposes should each verbal, written, or visual communication serve? The most impactful exchanges accomplish one or more of the following goals. The best moments of truth build:

- **Trust** – Employees feel that what you say is accurate and well intended and that you will act with integrity. You come across in a genuine way that gives people confidence and comfort.

- **Credibility** – Your information is trustworthy and your sources of information are good. You capably share information, although you do not need to be seen at the expert. Your decisions are based on sound judgment and you explain them well.
- **Familiarity** – Employees get a sense for who you are as a human being including your style, hot buttons, what’s important to you, and about your life. If asked, “tell me about _____ (you),” most employees, and not just those reporting to you, would be able to respond with a few sentences.
- **Connection to you and the leadership team** – Employees feel that they share goals, passions, interests, or values with you and your peers. They feel they have something in common with you. One of the reasons they would hesitate to leave the organization is the people, including the leadership team.
- **Connection to the organization’s mission, strategies and results** – Employees are proud of the organization’s mission and agree with and are willing to support the overall strategic direction. They know and understand results and how their work impacts results.
- **Interest, passion, and enrollment** – Employees sense your dedication and passion for the business and this bolsters their interest. You share information and stories that add color and depth and bring goals and plans to life.
- **Clarity, commitment and focus** – The information you share helps clarify short-term and long-term priorities and why the vision will benefit the organization and all employees. You answer questions so that employees can better support major initiatives.

***"We are more inclined to follow the lead of
a similar individual than a dissimilar one."*²**

- Robert Cialdini

Think back to the last time you interacted with employees – those reporting to you or your peers. How many of these goals did your conversation meet? Think about the last time you walked through the office or plant floor. What do you think employees observed and what impression did you make? Did you look happy or angry? Energetic or lethargic? Focused or scattered? Did you greet people or fail to notice them? All of these things matter when your reputation is created by just a few moments of truth.

Here is one example from Connie Kocher, an OD leader for a trucking parts manufacturer and colleague of ours, about how her general manager ensures he sets a good tone:

“Perry, our General Manager, sets a great example for managers about being visible and approachable. He rarely conducts meetings in his office and almost never calls people into his office. If he has a question or wants to dialogue with someone, he routinely goes to his or her place to have that discussion. He is routinely seen throughout the facility, walking around, stopping to talk to people, and just generally being available if people want to talk to him. His

² From Robert Cialdini’s, *Influence: Science and Practice*, pg 120.

demeanor makes it easy to approach him, and his example destroys any myths about a "pecking order." We try to keep a very flat organization in which anyone can talk to anyone else--regardless of title or position--to get a job done. Perry's example helps establish this culture."

These little efforts make a big difference, and Perry's habits hit on several of the items on our list. It is not our expectation that every message accomplish every one of these goals, but it is important that you accomplish as many as possible and make sure that you hit them all on occasion. And as a leadership team, you should be cognizant of significant differences in how you communicate and build relationships with employees and other stakeholders. The bottom line is that you want all employees to know you and the leadership team, trust you and the leadership team, and want to follow you and the leadership team. Individual differences in style are fine as long as these goals are met and reinforced by all leadership team members.

At the core of each moment of truth is the impression we leave with people and how that makes them feel. This feeling will impact their choices and actions, and their actions will culminate in their success. This is important to remember and goes back to what we wrote in Chapter 2 about how what leaders and leadership teams do reverberates. Each moment of truth creates waves of impressions.

Aside from the opportunity to build relationships, moments of truth offer leaders the chance to go beyond reverberation and make a positive splash. By splash, we mean that people are significantly lifted by the moment, like a pleasant splash of water on a hot summer day. And why not try for that? A good splash can catalyze passion, commitment, and engagement. Some of the elements involved in creating a splash:

- **Surprise** – Are you a pleasant surprise? Do you surprise people or make them smile wide?
- **Passion** – Are you showing your passion for the business? Each of us demonstrates passion differently, but it is clear no matter how we do it. Passion fills the air.
- **Fun** – Can you lead and be fun? Yes, and employees will find you refreshing and inspirational when you combine serious work with fun. Work should be fun.
- **Provocative** – Are you making people think and expand how they think about things? Sometimes a splash comes in the form of a paradigm shift.
- **Inspiring** – Do your stories move people? Are you a leader people want to hear and follow? Do your words have the potential to transform people?

We all should make a splash every now and then. Use moments of truth to catalyze energy, engagement, change, and breakthroughs. Go beyond everyday reverberations to shake things up. This applies to individual leaders and the leadership team. Talk about how the team can periodically create a positive splash to reengage and reenergize the organization. We know one senior team that decided they were going to sing for their employees at the end of year communication meeting. They got together several times before the meeting and practiced their singing parts. It was fun and their performance was highly imperfect. They found, though, that their flawed amateur performance created a wonderful splash and

made a very favorable impression on employees. As a bonus, the preparation improved the level and depth of the relationships between leadership team members. Two splashes!

“Your success will be a product of your own enthusiasm and the commitment to that future, and your ability to regenerate the initiative often enough to keep others enthusiastic too.”³

- Jeffrey and Laurie Ford

How to Quickly Make a Positive Impact and Build Relationships

Moments of truth occur many times each day, so how do you and your fellow leadership team members ensure that you capitalize on each opportunity? Let’s explore the goals from above in greater depth and review ways we can increase the number of positive moments of truth. By assessing your current and past communication attempts and asking yourself several questions, you can quickly understand the strengths and weaknesses of your approach. Done as a leadership team, you will see whether patterns exist in how well or poorly you and your peers are connecting with employees. Figure 5.2 lists our communication goals and methods that we can use to make a positive impact with each moment of truth.

| Goal | Description | Suggestions |
|-------------|---|--|
| Trust | You come across in a genuine way that gives people confidence and comfort. | Be yourself and show an interest in others. Be honest and as transparent as possible. Don’t dodge difficult questions. Invite questions. Share the “why” for decisions. Be open about setbacks and mistakes. Ask yourself the following questions: Do I come across as genuine? Do I walk my talk? Are my values clear? Do I feel comfortable standing up for them and making tough decisions to stay true to them? Am I both a leader and a follower? A coach and a learner? Do I keep my promises? Do I humbly apologize when I make mistakes? |
| Credibility | Your information is trustworthy and your sources of information are good. You capably share information, although you do not need to be seen at the expert. Your decisions are based on sound judgment and you explain them well. | Be as open as possible. Share the reasons behind decisions and encourage employees to ask questions. Be wary of responses that sound like they belong on a press release. Do your homework and share background information and research? Negative impressions are often formed when employees make incorrect assumptions about what, why, and when. Provide the right information to reduce bad assumptions. |

³ From Jeffrey and Laurie Ford’s, *The Four Conversations: Daily Communication that Gets Results*, pg. 53.

| Goal | Description | Suggestions |
|-----------------------------------|---|---|
| Familiarity | Employees get a sense for who you are as a human being including your style, hot buttons, what's important to you, and about your life. | Let people get to know you. Share some information about your family, hobbies, preferences, and values. Employees should see you for more than formal communication meetings. If you cannot spend time with employees, write a blog or create informal video messages. |
| Connection to you and team | Employees feel that they share goals, passions, interests, or values with you and your peers. They feel they have something in common with you. | Share your goals, values, and vision for the organization. Communicate your hopes and worries as appropriate. Show your passion for the business and be energized by goals, progress, and great team efforts. Talk with employees about their lives, show in interest in them. |
| Connection to the organization | Employees are proud of the organization's mission and agree with and are willing to support the overall strategic direction. They know and understand results and how their work impacts results. | Talk often about the organizations direction and mission and tie this to daily work and current priorities. Make sure that employees know how the organization's mission makes it a better place to work. Have a mission and strategic plan that is worthy of their passion and commitment ("make more money for rich stockholders," won't cut it). |
| Interest, passion, and enrollment | Employees sense your dedication and passion for the business and this bolsters their interest. You share information and stories that add color and depth and bring goals and plans to life | Be animated, excited, and willing to show your love of the business. Positively reinforce managers and supervisors who do the same. Talk about what drives you to do your job – let people into your work life through the stories you tell. Actively celebrate successes and show an interest in learning about daily success stories. |
| Clarity, commitment and focus | The information you share helps clarify short-term and long-term priorities and why the vision will benefit the organization and all employees. You answer questions so that employee can better support major initiatives. | Take the initiative to communicate priorities and engage employees in conversation. Share priorities in several ways and levels of detail so that everyone can understand on what they should focus. Show focus through the decisions you make and by modeling an appropriate sense of urgency. |
| Make a splash! | Create a positive impression that moves, engages, or surprises employees. | Do something fun and surprising at least a few times per year. Share information that you find provocative. Ask your OD and marketing departments to help your team improve the impact of your communications. |

Figure 5.2

Are you wondering WHEN you will have time to connect in these ways? We know that time is scarce and that time spent connecting with employees have a high ROI, likely higher than many things on your mile-long to-do lists. Not every conversation or brief exchange warrants that you take these steps, but we think that if you look over this list of goals, descriptions, and suggestions regularly, you will improve the delivery and impact of your messages. Looking back at the situation with the plant manager who fired a worker for his loud and untimely burp, one reason the second moment of truth was effective and built his trustworthiness and credibility was that he humbly apologized for making a mistake and fixed the problem. He shared his feelings and showed his staff that he was willing to expose himself to embarrassment to get things right.

Should the idea that all moments spent with or in the presence of others are moments of truth change how you and your fellow leadership team members communicate with staff? We believe that it should. You might remember the idea of the emotional bank account that Stephen Covey wrote about in his best seller, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective Leaders*. Covey said that every time we communicate with someone, we either make a deposit or withdrawal from the emotional bank account. Covey used the term “emotional bank account” to refer to the sum of our impressions about each other and the health of our relationships. Each moment of truth redefines your leadership and the reputation of the leadership team – each moment builds it up or tears it down. Covey’s idea of the emotional bank account reminds us that every conversation counts. Every hallway passing counts. Every opening of a communication meeting counts. Every email counts.

Do you want to connect more with employees? How much time are you spending with them? The nice thing about moments truth well spent is that you can make a big difference in a little time. If you set aside an additional five minutes a day to converse with employees, it will go a long way. Whether you MBWA (manage/connect by walking around), eat lunch in the cafeteria, or engage in an informal idea generation conversation, you can efficiently increase visibility. One word of caution about the idea to eat in the cafeteria. Don’t sit at the “executives” table as this reinforces separation, not relationship. We have one client where the senior leaders all sit at one particular table in the lunchroom and we are quite sure that this hurts their reputation.

The value of each moment of truth goes beyond building relationships, credibility, and trust. Leaders receive useful information from each moment they spend communicating with employees. They learn how employees feel, they hear important feedback, and they are better able to proactively identify and solve problems.

All for One, One for All

Moments of truth are opportunities. Leadership is a social act and each conversation offers you the chance to build relationships and strengthen commitment and focus. As a leader, every moment you spend with employees, peers, and stakeholders adds up to define your reputation and impact on others. And your conversations define how employees view the leadership team. As a representative of the leadership team, everything you say and do is as if it is coming from the team, too.

Leadership teams can proactively use moments of truth to proliferate important messages, establish norms for leaders and managers, and build the culture. When employees see and hear leaders, they form impressions about many things including:

- What excellent is and how it will be measured.
- How personable and fun the workplace is.
- The behaviors that are preferred and whether openness is desired.
- The importance or unimportance of the chain of command.
- Whether leaders value and care about employees.
- What leaders are thinking about the company's future.

Using the same goals discussed earlier, Figure 5.3 offers a filter that leadership teams can use to improve the efficacy of each moment of truth.

| Goal – The Leadership Team Can Build | Filter Questions |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Trust | As a team what do we do to build trust? As individuals, how well do we represent the trustworthiness of the team? |
| Credibility | Does the team operate in ways that improve or hinder our credibility? Are we as open and transparent as possible and what tools do we use to increase information sharing? |
| Familiarity | How are we making sure that employees at all levels get to know all leadership team members? What communication tools and practices could we use to help employees get to know us? |
| Connection to the team | How can we draw connections between the leadership team and other employees? Do we demonstrate connectedness between leadership team members? |
| Connection to the organization | Is the leadership team communicating the vision and strategic plan in enough detail so that all employees can understand it and know how their work supports the organization's success and future? |
| Interest, passion, and enrollment | Does the team seem interested in and passionate about their work? If a fly were on the wall during our team meetings, would it conclude we are highly engaged in our work? Do we look and sound like a strong team? |
| Clarity, commitment and focus | As a team, do we demonstrate an adequate sense of urgency and are we united what we believe are the top priorities? When we communicate with our respective functional teams, do we emphasize the same broad priorities? |
| Make a splash! | What can we do to inform and entertain? How might we change our communication methods to increase our ability to inspire and provoke? When was the last time we gave our employees a pleasant surprise? |

Figure 5.3

Use these filter questions to ensure that you are not inadvertently communicating different and conflicting impressions during moments of truth. If you are part of a team of ten leaders, you have the opportunity to build confidence and trust more than a million times each year. What one leader does and says affects how other leaders on the team are perceived. This is both a blessing and a burden and we invite you and your fellow leadership team members to seize opportunities to use moments of truth to strengthen the bonds between employees and leaders.

“Simply put, trust means confidence. The opposite of trust – distrust – is suspicion. When you trust people, you have the confidence in them – in their integrity and in their abilities. When you distrust people, you are suspicious of them – of their integrity, their agenda, their capabilities, or their track record. It’s that simple. We have all had experiences that validate the difference between relationships that are built on trust and those that are not. These experiences clearly tell us the difference is not small; it is dramatic.”⁴

- Stephen Covey

⁴ From Stephen Covey’s, *The SPEED of Trust: The One Thing That Changes Everything*, pg 5.

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- *Coaching Up and Down the Generations* (ASTD Press, October 2010)

In addition, her work has been highlighted in publications such as *Leader to Leader*, *Washington CEO*, *Capital*, and *Leadership Excellence*.

Jim Taylor and Lisa Haneberg’s book, *Connecting Top Managers: Developing Executive Teams for Business Success* has just been published by the Financial Times Press.