D o you know what your ripple effect is? Like waves of ripples that extend across water when something is dropped into it, you too have a leader’s ripple effect that goes deeply and broadly into your organization. The more senior you are, the more visible you are, and the higher your performance, the greater the impact of your ripple and the wake that you leave.

After over a decade of executive coaching and training senior leaders in organizations across a variety of industries, we’ve seen the impact of a leader’s ripple effect. We’ve been stunned by just how much people read into all that a leader says or does not say, all that a leader does or does not do, and how the leader says it or does it. A tremendous amount of talk and lore forms around you, amplifying your ripple effect further. A ripple effect—positive or negative—has the possibility of affecting the tone, culture, and employee engagement of your organization. Some illustrative things we’ve heard through the years:

- All who work in his organization love him. He has an incredible effect on all he has worked with, affects how you want to be as a person. I feel lucky to have had him as the head of our area. I will still feel that way years into the future.
- She’s one of the most dedicated senior leaders in the business. You know she believes in the mission, has great values, and reminds us all why we are here. She leads by example.
- Everybody, across the organization, looks to him. Wants to know what he thinks. He’s the rock star.
- She needs to realize just how powerful she is. Given her position of authority, people read into the comments she makes even in passing.
key events for employees? This means recognizing all the vehicles available to you in reaching others: one-to-one meetings, team meetings, all-hands meetings, town halls, skip levels (meetings between a leader and team members who are more than one level below them), video conferencing, e-mail/voicemail communications, or fireside chats. We’ve seen leaders use a broad range of all of these to ensure they are visible throughout the entire organization.

With visibility comes a higher level of responsibility and understanding of the weight and influence of your voice and presence. Employees can pick up on what’s sincere or not. They can sense what sounds like a “talking head” on stage versus believing they are in the presence of an authentic leader that they connect with and trust. Be authentic and work to have fully expanded executive communications to engage others even when you are on a large platform or having to communicate via a company e-mail. The following are some key “connector” communication skills that leaders can use to expand their ability to engage the organization:

- **Framing.** One of the key jobs of a leader is to set the frame through which you hope the organization and employees understand their work. This requires, across communication media, to provide the key context for helping people to align and tie what they are doing at the ground level each day to where the organization is headed. Tie back messages to the strategic imperatives and priorities. Remind people of your appreciation for why they are important to reaching a common vision and goal.

**Build Genuine Rapport and Engagement**

As a leader, you play a critical role in how engaged employees are in the organization. Part of having a healthy ripple effect begins by ensuring you are taking the time to build genuine rapport and engagement so that people feel a connection not only to you but to the mission and vision of what your organization is setting out to achieve.

Consider first all the places you are visible or could be visible. Leaders, especially those with multiple layers within their sphere of influence, cannot possibly be in contact each day with all those who report up into their chain of command. Some executive leaders have told us, especially those in high-growth companies, that they have a hard time keeping up with knowing all the new people who’ve joined their organizations, especially at the most junior levels. This requires a leader to be genuine and intentional about when and where you are seen and how to make contact.

Are you getting out of your office to walk the halls? Are members of your teams spread across buildings or even multiple geographic locations? How are you reaching them? Are you attending new hire lunches or attending

---

**Are you getting out of your office to walk the halls?**

His words and actions are really amplified given his stature and status in the organization. He’s so darn good, has such incredible gravitas, everyone is afraid to make a mistake around him.

For every leader, there is a thin line that exists between being considered “inspiring versus intimidating,” “having grace under fire versus being unapproachable,” or “being for the people versus indecisive.” A leader’s ripple effect ultimately affects your effectiveness as a leader and is something that needs to be managed. To ensure you have a healthy and positive ripple effect, there are three key areas you can enhance:

- Build genuine rapport and engagement
- Be consistent and avoid negative behaviors
- Keep a finger on the pulse of the organization and gather feedback

---

**Build Genuine Rapport and Engagement**

As a leader, you play a critical role in how engaged employees are in the organization. Part of having a healthy ripple effect begins by ensuring you are taking the time to build genuine rapport and engagement so that people feel a connection not only to you but to the mission and vision of what your organization is setting out to achieve.

Consider first all the places you are visible or could be visible. Leaders, especially those with multiple layers within their sphere of influence, cannot possibly be in contact each day with all those who report up into their chain of command. Some executive leaders have told us, especially those in high-growth companies, that they have a hard time keeping up with knowing all the new people who’ve joined their organizations, especially at the most junior levels. This requires a leader to be genuine and intentional about when and where you are seen and how to make contact.

Are you getting out of your office to walk the halls? Are members of your teams spread across buildings or even multiple geographic locations? How are you reaching them? Are you attending new hire lunches or attending
Tie back messages to the strategic imperatives and priorities.

- **Stories.** One of the challenges of many “one-way” communications such as town halls or all-hands meetings is engaging the troops and creating a sense of approachability and connection from a stage. Sharing a relevant story that either drives your point home or gives insight into your values, commitment, or beliefs as a leader is a way to show that even though you are the leader, you are human as well. Even letting people know “what is keeping you up at night” helps to bring focus to what the highest priorities are and through what lens to consider the business.

- **Analogies or metaphors** can also help to make your message stick further. One of our favorite examples came from a chief executive officer of an organization where a key message he cascaded through the organization was that he hoped that teams, including his executive table, behaved more like a soccer team versus a swim team. The image of the soccer team said all that it needed to—his expectations for a new kind of organizational team play, “passing balls” in a more coordinated way toward a shared goal versus the siloed lanes, like a swim team, that were holding the organization back from getting to the next level of growth.

- **Bridging.** Create bridges in your communications using words, language, and phrases that reflect back you have a pulse on what people care about, show that you are listening, and are finding ways to tie back how employees’ day-to-day work links to the bigger picture. Ask follow-up questions during an all-hands meeting or acknowledge what’s been said along the way. Answer questions where concern appears highest.

Even with a seasoned communications repertoire, you have to keep it authentic and show you are “walking the talk.” People in our organizations look to our example and determine if the values you are communicating are ones that you are leading and living by. Consider how you are aligned to your role and organization to speak and communicate with credibility and conviction.

Again, we can’t emphasize enough that our efforts as leaders must be genuine and sincere versus seeming like you are going through the motions or ticking your way down a checklist. One employee of a leader for whom we recently conducted 360-degree feedback shared a story of seeing a leader at a company event work her way methodically around the room to ask the more junior folks how they were doing. The employee shared how disappointed everyone was as they watched the leader spend exactly the same amount of time with each person and ask the same questions as if she had memorized a script and had been trained by HR. What felt like a lack of sincerity and rote exercise created an even more negative impact for this leader in the long run.

**Be Consistent and Avoid Negative Behaviors**

Being insincere in your efforts or demonstrating negative behaviors can really cause a significant and negative ripple effect for a leader. In the *Harvard Business Review* article “How to Play to Your Strengths,” Laura Morgan Roberts and her colleagues share that, “multiple studies have shown that people pay keen attention to negative information. For example, when asked to recall important emotional events, people remember four negative memories to every one positive.”

As you reflect on your own experience as a leader, consider how you “show up” and how you are
Answer questions where concern appears highest.

affecting others. What may feel like a passing reaction for you when under stress leaves an imprint and negative organizational memory that affects how your employees then behave. People create distance and put up their guard in order to avoid feeling the bite or sting of their leader.

- *Not paying attention, not appearing engaged.*
  Given all that is on our plates as leaders and moving at a fast speed, we have to watch out for the temptation of clicking away on our iPads, looking at our cell phones, or turning away when we hear the e-mail ding when sitting in a meeting with those you lead. The impact is doubt and discouragement, sometimes even resentment. The team has finally gotten on your calendar, looking for you to provide your judgment and weigh in, and you appear to be in a rush or not paying attention. It can be especially crushing to someone much more junior, who worked for weeks in anticipation of finally getting exposure with senior management.

- *Tone and body language.* Folks deep into your organization are attuned to the power dynamic that exists within hierarchy in your organization. Everyone has an “authority story.” Those more junior to you or support staff who serve your functional area or line of business may be especially sensitive. Pause and consider the following: What’s the tone you use when speaking to others? When have you, even unintentionally, been dismissive of someone or of their ideas? Used a harsh or condescending tone? Employees burn through a lot of unproductive energy and water cooler talk being fearful of their leaders or wondering if they are being evaluated at every turn. Remember to be their leader, not their scolding or disapproving parent. Studies show that more than 75 percent of our communications impact is nonverbal, so we have to be especially mindful here. Especially to those people who may place a greater emphasis on or have a stronger “authority story.”

- *Shutting down conversation or making it unsafe.*
  Given your knowledge, experience, and speed to action, leaders can unintentionally take up most of the airtime or dominate meetings. Our voice, by the nature of our position, is often the “loudest” in the room. We don’t help others feel safe when we add more volume by taking over the agenda, interrogating when we hear something we don’t like or interrupting the discussion. This means picking our spots with greater mindfulness and placing a greater effort on bringing others along, letting them know how you are getting from A to Z, and encouraging folks to share what they are thinking with you.

Keep a Finger on the Pulse of the Organization and Gather Feedback

A healthy ripple effect ultimately has a resonance and reciprocity between you and the people in your organization. Leaders can help to make things feel like a two-way street by keeping a finger on the pulse, listening, and gathering feedback.

Keeping a finger on the pulse of the organization requires knowing how and when to listen—not only in smaller venues such as one-to-one or team meetings but on a broader scale as well. What’s especially challenging is for leaders to recognize that the more senior you are, the less likely people will tell you directly what they are thinking or feeling for fear of potential consequence or retribution. This means you have to do more of the work to cull this information. Some good ways of staying connected include
Everyone has an “authority story.”

- **Increase your awareness and reflection.** After important meetings, pause and reflect on the impact of your communications and presence in the room. How well did I connect with the group on a personal level? How well did I thank the team? How well did I respond to questions? Did I effectively make the connection between what we are doing and the future? Sometimes, taking some time to be Monday morning quarterback is a good thing.

- **Hold an open door.** Most organizations have “open door policies.” Make it a reality for your team and employees. Encourage open communication, feedback, and willingness for employees to come to you. Help to solve problems, offer guidance, and be clear. Help people know where they stand. Share your point of view. Be someone others can count on for your candor and perspective and someone they can be open with.

- **Pay attention to employee engagement and surveys.** If your organization conducts employee engagements and surveys, pay attention to them. These are formal touch points that have been put in place to give people in the organization a chance to have “voice” in an anonymous, safer way. Look for trends or patterns. Read the comments. Conduct analysis on it. Involve your entire lieutenant table in reviewing the results and hold them accountable for the ripple effect and waves they are creating in their areas.

- **Gather 360-degree feedback on yourself.** The most direct way to get information on yourself and your ripple effect is to have this exercise conducted. Make sure it’s one that goes beyond your competencies and skills but really asks people about your impact. What do your colleagues up, sideways, and down in the organization appreciate about you? What are your greatest strengths? What are the significant contributions you’ve made? Given what the business has to accomplish, what are one or two ways you could maintain or increase your effectiveness? How would people describe your presence in the organization and how you lead?

Gathering a well-rounded, holistic view of your leadership and its impact can be valuable information for confirming your own self-perception and understanding where you are dead-on or have a blind spot to consider. We don’t believe leaders should be reactive to this kind of information but see it as additional data to take into consideration when considering what’s ahead for you, the impact you hope to make, and what the business needs from you over the long term.

### Conclusion: Managing Your Ripple Effect

It can be both exciting and daunting to imagine that we could have this kind of impact on others and the culture of our organizations. Because a leader’s ripple effect is real and has implications, building an authentic, connected presence to others becomes increasingly important the more senior we become. For years, we’ve been passionate to help others build what we call a Signature Voice—a presence that is authentic, uniquely your own like a signature but leaves a positive, significant contribution and makes its mark. Ripple effect affects the legacy we leave. Loyalty and followership are unfortunately two things we can’t demand or set as an expectation from those who work with us. Followership is hard earned. Manage your ripple effect by building rapport, creating genuine engagement, being consistent and respectful in how we lead and ultimately in being open to what others have to say about the impact of our leadership.
Amy Jen Su and Muriel Maignan Wilkins are executive coaches and leadership development consultants who have served senior clients in a variety of industries including biotechnology, financial services, management consulting, private equity, and nonprofits. Together, they are coauthors of Own the Room: Discover Your Signature Voice to Master Your Leadership Presence (Harvard Business Review Press, 2013) and cofounders and managing partners of Isis Associates, a boutique leadership coaching and consulting firm, with offices in Washington, DC, and Boston. They have worked with thousands of high-potential and senior leaders through their Signature Voice™ training and coaching programs. They are cocontributors to a Harvard Business Review blog.