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Leadership communication in times of crisis

Chris Murray talks with Daan Stam

What happens when your new research yields the opposite of what your previous research had predicted? This happened to Daan Stam, associate professor of innovation management at Rotterdam School of Management, when he and his colleagues expanded their previous research on communication and personal motivations to include communication in times of crises.

According to Stam, adding the crisis factor unexpectedly disrupted the proven theory on communication types that he had earlier developed. And it would take some detective work to understand why.

As Stam explains in a recent interview, the original research used motivational theories in the field of social psychology to explain why people preferred and responded better to certain types of communication. The building block of this research was the concept of self-regulation. People regulate themselves – controlling their thoughts, their emotions, and their behaviours – through their choice of what psychologists call approach systems and avoidance systems, Stam says. Approach systems involve moving toward a goal, and avoidance systems involve running away.

Based on goal-based approach theories, Stam and his colleagues identified two types of communication: *promotion-focused* communication and *prevention-focused* communication. As Stam explains, 'These are approach systems where you set a goal and you move towards that goal but you do so in really significantly different ways.'

Promotion-oriented communication, he says, is about aspiration and ambition, while prevention-focused communication is about responsibility and safety. In other words, promotion-focused communication encourages people to strive toward a positive ideal; in contrast, prevention-oriented communication reassures people by telling them how to avoid the negative

Personal preferences

According to Stam, most people will tend to prefer one or the other. 'If you're promotion-oriented,' he says, 'you set the type of goal that's oriented on growth. You really want to reach this goal because it will be great if you do so. So you're eager, you're enthusiastic, you're not afraid to take risks.'

Prevention-oriented people have completely different motivations, says Stam. When you're prevention-oriented, he says, 'there is something that you go to, but the real driver is something else that you want to avoid. You don't take risks because you don't want to make mistakes. You're vigilant all the time.' Prevention-oriented people, he says, 'have safety goals: things you should reach because other people think they are good for you.'

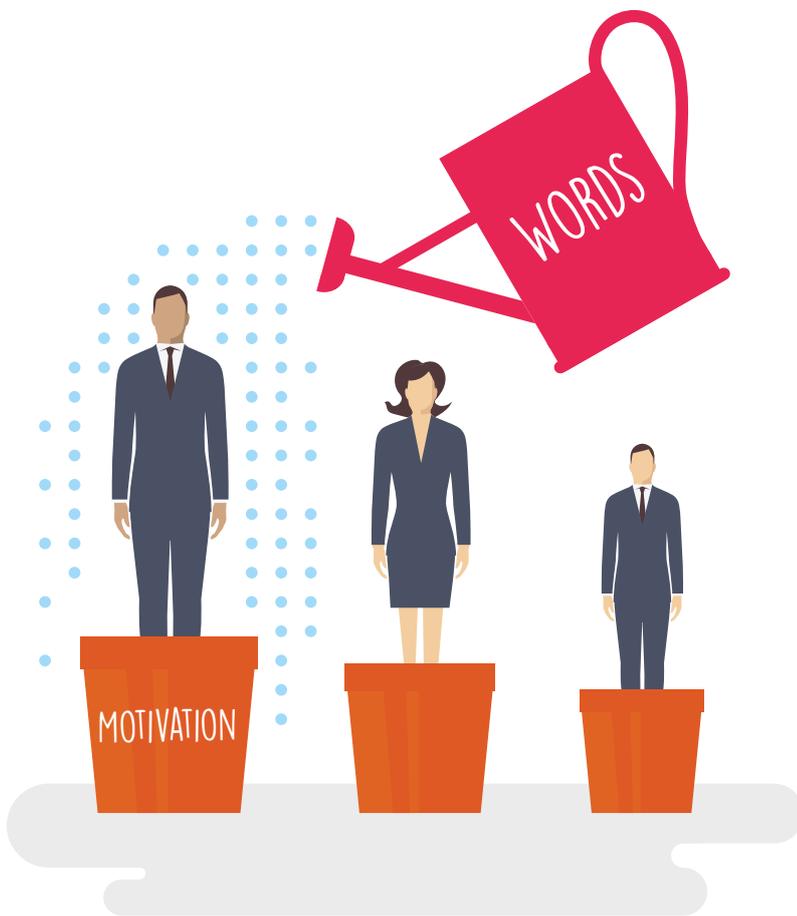
While some people are naturally inclined to be promotion-oriented others are inclined to be prevention-oriented, Stam says, and this inclination can be altered somewhat by the environment. For example, a company that rewards risk-taking may act as a trigger, pushing people to be more promotion-oriented. On the other hand, a company that punishes risk-taking or mistakes will push people to be more prevention-oriented.

Regulatory fit

When the environment matches someone's preferred orientation, there is what psychologists call a *regulatory fit*. Thus, for example, there would be a regulatory fit between a corporate culture that encourages promotion orientation and employees who have a tendency for promotion.

In his earlier research, Stam and his colleagues applied the regulatory focus concept to communication, and found that the regulatory fit rule held firm. 'We triggered in the environment a certain regulatory focus in people and we showed them both types of communication,' Stam explains. 'We found that when people were more promotion-oriented they liked promotion-oriented communication. When they were prevention-oriented, they liked prevention-oriented communication.'

According to Stam, the purpose of the latest study, published this year in the *Journal of Management*, was to apply the previous research about regulatory fit and communication to crises. 'We started out just wanting to do something practical, something that



happens a lot,' he says. 'How to overcome crises is a big topic. We thought maybe the things we found earlier about communication and regulatory fit could be applied here.'

Crisis, Stam says, would seem to favour a prevention-orientated regulatory focus. 'Prevention focus is related to emotional states such as anxiety or fear. In a crisis, people will start feeling these emotions and start becoming more prevention-oriented. That was the idea.'

The misfit surprise

Times of crises tended to make people more prevention-orientated, Stam says. Then came the surprise. Rather than responding favourably to prevention-oriented communication, people during times of crises responded better to promotion-oriented communication.

'Most people would assume that since crisis is all about avoidance and it's all about fear, you probably get a better response by talking about safety,' Stam says. 'That's the inclination. Then we looked at the data and the data showed something different. You get a better response by talking about hope and talking about ideals.' In other words, the new research revealed that for some mysterious reason, regulatory *misfit* worked best in crisis communication.

To discover the reason for this unexpected result, Stam and his colleagues revisited all of the earlier studies on regulatory fit. They found a major clue in studies on regulatory fit applied to relationships. As Stam explains, these studies showed that the impact of regulatory fit is not necessarily *positive*. Instead, the impact of regulatory fit is

to increase the *intensity* of any emotion – and if that emotion is negative, regulatory fit only increases the negativity.

For example, he says, two promotion-oriented people who like each other are going to like each other even more because they share the same regulatory focus. However, if two promotion-oriented people dislike each other, their shared regulatory focus will only serve to intensify this dislike. The same dynamics apply to two people who share a prevention-oriented preference.

Enough with the negative

Applying the role of intensity in regulatory focus to crisis communication helps explain why regulatory misfit works better. In times of crisis, Stam says, people are plunged into prevention-oriented emotions, such as the desire to escape danger and find safety. Prevention-oriented communication only serves to focus more attention on the danger and the need for safety – in other words, intensifying the negative emotions. As Stam explains, 'If you talk about safety and security – and providing people with help from the disaster – you just make the point again and again that there's a crisis. It's continuously there and that makes people unhappy.'

On the other hand, Stam says, promotion-oriented communication offers some light in the darkness by emphasising hope and resolution. Everything is not dire, the promotion-focused communication will emphasise. We will emerge from this situation.

'It's also about seeing the bigger picture,' Stam notes. 'Prevention ori- ▶

entation leads people to focus on details and local issues. This small picture emphasises the misery. Promotion focuses people on the abstract, the bigger picture. If you want to get them out of it, you give them the big picture.'

people to act, which led them to support and endorse the speaker.

The first study looked at the inauguration of US presidents, says Stam. Each president's inauguration address was measured for promotion-

did not have any effect on either greatness or re-election.

A second laboratory experiment, Stam says, specifically measured the motivation level of participants to perform a task in response to a leader's appeal. In the crisis condition, the leader's appeal was more motivating when it was more promotion-oriented.

Finally, a third laboratory experiment – using scenarios involving promotion- and prevention-oriented candidates for a CEO position – established the causal link from promotion-oriented communication to higher levels of motivation to endorsement.

For Stam, the impact of words on motivation is one of the reasons he was drawn to study communication. 'We can directly turn people's motivation into words,' he says. 'So what if we use those words to motivate people?'

It's a lesson that great US presidents seem to have learned. ■

"If you're promotion-oriented, you set the type of goal that's oriented on growth. You really want to reach this goal because it will be great if you do so." Daan Stam

Leadership endorsement

To test whether promotion-oriented crisis communication worked better in times of crisis, Stam and his colleagues compared communication types and leadership endorsement. 'If people feel really negative and then someone tells them a story and that story just continues to say, "safety, watch out, fear", they'll become more negative and feel more insecure,' Stam explains. 'They will then probably blame the message for this increased insecurity, and subsequently the person who gave the message.'

As presented in the *Journal of Management* article, Stam conducted three studies that analysed this link between the type of communication that leaders offered and the ultimate endorsement of those leaders. The studies also showed, he says, that motivation was a key mediator: the promotion-oriented speech motivated

or prevention-orientation based on the number of promotion-oriented or prevention-oriented words it contained. Two proxies for leadership endorsement were used, he says. One was "presidential greatness", as measured by respected polls of historians rating the greatness of US presidents. Another was whether the president was re-elected. The level of crisis was based on inflation and economic growth numbers at the time of the inauguration.

The results confirmed his thesis, Stam says. US presidents holding office in times of crisis who used more promotion-oriented words in their inaugural address were more likely to be later considered "great" presidents, and were more likely to be re-elected – in other words, were more likely to be endorsed. One interesting result of this study is that use of prevention-oriented words in inauguration speeches

Motivation in Words: Promotion- and Prevention-Oriented Leader Communication in Times of Crisis by Daan Stam, Daan van Knippenberg, Barbara Wisse and Anne Nederveen Pieterse was published in the *Journal of Management* in January 2017. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1177/0149206316654543>

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