

Communicating CEOs

CEOs may do more than communicate, but almost everything they do will be driven or influenced by [communication processes](#) inside and outside the organization.

I see a PR firm has done a survey on the amount of time Canadian CEOs spend on communication. According to the survey, CEOs spend almost half of their time on communication.

I think we're supposed to be impressed that CEOs spend that much time on communication. But, quite frankly, what else does a CEO do? And, if you consider both direct and indirect communication, wouldn't that be more like 90%?

So, what do CEOs do, and how much of that involves communication of one kind or another?

Well, they make decisions. But before they make them, good CEOs get information from specialists in their organization. They also may check other options by reading newspapers and magazines, attending conferences, and talking to their peers. All of which involve communication.

For example, let's say a CEO must decide whether or not to launch an important new product line. Before she makes that decision, our CEO will have had discussions with, and reports from, senior members of the sales department. She will also consider the country's economic outlook in the coming months and years, talk to others about what competitors might do, and review the financial implications with the VP of corporate finance.

It's all about gathering, distilling, and transmitting information: what we call communication.

Turning to another CEO function, what about envisioning a new future for the organization and developing a strategy based on it? Again, communication can't be taken out of the mix.

After all, you can't just pick a vision out of the air. It's the outcome of reflective thinking combined with information, knowledge, and insight. All of which come from communicating.

And, there's often a kaleidoscope effect before a vision emerges. All sorts of information tumbles around in the mind, over and over, like clothes in a dryer, until eventually a new and promising pattern reveals itself.

For example, suppose a Vice President of Human Resources has just been promoted to Chief Executive Officer, and the board made it clear it expects him to put his own, unique stamp on the company.

He might retire to his office and spend a lot of time inside trying to think of a new direction. But, it's far more likely he'll reach out, rather than withdraw. He'll talk to staff on the front lines as well as managers. He'll read everything relevant he can find in books and magazines.

As that information pours into his mind -- as the communication process enriches his imagination and knowledge -- he'll start to envision possibilities. Some will be more promising than others, and he'll talk about them with others in the organization. Eventually, some sort of consensus will likely emerge about the most promising vision.

Those are just a couple of examples from the work of CEOs, but you can see why I'm skeptical about the 50% figure: There's not much about a CEO's job that does not involve communication of some kind.

In summary, CEOs may do more than communicate, but almost everything they do will be driven or influenced by communication processes inside and outside the organization.