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Own Your Words to Gain Authority

Managers undermine their credibility when they speak for others too frequently.

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COMMUNICATION

Own Your Words to Gain Authority

Managers undermine their credibility when they speak for others too frequently.

By David Hollis and Alex Wright

How often do you find yourself voicing someone else's ideas, thoughts, or demands at work? Whether you are conveying your CEO's wishes to a colleague or explaining to your team that "sales needs an update," speaking for others — what researchers call *managerial ventriloquism* — is a common practice in organizations. It can be valuable, and even essential, to fulfilling the role of a manager. But when done badly, it can harm managers' credibility, damage company culture, and hurt their organizations' reputation and profits.

The practice of invoking distant interests by making statements like "The CEO needs this by the close of play" or "The board needs answers immediately" is commonplace and natural. But when managers rely on this approach to excess, it is usually an indicator of one of two issues in the organization: Either managers possess too little autonomy and are compelled to speak the words of others (typically, the organization's leaders), or, as is the case in most organizations, the habit of ventriloquism has become so ingrained that managers act as others' mouthpieces without giving the practice much thought. So by routinely saying "The CEO needs ...," for instance, a manager can create the perception, both in their own mind and among colleagues, that they lack authority. Over time, speaking for others in this way engenders a managerial culture where responsibility is forever being passed on to someone else, with no one willing to take ownership of decisions.

The good news is that paying attention to these behaviors and modifying them can have big payoffs. Identifying when and why managers unnecessarily take on the messenger role helps them realize that they often have more autonomy than they and their colleagues assumed. Minor adjustments in word choice allow managers to demonstrate that they have autonomy — and deserve more of it. Further, moderating how often they speak for others and paying attention to what they say in this role boosts managers' credibility and effectiveness and fosters a healthy corporate culture where responsibility is clearly assigned and claimed.

Sergio Ingravalle / Ikon Images

These observations are based on our research, which includes four ethnographic studies in Financial Times Global 500 businesses and public-sector organizations. We immersed ourselves in the everyday workings of the organizations and recorded and transcribed conversations and presentations made by leaders and managers in a variety of workplace settings to identify and study managerial ventriloquism in action. We also drew on our own consultancy and academic experiences helping managers and students develop alternative scenarios of managerial ventriloquism and test and implement them in the workplace.

Let's look more closely at how managers position themselves and others in their talk, why they do so, and what effects it has on them and others.

Managerial Ventriloquism in Action

Consider the following statement made by Lucy, the U.K. CEO of a global retailer, in which she invokes Meryl, the U.S.-based founder and global CEO, while addressing a team of sales managers at a company meeting: "I've just had a call with New York to kick off the new fiscal initiatives. Meryl says, 'I want to do bigger, better, fewer.'"

Lucy's statement might seem unremarkable — a simple case of a leader relaying information. But we can see how Lucy is communicating additional subtext. She is not the one stating what the company's sales initiative will be but, rather, is conveying what "Meryl says," explicitly positioning the global CEO as the real speaker. Referring to "New York" also signals power and business acumen, lending outside authority to the statement.

Leaders and managers have many

motives for communicating in this way. Lucy, the U.K. CEO, explained to us that invoking the global CEO bolstered her credibility. The team puts "that little bit more trust in you because you're talking directly from the creator of the brand," she contended.

However, doing this also assigns responsibility for the decision to Meryl. Should the "bigger, better, fewer" strategic initiative succeed or fail, Lucy has communicated it to her team in such a way that responsibility for the decision will be viewed as resting firmly with Meryl. Shifting responsibility in this manner holds the potential to damage a manager's authority, which was confirmed in our interviews with others in the organization and with external partners.

How might Lucy have communicated her discussion with Meryl differently to maintain her own credibility and authority with her team? She might have said, "Meryl says, 'I want to do bigger, better, fewer,' but you're telling me about the pressures that your teams are facing, so I've decided that we will focus on doing fewer initiatives first."

With "I've decided," Lucy is signaling to her team that she is asserting her authorial voice. She does so after speaking for Meryl and the U.K. teams, who have stated what the company's global initiatives will be and what the national pressures currently are, respectively. Adopting this role is beneficial in this instance because it allows Lucy to strike a middle ground between two stakeholder groups: She is relaying the head office's directive but adapting it to account for the team's context and challenges.

There are inevitably times, however, when managers will have little or no say in shaping organizational decisions; in such cases, they should be as transparent as possible about their positioning. For example, Lucy might have said, "Meryl says, 'I want to do bigger, better, fewer.' I understand the pressures we're under, but I want you to know that these are global initiatives that we all have to work toward."

By qualifying the original statement with "I understand the pressures we're under," Lucy acknowledges that she has no choice but to carry forth her boss's message. We all take on such roles, at least some of the time, and admitting this can earn a manager respect from peers for their honesty and openness.

Lucy's word choice also carries a less obvious implication: "We're" signals to the team that Lucy is part of the team rather than merely Meryl's messenger. However, managers should use the pronoun "we" with care, as those to whom it is directed often interpret it not as representing an agreed-upon collective view but as the manager shifting their decision-making responsibilities to an absent and ambiguous other (such as in "We cannot pay bonuses this year").

Speaking for others can also help managers advocate to senior leaders on behalf of their teams. For example, a sales manager in a meeting with other senior-level executives might say, "Obviously, I love strategy's upsell messaging; however, the team's telling me there's not enough stock to sell." Here, they are acknowledging the strategy department's authority but playing it off against their team's on-the-ground experience. In doing so, the senior manager is skillfully advocating for their team while also taking care not to denigrate the strategy department.

Good salespeople often employ these tactics. Consider Daniel, a salesman, who tells his client, "CorpCom insists that existing clients should always receive a 10-point demo, but I'm aware that you're a legacy client, so I'll go bespoke." He begins as though he is being made to speak by a higher authority, CorpCom, but saying "I'm aware that" creates the impression that he possesses some sort of inside knowledge. This leads him to say, on his own authority, that the customer deserves special treatment.

Use Ventriloquism Thoughtfully and Intentionally

As we've discussed, the practice of speaking for others is a common one — but it should not be an unconscious one. Rather, managers can wield this communication technique more skillfully by increasing their own awareness of when they and others are using it. Taking inventory of the various entities for whom they speak and on which they confer authority or credibility at the possible expense of their own might result in a surprisingly long list. Besides speaking for the C-suite, head office, or others higher up in the ranks, managers also speak for technologies ("Our algorithm states ..."), documents ("The mission statement proposes ..."), business models ("Agile management requires ..."), business environments ("The market is demanding ..."), company traditions ("The CorpCom way is ..."), and so on. Pay attention to how often colleagues speak for others; being on the receiving end of these communications is an opportunity to see how they can enhance, detract from, or make little difference to colleagues' authority or credibility.

Minor adjustments in word choice allow managers to demonstrate their autonomy.

Managers need to not only have an awareness of ventriloquism but develop the skills to avoid adopting the role of a spokesperson too frequently and unnecessarily in order to establish and maintain their credibility with colleagues, clients, and other partners. We suggest three practices to develop this skill set:

1. Question whether your own ventriloquizing is necessary or has become a habit. For example, if you ventriloquize "The head office needs ...," is this *its* requirement or *your* tactic for getting the team to do something by way of attaching additional weight to your statement? Overusing the approach in the latter case will eventually weaken your credibility. Consider whether balancing out ventriloquizations with your own view (such as "I know this is a priority for the head office,

but ...") is possible. If it is, then counterbalancing will help you establish credibility with your colleagues and engender better working relations.

2. Know your audience. Self-check when speaking for others to senior colleagues. The temptation to assign agency and authority to others can become a habit and create the impression that you're a manager who avoids making decisions. If you feel you are credible, there's no need to rely on the extra weight another voice might carry. Also, you'll be demonstrating original thought and the desire to assume responsibility. In particular, avoid acting as a spokesperson when addressing junior colleagues. If done too much, it can result in them doubting your authority and weaken your own position.

3. Identify those occasions when you most regularly ventriloquize. For example, do you tend to do so during important meetings, for impact? Or are your ventriloquizing acts triggered by pressure such as approaching deadlines? Ventriloquizing intelligently rather than reactively makes a big difference in how others perceive you.

When managers better understand who is *really* speaking and consciously exercise their agency in choosing how to communicate decisions and information, they can enhance their credibility and cultivate a sense of responsibility and ownership among their team members, which improves effectiveness across the organization. Managerial ventriloquism is commonplace: We are all, at various times, figures being made to speak the words of others. Rather than ignoring this phenomenon and its effects, managers should develop their skills in its art and practice them to ensure that their preferred outcomes are achieved. ■

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