

SAMPLE CHAPTER

LEADING INTO THE FUTURE

**GUIDED BY
SCIENCE FICTION LEADERSHIP STORIES**



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4

COMMUNICATION

“Strategic communication is one of the most powerful weapons in your arsenal for building a High Performance Culture.”

Mark Miller, *Culture Rules*

“Communication combined with recognition of strategically important behaviors takes your vision and values off the wall and puts them into the hearts and minds of your people, which is exactly the place you want your vision and values to be.”

Adrian Gostick, *The Carrot Principle*

4.1. The Story–Optimized To Fail

A Flawless System

The Celaris-11 space station hummed with quiet efficiency, its sleek corridors bathed in the soft blue glow of interface panels. Unlike most stations of its size, Celaris-11 had no unnecessary noise, no hurried footsteps, no overlapping conversations.

MindCom, the station’s hyper-intelligent communication AI, ensured that every crew member received the exact information they needed, at the precise moment they needed it, in the format they best understood. Every shift change, every maintenance update, every piece of social context was delivered seamlessly. There were no misunderstandings, no unnecessary discussions, no inefficiencies. And that was exactly how Commander Khoros had envisioned it.

The Commander stood on the observation deck, overlooking the station with satisfaction. Celaris-11 had not always run like this. When he arrived seven months ago to take over the role of Station Commander, he had observed disorder with pointless meetings, inefficient decision-making, and crew members wasting time with redundant discussions. He had optimized the station’s communication system MindCom and streamlined everything. For him as Tavarek, it was part of his species’ nature to strive for efficiency. He did not understand why humans were so inefficient most of the time. It was so much better now, as every second had purpose and every action was executed with precision. His station ran exactly as it should.

The commander’s personal interface blinked softly in his peripheral vision. A voice, perfectly tuned to his preferred tone and cadence, spoke in his mind. This was MindCom: “Commander Khoros, begin transit to Engineering to maintain optimal scheduling. Estimated arrival at 9:45 a.m. for upgrade verification to ensure minimal operational disruption.”

Khoros acknowledged the instruction with a slight tilt of his head. His movements were effortless, synchronized with the station’s flow. Every corridor clearance, every elevator timing, every intersection was calculated to minimize inefficiencies. He would arrive at precisely the right moment to complete his task.

The Medical Officer Dr. Midori Nakamura was reviewing a research proposal in her quarters when her MindCom interface gently pulsed and she heard its voice in her head.

“Dr. Nakamura, your research partner, Rilo Sevar, has completed the preliminary structural analysis. Your report is due next. Planned completion is 2:30 p.m.”

Perfect and just in time. There was no need to call him and no need for a meeting to sync up. MindCom had already tailored his notes to her preferred format and provided them exactly when she needed them. She tapped her interface to acknowledge.

Somewhere across the station, Lead Systems Engineer Rilo Sevar received her update and continued his work. They had not spoken once throughout the project, but the work was getting done faster than ever before. No back-and-forth. No confusion. Just seamless collaboration.

Two engineers, Ensign Daelor and Technician Miren, crossed paths in the main corridor. As soon as they were within five meters of each other, MindCom automatically provided an emotional and professional status update directly to their neural interfaces.

MindCom’s update to Daelor:

Technician Miren: Mood—Focused. Productivity—92%. Currently engaged in scheduled maintenance. No interruptions recommended.

MindCom’s update to Miren:

Ensign Daelor: Mood—Neutral. Productivity—Slightly below optimal due to sleep quality. Currently en route to Engineering. Minor social engagement suggested.

As Miren passed Ensign Daelor, he gave a small nod as recommended by MindCom. She nodded in return. No words, just precisely the right amount of social interaction. As they continued in opposite directions, neither of them thought about it twice.

In the cafeteria, crew members sat at separate tables, eating in comfortable silence. MindCom’s nutritional optimization protocol

calculated each person's ideal meal composition, the exact time their body needed nourishment, and the correct ambient lighting and sound settings to maximize cognitive function.

Commander Khoros entered the room, watching his crew with approval. He heard MindCom in his mind: "Your hydration levels are slightly below target. Recommend consuming 250ml of water."

As told, Khoros picked up a glass of water from the water dispenser, which had been filled with the exact recommended amount and drank it.

Across the cafeteria, Dr. Nakamura glanced up from her tray, observing the room. No noise. No distractions. No inefficiencies. She knew exactly how everyone was doing. When looking at a person for a certain time MindCom placed relevant information into her mind. She finished her meal and stood to leave, nodding at Commander Khoros as she passed.

The Cracks Appear

Dr. Midori Nakamura sat alone in the observation lounge, staring out at the vastness of space. The room was peaceful and quiet. MindCom ensured that everything ran according to personal preference. But for the first time, she realized just how silent it was. More than silent, maybe depressing. There was a time when this very lounge had been filled with vivid conversations, small talk over coffee, debates over mission objectives and occasional heated arguments that ended in laughter. Those moments had seemed unimportant then, but now she struggled to remember the last time she had actually spoken to someone besides the absolute essential, let alone laughed about something. She felt a strange feeling of tightness in her chest.

Her personal interface pulsed with a notification. MindCom had detected a change in her neural activity and provided an explanation before she could even process the feeling herself.

"Low engagement level detected. Neural activity suggests mild restlessness. Recommended response: Increase focus tasks or physical movement."

She dismissed the message. It was an answer, but it wasn't the right one. Instead, she opened a manual message tab and hesitated before

typing a simple note. She hovered over the send button. What was the point? What answer would she expect? While she was still thinking, MindCom warned her that the message was not necessary and would cause inefficiencies. Without further ruminating, she hit "Send."

Lead Systems Engineer Rilo Sevar watched task updates shift across the screen of his console. His daily workflow was straightforward. Every piece of information was delivered without delay. There were no gaps in communication, no unnecessary check-ins, and no waiting for people to get back to him. His work had never been more efficient.

A notification blinked in his interface. It was a non-priority message. That was unusual.

Sender: Dr. Midori Nakamura

Subject: Just Checking In

Message: "Hey... do you ever feel like we don't talk anymore?"

Rilo frowned. His MindCom overlay immediately provided a list of possible responses based on previous interactions and efficiency metrics but recommended no response. He could select between:

"No need, all is running optimally." or

"I receive all necessary updates through MindCom." or

"Our project is on track. No issues to report."

They were all technically correct. And yet, none of them felt right. He hesitated, fingers hovering over the reply field. Then he closed the message. What would he even say?

Commander Khoros stood at the center of the operations deck, reviewing the station's efficiency metrics with satisfaction. Every sector was operating within optimal parameters. It had taken him months to perfect Celaris-11, to refine it into the streamlined, distraction-free environment his people deserved. When he had arrived, he had witnessed the chaos of inefficiency. Meetings that wasted time, redundant conversations, unnecessary human friction. He had fixed it. Now, everything functioned as it should. The crew was healthy, productive and aligned.

A soft notification pulsed in his interface. MindCom alerted him about a minor anomaly: "Oxygen Level Discrepancy in Sector 7. Cause: Unspecified System Malfunction. Countermeasures initiated."

Khoros barely glanced at it before dismissing the alert. MindCom was already handling it. It was designed to correct inefficiencies before they became problems. Everything was in order.

The Cost of Perfection

One hour later, the anomaly had escalated. The oxygen discrepancy in Sector 7 had not been resolved. MindCom had attempted to reroute airflows according to its optimization models, but now the issue had spread beyond its original containment. Carbon dioxide levels were rising. MindCom adjusted again. More rerouting. More optimization. But the problem wasn't going away. While everyone was following the orders MindCom gave out, no one knew what was going on.

Dr. Midori Nakamura was in her office reviewing project data when MindCom informed her about an irregularity: "Elevated rates of medical requests detected in the last two hours. Investigation ongoing to detect root cause and countermeasures." Although MindCom was handling these kinds of issues autonomously, she pulled up the data on her interface to take a look herself. Multiple crew members had experienced reduced oxygen saturation. They were all located in Section 7 of the station. That wasn't normal.

She pressed her interface to send a priority alert to Engineering. MindCom interfered: "Issue detected. Adjustments in progress. No crew intervention required."

She hesitated. MindCom was handling the issue. She would just cause inefficiencies by interfering manually. She continued reviewing the project data like she did before the interruption. But she could not concentrate anymore. After ten minutes of useless staring at the data while worrying about the issue, she decided to quickly check in without causing too much interference. She reviewed whether any new health reports had come in. There had, two more people with low oxygen

saturation, now in Section 8. It was spreading. She asked MindCom for an update.

“Root cause identified. Engineering tasks in progress to resolve the issue.” She heard the answer in her mind.

This took too long for such an important issue. She typed the second message to Rilo Sevar today. He had ignored her first one. “Rilo, did your team already fix the oxygen issue?” This time the response came immediately: “Which issue? There was just a recalibration.”

“Ask MindCom,” she quickly responded. It took a few minutes until his next answer arrived: “All under control according to MindCom.” She checked the health data again. More people. MindCom still reported the issue as under control. But why, then, did it feel and look like it wasn’t?

For a last moment, she hesitated. She had trusted MindCom for months. Why did she question it now? But then she looked again at the names on the health reports. Crew members she once knew but hadn’t spoken to in months.

Dr. Nakamura sent a manual priority alert to Engineering with a direct manual override: “Oxygen saturation issue in Sector 7 and adjacent. Need manual confirmation of system diagnostics.”

For the first time in months, she had to wait for a response...

(Continues in *Leading into the Future*)

4.2. From Story To Practice

On the surface, communication on Celaris-11 looked flawless. Every crew member received precisely the right information at the right time without noise, confusion, or inefficiencies. But when the crisis hit, it became clear that something vital was missing.

The failure on Celaris-11 was not caused by a lack of communication directly as crew members received information precisely and efficiently. The deeper issue was that MindCom had been given decision-making power through its crisis management module. It may seem like a separate problem at first glance, but it is closely tied to communication. With information being shared only on a limited “need-to-know” basis, no

individual beyond MindCom had the full context and overview to make informed decisions. When communication narrows to pure efficiency, situational awareness shrinks, and it becomes almost inevitable that decision-making is delegated to the instance that holds the most information. The breakdown of broader communication formed the foundation for centralized, unchallenged decision-making and ultimately for failure.

Communication serves more than a single purpose. It is also building trust and relationships. It is how people align, ask questions, raise concerns, and feel seen and supported. When removing this human layer, you may still have data, but you no longer have a team. As we saw in the story, people felt isolated. There was no connection, no laughter, and no sense of belonging. We should keep this in mind as we move further into AI-supported management.

Communication also creates space for shared thinking and enables new ideas. When people talk, they challenge assumptions, spot risks, raise concerns, and co-create solutions. Sometimes solutions that no AI could have imagined.

On Celaris-11, the crew followed AI instructions perfectly, but they did not question, collaborate, or think beyond their roles because the system did not make space for it. And when things started going wrong, there was no shared understanding or trust to draw from, only isolated tasks and quiet compliance.

In the end, it was not a more advanced algorithm that saved them, but the return of human communication: messy, imperfect, and necessary. Conversations brought people together again. They reconnected, questioned, challenged, and solved.

The story shows that communication is not just for data sharing, it is also the foundation of trust, the trigger for collaboration, and the spark for creativity.

However, I do not want to diminish the huge potential in using AI for improved communication sharing, alignment, and coordination. But I want to point out that while utilizing the advantages of AI, we should not sacrifice the other aspects of communication that are so important to us.

4.3. What We Know From Literature

Communication is at the heart of leadership, and while previous and later chapters touch on different aspects of it, this chapter focuses exclusively on communication as a leadership tool. Whether it is aligning teams, building trust, enabling empowerment, or resolving conflicts, communication is what makes leadership effective.

We will review research and insights from experts who all highlight how great leaders and organizations prioritize communication to create strong, high-performing teams.

Communication to Transmit Information

Patrick Lencioni states in *The Advantage* that most organizations dramatically undercommunicate key messages. Leaders assume that because they have said something once, the message has been received. In reality, employees need to hear the same message multiple times, through multiple channels, e.g. meetings, written messages, one-on-ones, informal conversations. Transparency and clarity can only be achieved through communication and overcommunication.

Communication to Enable Empowerment and High Performance

In *Team of Teams*, General Stanley McChrystal argues that traditional, hierarchical communication structures fail in today's fast-moving and complex environments. During his leadership of U.S. Special Operations Forces in Iraq, McChrystal realized that transparency creates trust. He noticed that teams perform best when information is freely shared, allowing all members to operate with full context. In unpredictable environments, organizations need real-time communication loops to enable decentralized quick decision making. Teams need to be interconnected across teams to remove barriers to communication. McChrystal implemented daily, open-access briefings where even junior officers had full access to strategic discussions, eliminating information asymmetry and enabling rapid, coordinated action.

Organizations today, whether in business or military settings, must recognize that clear and transparent communication is a necessity for high-performing teams.

(More references in [Leading into the Future](#))

4.4. The Reality Today

In today's organizational landscape, effective communication is often undervalued, leading to significant challenges in team dynamics and overall performance. But when communication falters, other factors such as alignment, morale, creativity, and trust begin to suffer as well.

An engagement survey found that:¹

- 38% of employees feel that there is insufficient communication from senior leadership,
- 35% feel insufficiently informed about matters that affect them, and
- 34% believe that leadership does not communicate a clear vision of the future.

And as remote and hybrid work become more common, communication is even increasing in complexity. According to Gallup, 48% of organizations see decreased workplace communication as the main drawback for hybrid work.²

Lack of Information

One of the most common and costly communication failures in organizations is a lack of information sharing. A typical example is when two people unknowingly work on the same task. This likely happens more often than we realize. Whether it is noticed or not, it results in duplicated effort and reduced productivity. When it is noticed, it can be deeply frustrating because the work of both individuals suddenly feels meaningless.

¹ People Element, *Engagement Trends Annual Report 2023*, People Element, 2023.

² Gallup, “6 Workplace Trends Leaders Should Watch in 2024”, Gallup, 2023.

Another frequent issue arises when someone working on a project is not given access to critical or even just helpful information that already exists elsewhere in the organization or sometimes even within the same team. This information could have made their work faster, easier or more aligned with current expectations. For example, imagine investing weeks into a scenario analysis, only to be told during the presentation that one scenario is not viable because of a known stakeholder objection. Not only does this waste time and resources, but it also demoralizes the person who performed the work.

What makes these situations especially challenging is that we often only discover such overlaps and gaps by accident. Most likely, the majority go completely unnoticed. As a result, this represents a potentially massive but invisible drain on productivity.

Ineffective Team Meetings

Team meetings are one of the most important venues for communication. They should be the place where information flows openly:

- Who is working on what.
- Who needs support.
- What obstacles are emerging.
- Which decisions
- need to be made.

Unfortunately, regular team meetings with a clear agenda, a space for issues, and a focus on alignment are still not standard practice in all organizations.

When having team meetings, it is also important to ensure that all direct reports are included in these meetings. When I joined a new organization, my manager, acting with good intentions, chose not to include me in the regular team meetings. He wanted to give me time to onboard properly, and since my scope differed from that of my colleagues, he thought it made sense to keep me separate from other project-related discussions and KPI reviews. But the result was the opposite of what he intended. I had no insight into what was happening outside of my own team and no opportunity to build relationships with my

peers. It took six months before I finally was included and only then began to feel truly integrated.

I made a similar mistake myself when leading a new team. In the beginning, I saw my team as two separate groups with distinct responsibilities. For a while, I kept their meetings and communication separate. Only when I brought them together into the same meeting, sharing the same information and working from the same goals, did they begin to function as a true team.

Effective team alignment and communication do not happen by accident. It takes structure, consistency, and the deliberate inclusion of everyone who needs to be part of the conversation.

(More examples in [Leading into the Future](#))

4.5. Bridging The Gap

Improving communication starts by showing up with presence, clarity, and a willingness to truly connect. It is about being intentional not only in what we say, but in how we say it, who we say it to, and how much space we leave for others to speak as well.

In the last section, we looked at what goes wrong when communication lacks with missed information, disengaged meetings, and well-intended messages that never land. In this section we explore how to bridge the communication gap. It begins with a few powerful but often overlooked leadership habits.

Tailor the Message to the Audience

The goal of communication is not just to send a message, but also for this message to be received and understood by the audience you want to reach. That often requires adapting not only what we say, but also how, where, and when we say it.

Format matters: Sometimes an email works. Other times, it needs to be a phone or video call, a face-to-face meeting, or an all-hands meeting. Choose the format with the highest chance of being heard and understood.

Language counts: Especially in diverse or international teams, consider not just the language (English, German, French...) but also jargon, abbreviations, and sentence structure. Simple, clear language usually travels further.

Context is key: Just because something is familiar to you does not mean it is obvious to others. People need context. Even if it was explained before, do it again. The default should always be to give rather too much context and background information than too little.

Complexity needs calibration: What is appropriate in an executive meeting might not resonate with a production team or vice versa. If your message flies over someone's head, it does not land at all.

Tailoring a message is respecting where others are coming from and meeting them there.

Add Purpose to the Picture

People are more likely to engage when they understand not only what they are doing, but also why. As discussed in Chapter 2, purpose provides the emotional fuel that turns compliance into commitment. This does not always require a powerful speech. Often, one well-placed sentence is enough: "This connects directly to our vision of..." or "Here's why this matters now..."

Often leaders forget that their teams were not in the last leadership meeting or strategy session. Add that missing sentence to create meaning.

Create Communication Loops

One of the simplest signs of a healthy communication culture is that information flows in multiple directions. Meetings are not just for presenting, they are for listening, checking understanding, and inviting reactions.

Ask everyone to contribute. Invite questions. Watch for silence. Often silence is not agreement. Sometimes silence is confusion, fear, or disconnection. The best leaders learn to read the room and ask one more question before moving on.

This becomes especially important in larger settings like all-hands meetings. In my own team meetings, people were comfortable speaking up and often did. But in all-hands settings, participation was often harder. To lower the barrier and encourage engagement, we used a digital collaboration tool³ that participants could access on their mobile phones by scanning a QR code. During the meeting, they could answer short pulse-check questions or vote anonymously, an easy and even enjoyable way to join the conversation.

This served two purposes. First, it gave us a sense of the team's mood and mindset in real time. Second, it helped ease people into participation. Once they were already using the tool, the likelihood that someone would ask a question when we opened the Q&A part was much higher. Sometimes we had a colleague set up beforehand to break the ice by posting the first question, just to get the flow started.

Once questions come in, they must be treated with care. Answer thoroughly. Never dismiss a question as something “already covered,” even if it was. If you do not know the answer, say so and then follow up as promised. That follow-through is what builds credibility over time.

Two-way communication builds alignment, but more than that, it builds belonging.

(More insights in *Leading into the Future*)

³ Mentimeter, <https://www.mentimeter.com/> is just one example

4.6. Time For Action

Time For Action

If you want to increase your effectiveness as a communicator and build a team that is better connected, more aligned, and more engaged, here are some practical actions you can start implementing today.

Step 1: Co-create your Communication Strategy

Involve your team in designing your communication structure. Ask what is working and what is missing. Define the types of meetings you need and clarify the purpose of each. Use standard agendas where it makes sense. Include time for connection, not just coordination.

(More steps in *Leading into the Future*)

COMMUNICATION

MAIN TAKEAWAY

Communication is the leadership tool that activates all others. It builds trust, strengthens relationships, accelerates alignment, enables collaboration, and sparks creativity.

Without it, even the best strategies fall apart.

