

Leading in a crisis

PROPERTY AUSTRALIA April 14, 2020



In times of crisis, “all eyes are on our leaders”, says communication, body language and speech expert Michael Kelly. How can leaders enhance their skills to steer their ship through these choppy waters?

In uncertain times, people look to leaders to provide hope, and to tell a story of opportunity over obstacle, achievement over anxiety. But selling that vision of hope is no easy task.

“If you don’t believe in the messenger you won’t believe the message. You might have top level technical skills but if people don’t believe in you, through how you listen, speak, present, handle, carry and conduct yourself – people won’t have faith in your message,” Kelly says.

“As most businesspeople, at present, communicate through videoconference, how you project yourself and your messages, matters more as it’s harder to convey believability when you’re not face to face.”

So how can leaders sell their message?

1. **Be present:** Kelly calls this the DBAE – or Don't Be Anywhere Else – philosophy. "Stay present and focus your attention. In practice, the technique involves picturing the letters DBAE on the speaker's forehead. It sounds so basic, but it is very powerful when well executed." Kelly points to the example of Antarctic explorer Ernest Shackleton, who led one of the most courageous survival missions of all time". Shackleton recognised that the most important tools in his war chest was his presence. How he 'showed up'. The energy he exuded, the determination on his face, and the way he carried his body had a huge impact on his team, Kelly says.
2. **Overcommunicate your vision:** "You can't overcommunicate in times of crisis," Kelly argues. He points to the work of [Harvard Business School legend John Kotter](#), who finds most CEOs "under-communicate their visions for change by a factor of 10". So, keep sharing your vision. Overcommunicate, but don't confuse that with verbosity, Kelly adds. A "powerful speaking structure is: communicate the message, flesh out the message, repeat the message. Repetition breeds persuasion and acceptance."
3. **Radiate warmth, acceptance and calm enthusiasm:** "A leader is first known by their countenance," Kelly says. [Academic research](#) finds human beings make judgements of personality based on "extremely thin slices" of non-verbal communication. "People can make a judgement about others within just six seconds, so when entering a room, a videoconference or when greeting someone - radiate warmth, acceptance and calm enthusiasm."
4. **Provide certainty:** "Provide certainty when there is doubt and hope when there is fear." Kelly says "certainty is conveyed through your voice, cadence, facial expressions and body language. And people will believe your certainty. They may not know if an idea is good or not, but they will believe how certain you are that it is a good idea."
5. **Focus on others:** Kelly encourages leaders to listen to the advice in [The 'Scary Times' Success Manual](#). This can be summarised as forget about yourself; focus on others. Build relationships and look to create value for others.

Michael Kelly is the founder and director of [Kelly Speech Communication](#), and a member of the Property Council of Australia.