



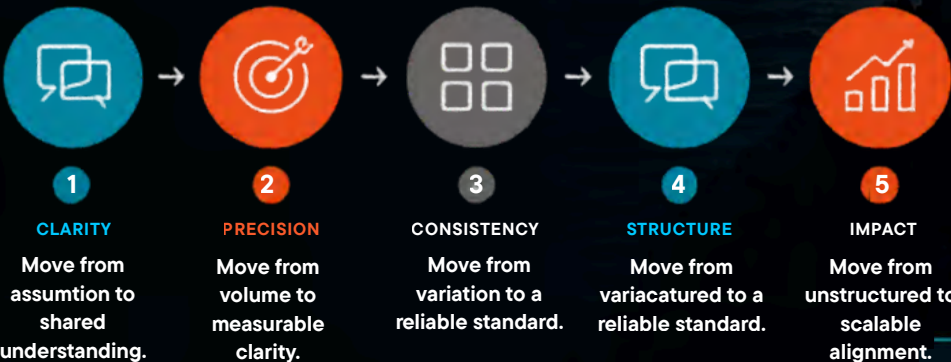
THUNDERBIRD
LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

5 Communication Shifts

THAT CLOSE THE GAP BETWEEN

Leadership Intent and Organizational Performance

A Thunderbird Leadership Consulting
Field Guide for Executive Teams



“

You can't improve what you don't measure.

CLARITY STARTS WITH TRUTH.

THE COMMUNICATION FRICTION SCORE™

A 5-MINUTE ONLINE ASSESSMENT

Get your score. See where friction is slowing you down. Get focused recommendations you can act on.



THUNDERBIRD
LEADERSHIP CONSULTING

Part of the Thunderbird Human-Centered
Leadership Effectiveness Architecture

THE REALITY

Communication is not the problem.

Variability is.

Every leadership team communicates. Messages are sent, meetings are held, decisions are announced, expectations are set. The volume of communication in most organizations is not the issue.

The issue is that communication means different things depending on who delivers it, how it is framed, and what the listener brings to the moment. In most leadership teams, the same message produces five different interpretations, and no one knows it until execution breaks down.

This is communication friction. And it is not a personality problem or a culture problem. It is a **systems problem**.

Friction lives in the gap between what a leader intends and what an organization experiences. It accumulates quietly: in the follow-up emails that shouldn't have been necessary, in the meetings that legitimate decisions already made, in the talented people who stopped raising concerns because raising them never seemed to change anything.

Left unaddressed, communication friction does not stay contained. It slows decision cycles, fragments alignment, and consumes execution capacity that your organization cannot afford to lose.

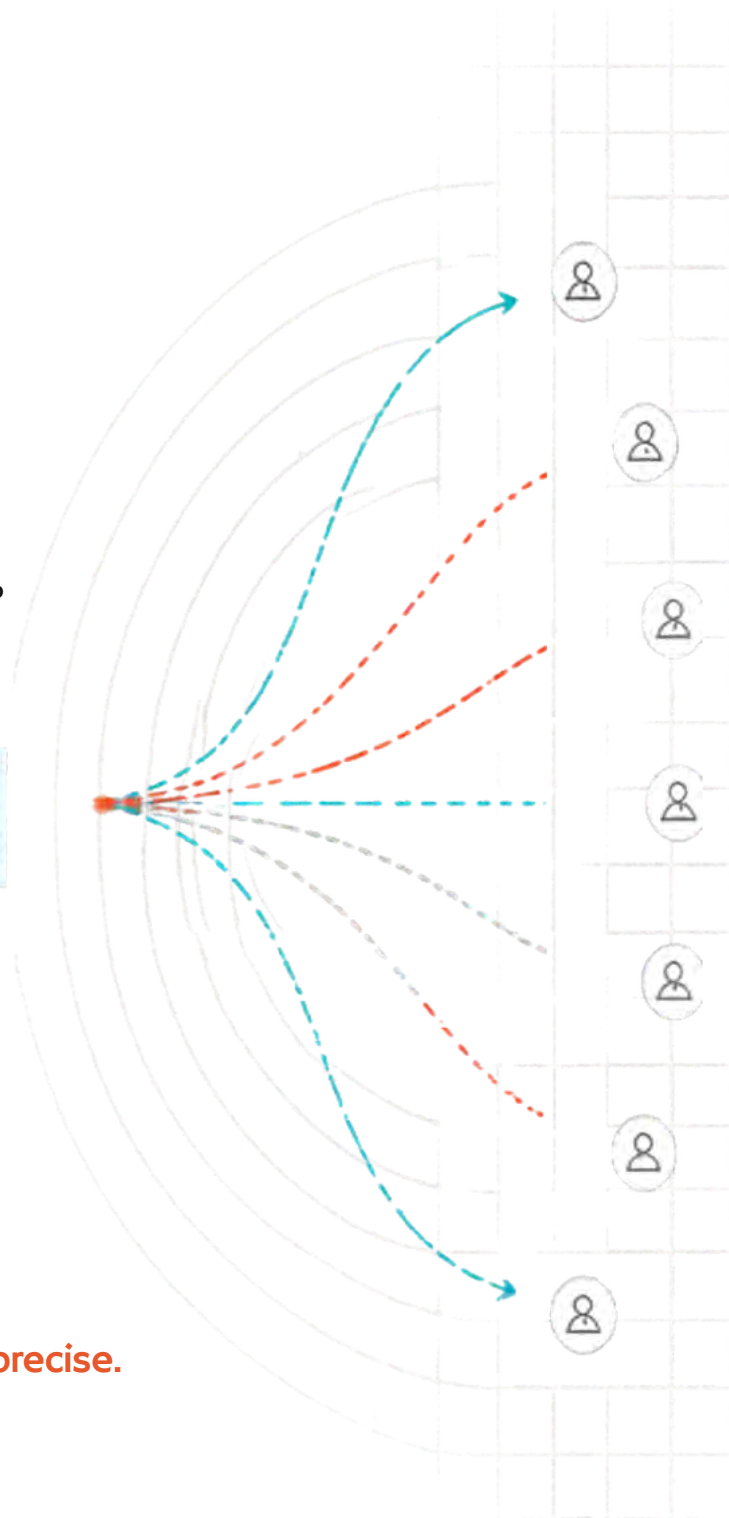
The five shifts in this guide will not make communication easier. **They will make it more precise.**

And precision is what closes the gap between leadership intent and organizational performance.

That gap is measurable.

That gap is closeable.

That is **Thunderbird's work**.



THE HIDDEN COST

What friction is costing your organization.

Communication friction rarely appears on a budget line. It doesn't show up in a quarterly report. But its costs are real, compounding, and directly traceable to leadership communication patterns that have never been examined.

Research from Grammarly and The Harris Poll puts a number on what most leaders already sense: the average leadership team loses the equivalent of nearly one full workday per person per week to poor communication—to follow-up that shouldn't have been necessary, decisions that had to be re-explained, and execution that stalled waiting for clarity.

For organizations with 1,000 employees, that pattern carries an estimated **annual cost of \$420,000**—not from catastrophic failure, but from the quiet, compounding friction of communication that wasn't precise enough the first time.

In most leadership teams, that cost concentrates around three recurring patterns: rework, delayed decisions, and misalignment.



ANNUAL IMPACT FOR A 1,000-PERSON ORGANIZATION

\$420,000

LOST TO COMMUNICATION
FRICTION EACH YEAR

These three patterns are not inevitable features of organizational life. They are the predictable result of leadership communication that operates without a shared standard.

The five shifts that follow address each pattern directly.

Organizations operating within Thunderbird's **Human-Centered Leadership Effectiveness Architecture** reduce these patterns measurably—not by communicating more, but by communicating with greater precision, consistency, and intentionality.

SOURCES:

Grammarly & The Harris Poll, "The State of Business Communication: The Backbone of Business Is Broken," 2022. Per-employee cost figure drawn from analyses of 400+ companies as reported by SHRM and cited in Talaira, "The \$1.2 Trillion Cost of Miscommunication in the Workplace," 2023. Original source: David Grossman, "The Success of 'Miscommunication in the Workplace.'"



NEARLY 1 FULL WORKDAY

PER PERSON, PER WEEK

lost to poor communication



REWORK

When messages are interpreted differently across departments, teams build plans, escalate resources, and make decisions based on different assumptions. The cost isn't just the rework itself—it's the erosion of confidence that follows when leaders realize their communication didn't land the way they intended. For organizations where every dollar and every hour of capacity is accountable to a mission, rework is not a minor inefficiency. It is a direct tax on impact.



DELAYED DECISIONS

Decisions that should take days takes—not because of complexity, but because expectations weren't clear when they left the room. Leaders re-explain. Teams seek confirmation. Momentum stalls while the organization waits for clarity that should have been built into the original communication.



MISALIGNMENT

The most expensive friction is the kind no one names. Teams work in parallel rather than in concert. Leaders hold different mental models of the same priority. The organization moves—but not together. In mission-driven organizations, misalignment doesn't just cost performance. It costs credibility, cohesion, and the trust that makes sustained execution possible.



SHIFT 1

From Assumption to Shared Clarity

WHY YOUR TEAM MAY BE EXECUTING AGAINST DIFFERENT MAPS

The most common source of communication friction is not conflict or confusion—it is an assumption. Leaders assume their message was understood because it was delivered. Teams assume they understood because they were present. Neither assumption gets tested until execution reveals the gap.

Shared clarity is not agreement. It is the verified alignment between what a leader intends and what the organization understands well enough to act on consistently. It requires that messages be designed for interpretation, not just delivery.



THE THUNDERBIRD STANDARD

A message has not been communicated until it has been **understood the same way** by everyone who needs to act on it.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Leaders who operate from shared clarity don't ask, "Did everyone get that?" They ask, "What are we each walking away prepared to do?" The difference is not semantic—it is the difference between communication that informs and communication that aligns.

THE FRICTION THIS ELIMINATES



Fewer clarification loops

Teams spend less time seeking answers and more time moving.



Faster execution

People act with confidence because the path forward is clear.



Stronger alignment

Leaders and teams build from the same map, not competing versions of it.

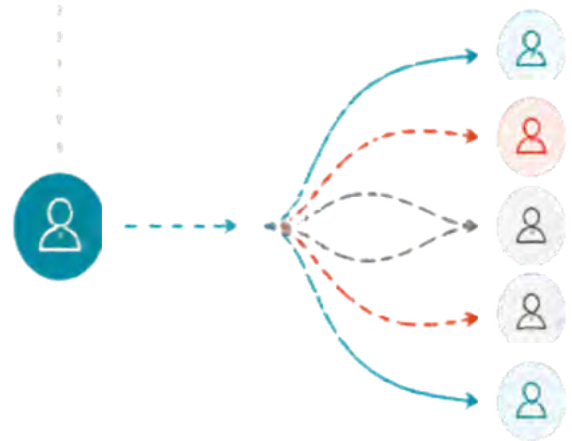
Clarity is not a kickoff meeting. It is a leadership discipline. It is how you make sure your intent travels intact and your organization moves as one.

LEADERSHIP INTENT

The message leaders intend to send.

ORGANIZATIONAL EXPERIENCE

What teams actually hear and understand.



LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

“Clarity is not about talking more. It’s about **making meaning transferable.**”

When leaders communicate for clarity, they eliminate the most common—and most expensive—source of execution friction.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

- Where do you see the biggest gaps between what leaders intend to communicate and what teams actually understand?
- What question could you ask after every important message to ensure shared clarity?





SHIFT 2

From Volume to Precision

WHY MORE COMMUNICATION OFTEN PRODUCES LESS CLARITY

In high-performing organizations, leaders are often the most prolific communicators. They send updates, repeat priorities, and try to ensure nothing gets missed. And yet—clarity continues to erode.

The problem is rarely how much leaders communicate. It's how much of it is necessary. When messages are not designed for precision, leaders repeat themselves, teams ask for clarification, and important decisions get buried in the noise.

Precision is not about saying less. It's about saying what drives alignment and action—nothing more, nothing less.



THE THUNDERBIRD STANDARD

Communication should be measured by the **clarity** it **creates**, not the effort it represents.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Leaders who communicate with precision lead with the message, explain the “why” once, and provide just enough context for teams to act. They front-load clarity so people don't have to dig for it. They anticipate the questions that matter—and answer them before they're asked.

THE FRICTION THIS ELIMINATES



Excess follow-up

Teams spend less time seeking clarity and more time executing.



Rework and redundancy

Clear messages prevent missteps and duplicated effort.



Slow decision cycles

Decisions move faster when leaders communicate with intent and focus.

When leaders communicate with precision, the organization feels it: fewer questions, faster alignment, and execution that stays on track.

THE PRECISION MULTIPLIER

When communication is precise, organizations experience compounding returns.



Precision in communication is one of the highest-return investments a leadership team can make.



LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

“Clarity isn't the result of communicating more. It's the result of **communicating with intent.**”

Precision respects your team's time, attention, and ability to act.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



What messages from you are generating the most follow-up, and why?



Where could greater precision remove friction or accelerate execution?



SHIFT 3

From Style to Standard

WHY CONSISTENCY IS THE MULTIPLIER

Every leader has a communication style. That's natural. The problem is that when style becomes the strategy, consistency disappears.

Teams adapt to the last message they heard, not the leadership system. One leader frames decisions as opportunities. Another delivers directives. Another over-explains. Another assumes context. When leadership communication varies this widely, the organization experiences the same thing five different ways.

A standard doesn't remove authenticity. It creates a shared operating system so every leader's message lands with the same structural integrity. Consistency builds confidence. Confidence builds speed. Speed compounds performance.



THE THUNDERBIRD STANDARD

The quality of your organization's execution is directly proportional to the **intentionality** of its leadership conversations.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Leaders use a consistent structure for the messages that matter most—decisions, priorities, feedback, and change. Teams know what to expect, how to interpret it, and what to do next. The leader may change. The standard doesn't.

THE FRICTION THIS ELIMINATES



Mixed signals

When leaders communicate differently, teams receive conflicting signals.



Interpretation gaps

A standard ensures every message is understood the same way.



Slower execution

Consistency reduces rework, speeds decisions, and builds trust.

Standards don't limit leaders. They multiply their impact. Teams stop decoding the message and start executing it.

THE CONSISTENCY CONTINUUM

Where most organizations live—and where high-performing ones operate.



STYLE-DRIVEN

Messages vary widely by leader. Teams adapt constantly.



STANDARDIZED

Leaders use a shared structure. Messages land consistently.



SYSTEM-DRIVEN

Communication becomes a strategic advantage. Execution accelerates.



LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

“Consistency is not repetitive. It's **reliable**.”

When leaders communicate with a shared standard, teams stop guessing—and start moving.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



Which types of messages vary most across your leadership team?



What would change if every leader communicated decisions and priorities using the same structure?





SHIFT 4

From Reaction to Structure

WHY STRUCTURED CONVERSATIONS CREATE SCALABLE ALIGNMENT

Most leadership communication happens in the moment. A question arises. A leader responds. A decision is made. The conversation moves on. But when conversations aren't structured, important elements get skipped, key voices go unheard, and decisions lack the full context they need.

Structured communication isn't rigid. It's intentional. It creates the conditions for better thinking, stronger participation, and clearer decisions, especially when the stakes are high.

When leaders use a repeatable structure, they remove the guesswork. Teams know how to contribute. Decisions are made with confidence. Execution starts with clarity.



THE THUNDERBIRD STANDARD

The quality of your organization's execution is directly proportional to the **intentionality** of its leadership conversations.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Leaders use a consistent structure for high-stakes conversations: strategy discussions, priority decisions, performance reviews, and problem-solving. The structure doesn't replace leadership judgment. It elevates it by ensuring the right inputs are considered before the decision is made.

THE FRICTION THIS ELIMINATES



Rushed decisions

A structured process slows down the rush so leaders can speed up with confidence.



Uneven participation

Everyone has a clear opportunity to contribute, so better ideas rise to the surface.



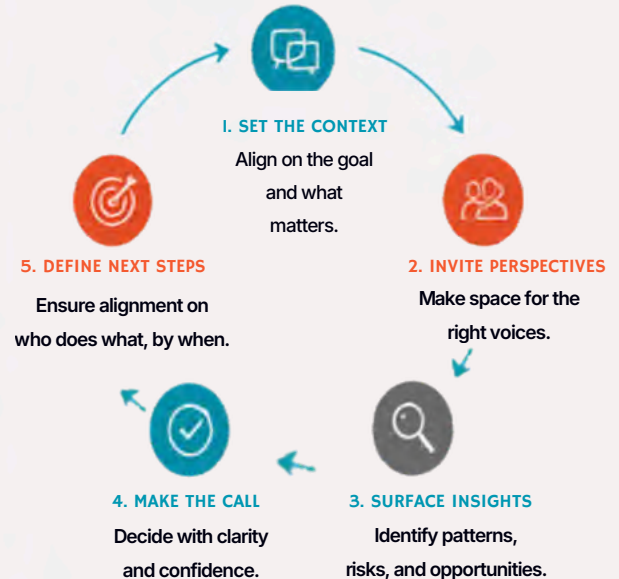
Unclear next steps

Decisions end with alignment on who's responsible, what's next, and when.

Structure doesn't slow leaders down. It helps them lead at the speed of trust. And trust is what makes execution possible.

THE STRUCTURE ADVANTAGE

Structured conversations lead to better decisions, stronger participation, and faster execution.



LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

“Unstructured conversations create uncertain outcomes. Structured conversations create **confident decisions**.”

When leaders lead the conversation, they lead the outcome.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



What types of conversations in your organization lack a clear structure?



Where would a structured approach lead to better decisions, more voices, and clearer next steps?



SHIFT 5

From Intent to Impact

WHY EXECUTION IS THE TRUE MEASURE OF COMMUNICATION

A message isn't complete when it's delivered. It's complete when it drives the **action** it was intended to drive.

Too many leadership teams stop at communication. They inform, present, and persuade—but they don't always confirm alignment or establish follow-through. The result is a gap between good intentions and real organizational impact.

Impact happens when leaders close that gap. They ensure the message translates into clear expectations, aligned decisions, and coordinated action. They build accountability into the communication, not just into the execution.

When **leaders communicate for impact**, the **organization moves as one**.

Intent becomes results. Momentum becomes measurable.



THE THUNDERBIRD STANDARD

Communication that does not produce **aligned execution** has not yet done its job.

WHAT THIS LOOKS LIKE IN PRACTICE

Leaders close every important communication loop by answering three questions: What are we doing? Who is doing what? How will we know it worked?

They repeat those answers—in different ways and at different intervals—until clarity creates momentum. And they follow up, not to check in, but to reinforce commitment and remove friction.

THE FRICTION THIS ELIMINATES



Execution gaps

Clear next step and ownership eliminate the space where good intentions go to stall.



Accountability drift

Built-in follow-through keeps priorities visible, active, and owned.



Lost momentum

Reinforcement turns alignment into sustained movement and measurable progress.

Impact doesn't come from saying the right things. It comes from building the conditions where the right things happen.

Leaders don't hope their message lands. They make sure it moves.

THE IMPACT CYCLE

Communication becomes impact when leaders close the loop—consistently.



1. Intend

Clarify the message and the desired outcome.

2. Align

Ensure shared understanding across the right people.

3. Act

Drive clear decisions and coordinated action.

4. Follow up

Reinforce priorities and remove obstacles.

5. Achieve

Measure results and build momentum for what's next.

Intent **starts** the cycle.

Impact completes it.



LEADERSHIP SPOTLIGHT

“Communication doesn't create impact. **Aligned action** does. Great communication ensures it happens.”

The best leaders close the gap between what they intend and what gets done.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS



What important messages have you sent recently that you haven't followed up on?



Where in your organization is good intent failing to produce the impact you expect—and why?



The Next Question Is Personal.

The five shifts in this guide represent the standard that high-performing leadership teams operate from. They are not aspirational — they are observable, measurable, and buildable in any organization where leadership is willing to examine how communication actually functions versus how it is intended to function.

Reading about friction is the first step. Measuring it is what makes it actionable.



Where does your leadership team experience friction most acutely?

The Communication Friction Score™ is a five-minute diagnostic built on the same five dimensions you just read about — [Message Fidelity](#), [Leadership Voice Coherence](#), [Candor Infrastructure](#), [Decisional Clarity](#), and [Execution Coherence](#).

Your score will tell you:

- ✓ Where friction is most concentrated in your leadership team
- ✓ What pattern is costing your organization
- ✓ What addressing it would make possible

This is not a generic assessment. It is a precision instrument designed for executive leadership teams who are ready to close the gap between intent and impact.



Click Here.
Take the Communication Friction Score™ — 5 minutes. Immediate results.

