

## What Organ Donation Taught Me About Leadership Communication

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I've spent my entire professional life working in communication, firstly as an actor, then in learning and development. It's fair to say I understand the craft of communication, having studied, practiced and taught it. But nothing came close to what I learned the moment we were told our eldest daughter, who was ten at the time, needed a kidney transplant.

I quickly realised that the need to communicate - clearly, calmly and compassionately - actually *increases*. With consultants, nurses, and surgeons. With your sick child, who deserves honesty but also hope. With your other younger daughter, who is scared and confused. With your spouse. With your wider family. With your team at work, who rely on you to show up. I had to apply everything I knew about communication every single day, often while barely keeping it together myself.

And what I realised is this: **communication isn't just a skill, it's a lifeline.**

### The Power of Tone, Pace and Timing

One of the most unforgettable moments came early on, when the consultant at Great Ormond Street Hospital sat us down to explain the seriousness of our daughter's condition. It wasn't what they said that stayed with me, it was *how* they said it. Their tone was calm, their pace gentle. There were pauses that gave us space to process. They didn't rush or overload us. They balanced their communication style meeting us where we were - confused and vulnerable.

That conversation could have gone very differently. A clipped tone, clinical language or rushing through the facts would have shattered us. But the delivery gave us something we didn't expect. It gave us *safety*.

And in that moment, I saw - clearer than ever before - that communication is about so much more than words. It's about energy. Empathy. Holding space. It's about leadership, in its most human form.

### Leading Under Pressure

There's a misconception that good communication only happens when you're feeling composed or confident. But that's not how it works when life comes at you hard.

In those months, I had to lead through grief, fear, uncertainty and exhaustion. I had to speak calmly to consultants while holding back tears. I had to reassure family members when I felt anything but strong. I had to support my daughter through procedures and tough questions while not having any real answers.

And I had to do all this while watching my wife prepare to donate one of her kidneys to our child. The conversations between us about risk, responsibility, hope and fear, were some of the hardest we've ever had. There's no manual for that. But we kept showing up and we kept communicating. Not always perfectly, but always honestly.

## **The Biggest Lessons That Translate to Leadership Everywhere**

Looking back, there were a few standout lessons I carry into every training room now:

### **1. Delivery Matters More Than You Think**

What you say is important. *How* you say it is everything. A rushed tone, a clipped sentence, an offhanded remark - these things linger. In high-stakes situations, people don't just hear your words, they feel your energy. Leaders need to slow down and become conscious of their delivery, especially when emotions are high.

### **2. Holding Space Is a Leadership Skill**

Sometimes leadership means speaking up. Other times, it means shutting up and sitting with discomfort - giving people space to process, react or just *be*. Consultants who gave us time, who didn't rush out of the room (but looked us in the eye), were the ones who earned our trust. Leaders who can do the same build stronger teams.

### **3. Vulnerability Isn't Weakness - It's Connection**

There's power in saying "I don't know," or "This is hard." I didn't always have the right words for my daughters, my wife or my team. But I tried to be honest and human. And I found that this openness often brought people closer, not further away. Vulnerability, handled with care, builds bridges.

### **4. Leadership Isn't a Role - It's a Relationship**

I wasn't "playing" the leader of our family. I *was* the leader. Not because I was in charge, but because people were looking to me for steadiness and guidance. Leadership is built in the micro-moments. In how you speak, how you listen and how you react under stress. Leadership isn't about always having the answers. It's about showing up with presence, humility and care, especially when the script runs out.

### **Final Thought**

I wish I hadn't had to learn these lessons the way I did. But I'm grateful for what they've reinforced.

Communication isn't about being perfect. It's about being *present*.  
It's not about having the answers. It's about listening deeply.  
And it's not just a tool for business.  
It's how we lead.  
It's how we love.  
It's how we get through.



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