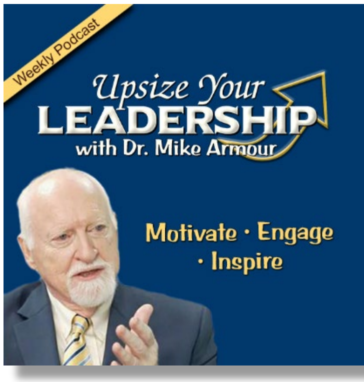
Tasking Miscues that Cost Leaders Trust

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

Episode: UYL2609

Podcast Date: August, 2026



Picture one of your best workers. Talented. Committed. The kind of person who says, “Yes” and means it.

Now picture that person after three long days of work on something you asked for — walking into your office, laptop open, a little proud, a little nervous. And picture five words from you that undo all of it.

The words aren’t spoken immediately, but most likely rather early in the conversation. But they are equally destructive, whenever they are uttered. These are the words: "That's not what I wanted."

In that moment, something breaks. Not the deadline. Not the deliverable. Something quieter and far more expensive. The person’s confidence in you in you as a leader. I’ll explain why shortly.

Today we're talking about what may be the most underrated driver of trust at the top of an organization. It isn't charisma. It isn't vision in the grand, poster-on-the-wall sense. It's something far more ordinary, and far more powerful.

It's clarity.

And in the next twenty minutes, I want to convince you of one idea: that for leaders, clarity is not a communication skill. It’s a critical strategy for building trust.

Let me start with a line I wrote in my book, *Leadership and the Power of Trust*, because it frames everything we'll cover today.

> *Leaders are expected to communicate both a vision and a plan for translating that vision into concrete results.*

Think that statement through, because it implies two demands incumbent on any leader.

First, leaders must have clarity *themselves* on what needs to be done.

Second, they must communicate those needs in terms that are clear, crisp, and precise.

Two demands. And here's what many executives miss: your people are quietly grading you on both — every single day. And if you miss the mark on either one, it does serious damage to their trust in your leadership.

Because here's the thing about trust. We tend to think trust is emotional — a feeling of warmth, of rapport, of "I like this person."

But inside an organization, trust has a far more practical dimension. Your team is constantly running one question in the background: Does leadership actually know where we're going, and can they tell me clearly what I'm supposed to do to help us get there?"

When the answer is yes, people relax. They commit. They move fast. When the answer is no — even if they like you — they hedge. They wait. They protect themselves.

So, clarity does two things at once. Inside *you*, it's the discipline of actually knowing what matters. And outside you, in the organization, it's the structure that lets everyone else act with confidence.

Those aren't two separate things. They're the same thing, seen from the inside and the outside. And that dual nature is exactly why clarity enhances trust: it gives your people something to believe *and* something to do that validate their confidence in you as their leader.

Let's take the two demands in order. First, having clarity yourself. In my book I put it this way:

> *Clarity is the requisite first step in knowing where we need to go. And clarity begins with properly understanding the current situation and its urgencies.*

Notice where clarity *starts.* Not with the vision. Not with the destination. It starts with an honest reading of where you actually are at present — and what's urgent about it.

This matters enormously if you're at the senior level of leadership, because it's a step that time-pressed executives are sorely tempted to skip in communicating to their people. Why? Because you've been promoted, in part, for your ability to see the future.

When setting direction for your people, therefore, it's only natural to lead with the future. You turn immediately toward painting a picture of the destination. You do so assuming that the current reality is obvious to everyone.

It isn't. And when leaders describe a bold destination without demonstrating that they truly grasp today's reality, people don't hear vision. They hear wishful thinking.

So in leadership communication, one of your primary goals is to create a shared perspective — a common understanding of the answer to four questions:

- Where are we now?
- Where do we need to go?
- How will we get there?
- And how will we know when we've done well?

Those four questions are your clarity checklist. Talk about them out loud at your next all-hands gathering, at your next board update, at your next town hall. Afterward, ask yourself honestly, "Did I answer all four? Or did I answer the exciting two — where we're going and how we will get there — and skip the two questions that actually build trust?"

Because it's your answers to the first and the last questions – where we are now and how will we know that we've done well in our drive toward the destination – that people find most reassuring.

Your description of where we are tells them that you're not deluded. And your outline of how we will know when we've done well tells them there's a finish line and that leadership has a fair and reasonable way of determining a job well done.

When you do this — when you demonstrate that you've properly sized up the situation and have a cogent, workable plan — you send a signal that goes deeper than the words that you speak. You're telling your people, "I've got this. I understand our reality, and I have a path forward."

Now, here's the flip side. And I want to say this bluntly, because in the book I called it exactly what it is. I said, "One of the most lethal trust-busters is for workers to conclude that their leaders are clueless."

The moment that people in your organization start saying to one another — in the hallway, in the parking lot, in the group chat that you'll never see — "Management doesn't have a clue" — trust is already losing its foothold.

For senior leaders – the ones primarily responsible for developing and communicating vision – the words "management doesn't have a clue" are a frontal assault on your credibility. And credibility is the cornerstone of trust.

Moreover, that verdict — "they don't have a clue" — is rarely a judgment about your actual competence. You may be brilliant. You may have the whole plan mapped in your head.

But if it stays in your head, if it never becomes a clear, shared picture, your people can't tell the difference between a leader who is thinking deeply and a leader who is lost, a leader who is talking in broad generalities to mask underlying personal confusion.

From where your people sit, your silence and your confusion look identical. Unspoken clarity clouds understanding. So long as it is unspoken, it's a secret. And you cannot build trust on a secret.

So, that's the first level of clarity — clarity of *direction.* The big picture. Where we're going and how we'll know when we get there.

But there's also a second level. And this is where the day-to-day trust in leadership is actually won or lost. It's the level of the assignment.

Here's how I put it in the book:

> *Trust makes a speedy exit when leaders fail to communicate expectations and assignments with such clarity that those who are given directives know clearly what is expected.*

Let me give you the full checklist that increases the likelihood that you will convey that requisite clarity. When you hand someone a piece of work, they need to walk away knowing the following four expectations:

- **What** is expected.
- **When** it is expected.
- **How** they are expected to do it.
- And the **form** in which it is expected.

What, when, how, and in what form. Four things. And most delegation failures that I've witnessed come down to a leader covering the *what* and assuming the other three are obvious.

They are not obvious. They are obvious *to you*, because the finished product already exists in your imagination. You can see it.

But team members can't see inside your head. They are left to reverse-engineer your expectations from whatever you happened to say — and from what you did *not* say.

Which brings us back to that scene from the top of the show. Let me read once more from the book, because the following line identifies one of the most telling wounds to trust in professional life:

> *Nothing shatters confidence in a leader more quickly than for a worker to put in countless hours fulfilling an assignment, only to be rebuffed at the end with, "That's not what I wanted at all!"*

Think about the sheer cost of that moment. You just lost hours of productive activity on the part of the worker. You've lost the energy that the worker could have given to other priorities. But these are the *cheapest* part of what you lost.

What you really expended was that person's faith that when you give directions, the directions can be trusted. And that's going to continue to cost you.

When your people lose trust in your directions, you saddle yourself with more work. The next time that you hand them something that calls for their independent initiative, they won't lean in.

Instead, they will hedge. They will verify excessively. They will build in three rounds of "just confirming" — which you will then interpret as them being slow, needing hand-holding, and more demanding of your time than you think necessary.

You created the very behavior that will frustrate you later. It started with an unclear assignment.

And here's where a situation like this becomes especially costly. Again in the language of my book:

> *As a rule, managers don't blame themselves for these breakdowns in communication. They hold the worker accountable for not listening.*

The manager's story is simple and self-flattering: "I was clear. They didn't listen."

But the worker has a completely different story. The worker will believe that he or she did indeed listen carefully and did everything reasonable to meet expectations. From the worker's perspective, the rebuff is unwarranted.

Two people. One event. Two irreconcilable stories. And here's the killer detail — the conclusion the worker draws:

> *To the worker, the rebuff indicts the leader as a poor communicator. The leader is now seen as fickle and capricious, or else either too incompetent or too lazy to give clear instructions. And none of these conclusions fosters trust.*

Fickle. Capricious. Incompetent. Or lazy. Give that list some thought and notice that not one of those words describes the worker. Every one of them is a verdict on the *leader.* You thought you were holding someone accountable for not listening. What actually happened is that the worker quietly reclassified you. You are now seen as someone who can't be relied on to say what you mean.

Now, why is this a *senior*-leadership problem specifically? Two reasons.

First, the distance. The higher you rise, the further your words travel and the more they get relayed, summarized, and reinterpreted on the way down. A small ambiguity at the top doesn't stay small. It cascades. By the time it reaches the front line, your one vague sentence has become five different interpretations across five teams — and you'll never see the divergence until the results come back misaligned.

Second, the deference. People push back on a peer. They rarely push back on you. When a senior leader is unclear, junior people will be hesitant to say, "I don't understand what you mean." They nod, they leave, and they *guess.* Your seniority suppresses the very questions that would have saved the project.

So, the burden of clarity doesn't lighten as you climb. It grows. The more authority you hold, the less margin you have to be vague.

As we move toward a close, let me get practical. If clarity is a trust strategy, here are the disciplines that I suggest you build.

One — do the internal work first. Before you communicate, make sure *you* actually have clarity. If you can't crisply answer "where we are, where we're going, how we'll get there, and how we'll know that we've done well," don't broadcast yet. Muddy input produces muddy output, at scale.

Two — narrate the current reality out loud. Don't assume everyone sees the present moment the way that you do. Be explicit about your sense of the current situation and what gives urgency to the course of action that you are taking. This is the fastest way to retire the "they don't have a clue" verdict before it ever forms.

Three — for every assignment, cover all four corners. Use the four questions that I posed earlier as a template. What do I need you to do? When do I expect it to be completed? How do I expect you to do it? And in what form do I expect you output?

Be sure that you follow the template completely in your tasking conversation. For complex assignments, write out your answers and pass them to those who are being tasked. And if the work is significant, show an example of the format or methodology that you want to see followed. A ten-minute conversation about the format is cheaper than three days of misaligned effort.

Four — invert the accountability for listening. Instead of relying on people to listen well, take responsibility for being understood. One question will do most of the work here. Word it something like this: "Just so I know that I explained it well — could you state in your own words what you're going to do and what it will look like when it's done?"

Notice the framing. You put the burden on your own clarity, not on their attention. That single habit closes most of the gap between what you meant and what they heard — and it protects trust before it's ever damaged.

And by asking them to put in their own words, you’re less likely to hear them parrot the phrases that you have used. Rather, you can listen to their phrasing and determine whether it adequately captures the substance of what you want from them. This gives you an opportunity, up front, to rectify any incomplete understanding implied by their words.

Five — remember that consistency is what makes clarity believable. You can be perfectly clear once and still not be trusted. Trust comes when your clarity is consistent — when your words and your follow-through match, again and again, until people learn they can rely on what you say. Clarity strengthens trust only when it's confirmed by consistency.

Let me wrap up, then by taking us back where we started — with that person standing in your doorway, laptop open, having just done three days of work to complete your assignment.

You have far more control over that moment than you might think. Not at this point in the game, when the results are about to be put before you. Rather, long before, at the time of the initial tasking. In the clarity with which you painted a picture of what you wanted done. In the way that you covered the four corners — the four key questions — related to the assignment that you were giving. In whether you took responsibility for being understood or whether you outsourced clarity to the worker's ability to read your mind.

Proper tasking is an opportune setting in which to enhance trust in your leadership. It's also a moment fraught with danger. If managed poorly, it can inflict a lasting wound to trust.

Clarity isn't a soft skill that you employ after doing the real work of leadership. For leaders — especially leaders at the top — clarity is as much a standard for your real work as integrity and excellence. Trust is the quiet currency that you spend to buy the one thing you cannot lead without — the trust of your people.

Dr. Mike Armour is the founder and president of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at www.LeaderPerfect.com.

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