Effective Communication Is Something You Learn, Not Something You're Born With

Listening actively and expressing thoughts clearly are hard-earned, high-level skills.

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A Note From The Editor

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Silver-tongued orators are like world-class magicians. They float onto the stage with enviable swagger. They use choice material, and their compelling delivery keeps audiences rapt. They know that to touch the heart is to affect change; to stir the imagination is to inspire action.

But they also know something that others don't: Effective communication is an attainable and deliberately acquired skill set — one that can be learned and practiced over time. Too many people mistakenly believe that good communication skills are written into a person's DNA. While it's true that individual attributes can make these abilities easier to acquire, there is nothing that the world's best communicators have that you can't acquire through hard work.

Ask any impressive orator and they will tell you that the *real* magic is anchored in the precision work they do behind the scenes. And as author and former presidential speech writer James C. Humes writes, “The art of communication is the language of leadership.” Those who master the art can convince others to help them move mountains.

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If you’d like to improve your ability to communicate and gain greater influence as a leader, take the time to cultivate the cardinal skills.

Smoke out original thought.

Citing tired platitudes and bumper sticker slogans might win you a few “cool points” in social media circles, but they will only take you so far if you’re truly striving to effectuate change. People loathe hearing the same old ideas, over and over again. Smart leaders know that stretching their creative capacity is required to increase industry clout and deliver meaningful messages that matter.

Make no mistake, to become a more effective communicator, you must ‘smoke out’ original thought. Rather than conforming to the status quo, make a conscious decision to abandon overdone and clichéd material. When a disruptive idea rears its peculiar head, instead of immediately dismissing it, meditate on it to see where it takes you. The most inspiring and provocative ideas usually evolve this way.

And as for those who say that you shouldn’t try to reinvent the wheel? Anyone who has ever sat through multiple renditions of *Three Ways to Become a Servant Leader* will tell you that it’s high time that someone, somewhere *did*.

Prepare an impactful delivery.

Once you've developed a fresh idea, it's time to work on organizing your message and polishing your delivery. How will you launch a stunning opening and closing line? How will you organize your material succinctly, so that it is both moving and memorable (perhaps tweetable and repeatable)? Should you use humor? Persuasion? What kind of compelling details should be included? Would a story be appropriate? Remember that your delivery also includes your vocal and non-verbal communication (body language), which are critical to the success of your overall message.

Winston Churchill practiced one hour for every minute of talk-time. A polished delivery is not about cobbling together the "perfect words" and then memorizing them like a robot. It is all about the way you competently and confidently convey your message in real-time. Take the time to internalize the subject matter and work on the mechanics until you *own* them. The delivery should feel so natural that you hardly have to think about it. Note that while practicing your message aloud, you may realize that the content needs to be tweaked. Welcome these edits. You're on you way to chiseling out the heart of your message so that it falls nicely on the ear.

It's often a good idea to send your draft material to someone you trust (even a subject matter expert) for honest, constructive feedback. Once you've honed the content, practice it in front of someone with a good eye and ear for impeccable delivery. Whatever you do, don't become defensive. Throw your ego out the door and apply what you learn to sharpen your saw.

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Use active listening to your advantage.

George Bernard Shaw coined the famous phrase, “The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.” Poor listening skills create roadblocks to communication, especially when the single-minded goal of the speaker is to be heard. Anytime you are engaging an audience, there should be continuous cycle of give and take, which includes listening and learning, as well as offering tangible value.

A speaker communicates best while he or she listens *actively*, which helps them to respond more organically to the needs of the audience, while simultaneously expanding their understanding of the nuanced dialogue taking place. However, if you’ve convinced yourself that you’re the only person in the room with something interesting or valuable to say, then you’ll miss key opportunities to clarify, provide relevant examples and challenge the audience to dig deeper to extract greater meaning.

Real communication involves purposeful exchanges between all interested parties. If you’re doing all the talking, you’re not maximizing opportunities to create reciprocal understanding or expand the reach of your thought leadership.

Develop rapport by engaging in real dialogue.

Most people know when they’re being “talked at” rather than “talked to.” And being “talked at” almost always turns people off. Leaders who engage in dynamic, interactive dialogues – rather than defaulting to stale monologues – establish trust, develop rapport and experience greater empathy from their

audiences.

We've all sat through lackluster, canned presentations hardly salvaged by the PowerPoint slides that consumed them. And when they're read verbatim, with little to no emotion, it's a miserable experience for all. If you're not focused on building rapport and having an organic conversation with the audience you're attempting to sway, then you're squandering your efforts and wasting everyone's time.

In a trust economy where honored relationships form the basis for developing and maintaining business, treating communication as a perfunctory exercise will only result in a gratuitous diminishment of credibility. Remember, connecting with your audience (whether that be an audience of one or 1,000) will always mean taking the time to engage them, exposing your humanity and jettisoning the unfortunate behaviors so commonly associated with an aloof and ill-prepared presenter.

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Check in with surgical follow-up.

Part of mastering the four skills mentioned so far necessarily includes following up with your audience, in real-time. Even the most accomplished communicators observe this critical step. How do you do that in a speech? You check in with your audience to make sure that they "got" what you intended to give.

One way to do this is to emphasize the main points of the presentation by strategically reintroducing them at the end. By no means does this suggest regurgitating a mundane list, though. Be creative! For example, you might offer several calls to action, complemented by an expansion of each point.

Another way to accomplish this is by eliciting feedback and

answering audience questions, especially when a live Q&A session is part of the engagement. This allows the audience to flesh out any unanswered questions, resolve any misunderstandings and walk away with greater value. If a Q&A session is not possible (and even still in most cases), offer a mechanism that allows the audience to provide anonymous, but targeted feedback. You'll want to know what worked and what didn't.

After the engagement, review and assess the evaluations. Use the constructive feedback to improve your next performance and surgically remove from it anything that isn't useful. The more evaluations you receive and analyze over time, the better you'll get with your scalpel.

Are you ready to benefit from the golden touch of a silver tongue? If you work to master the above skill set, you'll be well on your way!

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