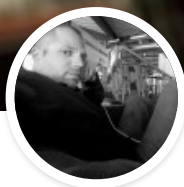


From the Commander • Leadership

Communication: The Key to Success

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 9 min read

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It's not what you say; it's how you say it... goes the old saying. And in considering the overall simplicity of this classic, we find a sense of remarkable depth and timelessness in its application to modern leadership. Today, more than ever before, is our age stifled by the demands of communication, that very often do we seem to forget communication is more about how you get your message across than it is a matter of sending the message. What is meant by “how” alludes to many things – simplicity, clarity, construct, and even empathy, to name a few – but the overall value of any message rests in its results. To simplify, communication must be *effective* for it to be of any use.

Now it is important to emphasize that we are not talking about the modern sensitivity idea of “effective communication *techniques*” here. We are not discussing “open-ended questions”, “reflective listening”, “I statements”, or “giving the speaker positive reinforcement”... those things are not only culturally biased – in a sense that they only apply to certain cultures and not others – but they can actually be counter-intuitive to the process of communication (getting the point across). Some of those things in no way serve to aid in communication itself either, but instead, only to shelter weak individual constitutions and cater to sensitive mentalities, and as such, are not our focus today. No, we are discussing the drafting and expression of

messages that hold value, which are able to get their point across in a clear and concise manner, and to which maintain the propriety of communication in a manner consistent with intelligible construction, meaning, and tact. We are discussing communication that is effective at getting the message across, and to which enhances the effectiveness of leaders and the organization alike without discriminating between the two. And the reason for this is simple...

Effective Communication: A two-way information sharing process – either through speech, writing, gestures or symbols – that involves sending a message that is easily understood.

Today, we live within a postindustrial information society, whereby our Information Age culture is steadfastly advancing towards a new Conceptual Age. With the advancements of modern technology, and the drive towards an ever-increasing globalized economy, the problems and issues of our age are of such diversity and mass that the very way we think and reason has changed drastically over a shorter generation gap than ever before in history. Global warming, biodiversity, deforestation, poverty, education, global finance, e-commerce, international labor, migration, wide-spread government and corporate corruption, and so much more are the problems of today, all enabled by our advancements in communication capabilities. Yet with those same capabilities come enormous opportunities for leaders to spur innovation and change. But none of that is possible if leaders are incapable of communicating effectively within their organizations.

Information Society: An environment in which more jobs create, process, or distribute information than directly produce goods. The environment is characterized by mass production of information, which requires the constant learning of new activities and processes.

Due to the increasing dynamic needs of organizations today, often individuals will discover the demands of communications – stemming from both interpersonal communications as well as technological communications – forces them to coordinate larger and larger volumes of information in order to achieve the levels of performance required to remain effective. We are responsible for solving increasingly complex issues, even despite resource limitations, on an ever-growing globalized scale, and despite newer technology, increased technical capabilities, and ever-changing dynamics within organizations themselves, the basics of effective communication have remained the same. Even Shockley-Zalabak (2012) recognizes that, “In this complex and information-rich conceptual society, the key to organizational excellence is effective communication” (p. 4).[1] Therefore, it is safe to say that communication, to which itself is effective, is a skill all leaders should consistently strive to understand and develop.

Thinking about effective communication as the *key* to organizational excellence is not a new idea in any way. Chester Barnard became famous for describing the primary responsibilities of executives as the *development and maintenance of a system of communication* in his work *The Functions of the Executive* (1938). [2]“Research since then has linked organizational communication to managerial effectiveness, the integration of work units across organizational levels, characteristics of effective supervision, job and communication satisfaction, innovation, adaptability, creativity, and overall organizational effectiveness and performance” (Shockley-Zalabak, 2012, p. 5). Effective communication is the connection – the bridge – linking all levels of an organization together, and without it, there would be no way for leaders to steer the organization, to emphasize their vision, delegate responsibilities, coordinate tasks, reward superior achievement, scout promising talent, provide purpose, direction and motivation, or even coach, mentor and/or guide. Certainly we can see, that without the knowledge of how to communicate well, and its proper use, even a great organization can cease to function properly and fail.

Conceptual Age: An environment in which inventive, empathic, big-picture

capabilities will become the most basic of requirements for the most fulfilling jobs. Written and oral communication, inquiry, critical and creative thinking, quantitative literacy, cultural knowledge, and strong personal ethics will be highly valued above all else.

Without purposeful and careful consideration towards our messages, leaders lose the connection they have to their organizations – to include the connection they may have had to their followership – and those reaching for success in life – personally and professionally – only end up keeping themselves from the very stars they strive to grasp. Myatt (2012) believes, “It is simply impossible to become a great leader without being a great communicator... ..Effective communication is an essential component of professional success whether it is at the interpersonal, inter-group, intra-group, organizational, or external level.”^[3] Given the already pre-established understanding of the connection between effective communication and organizational success that we have drawn thus far, Myatt’s assessment of leadership success tied to communicational effectiveness is not only correct, but further highlights the increasing demand for today’s leaders to understand how to communicate effectively.

Truthfully, the art of crafting messages of worth seems an art slipping through our fingers with each passing year. Far too often today is the communication of the masses deconstructed, filled with useless words, illiterate constructs, lacking in conceptual form, without thought or thesis, unclear, or even purposely ignorant. Worse still have we found such willfully unintelligible drivel invading our professional environments as a culture focused on false-information, satire, de-education, de-evolvement, a false sense of entitlement, pop-culture, selfies, social media popularity, quick-text/short-text, the 2-second attention span, the demand for freebies, and willful indifference, is steadily invading nearly every aspect of modern, first-world lives. These add nothing of worth or meaning to communication, and only serve to dilute messages and the value of communication itself, thus perpetuating the vicious cycle of continued willful cultural disintegration, leading to a greater loss of professionalism and the increasing rarity of individually self-motivated leadership development. Instead, effective communication requires critical thinking capabilities, hard work, dedication, a continual desire towards education, clarity and conciseness, understanding and correlation, and even the willingness to reject social trends. Therefore, Myatt’s list of 10 things that are essential for communicators to be effective can be considered a good start:

Truthfulness, Personalization, Specificity, Contribution of Ideas, Open-Mindedness, Listening Skills, Humility, Reflection, Subject Matter Knowledge, and Interpersonal Skills.

Note: If anything, “Subject Matter Knowledge” should be underscored here. One look at the majority of social media debates will emphasize why. Please refer to Tom Nichols’ (2014) “The Death of Expertise”^[4] for further reading...

Finally, it is essential for leaders to also understand that effective communication is a skill that must be passed on to others, and indeed even highly encouraged in personal development and use throughout an organization. As stated earlier, we are discussing communication that is effective at getting the message across, and to which enhances the effectiveness of leaders and the organization alike without discriminating between the two, and this means that leaders are not the only ones to benefit from developing and maintaining knowledge of effective communication, but all within an organization, and indeed the very organization itself, benefits from purposeful development of the art of communicating well. Returning to the words of Shockley-Zalabak (2012) once more, “With more complex decisions, rapid change, more information, and less certainty about what the decisions should be, excellence in a conceptual world depends on the abilities, commitment, and creativity of all organizational members... ..Put simply, organizations of today and tomorrow need competent communicators at all organizational levels” (p. 5). Part of the inherent responsibilities of all leaders is the stewardship of leadership itself, and that means the development of those

who follow, and it is in this regard that we can see organizations that truly care about communication as a whole as more dynamic, creative, successful, and even more desirable to belong to.

So take heed in the timeless classic of, “*It’s not what you say; it’s how you say it...*” Because, while the art of communicating well may be a dying art in today’s society, it will never cease to be the Key to Success for both leaders and organizations alike.

Sound Off!!!

In what ways do you think your own communication abilities could be improved?

In what ways do you think “Communication” and “Communicating Effectively” differ?

How do you think you could use this information to better your own organization, or simply those around you?

What are YOUR thoughts on the subject?

Let’s discuss as a community in the comments below... We can learn more together.

References:

[1] Shockley-Zalabak, P. (2012). *Fundamentals of Organizational Communication: Knowledge, Sensitivity, Skills, Values*. Eighth Edition. University of Colorado. Pearson.

[2] Barnard, C. (1938). *The Functions of the Executive*. Harvard University Press. Cambridge.

[3] Myatt, M. (2012). 10 Communication Secrets of Great Leaders. Forbes.com. Retrieved from: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/mikemyatt/2012/04/04/10-communication-secrets-of-great-leaders/>

[4] Nichols, T. (2014). The Death of Expertise. The Federalist.com. Retrieved from: <http://thefederalist.com/2014/01/17/the-death-of-expertise/>

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About the author



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