

From the Commander • Leadership

Digital Communication Often Loses Context: A Challenge for Globalized Leaders.

by AJ Powell 0 Comments 6 min read



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Let us define the concept...

It is no secret; the foundations of effective leadership practices lie in effective communication techniques. Today's organizations are ever more increasingly expanding, and today's leaders must adapt to the broadening of reach in a dynamic and constantly evolving medium. What we see in today's world, not found in the conceptualizations of the minds of the past, is a vast expanse of mediums for social communication and digital interaction. Our messages can be cast into an ocean of other messages, buried in the sands of the information wasteland, and lost amongst the endless forests of the global communication networks. In a

digital information age where so much can be communicated through a series of alphanumeric strings designed to represent whole words and phrases, combined with near instantaneous transmissions between multiple cultures at once, the attachments to those words that create an intention of portrayed meaning are often lost. Indeed, the contextual meanings that often make effective communication possible in the physical presence may never make it to the other side of the line, effectively destroying any chance at our electronic string-cans to carry our intent and possibly soiling and souring the relationship on the other side.

What am I talking about? Why, effective communication, of course. Yet, more importantly, and more simply, the context such communication carries.

Fitting the Pieces:

When talking to a person face-to-face, nearly everything about our interaction – combined with our individual psychological instillments (mainly culture) – give meaning to the words we exchange. Everything from eye movements, to body language, and even intonation, construction, inference, and stress on specific aspects send a complex coded message to the other person. We often relate within our own cultures – and cultures we have adapted to over a period of time – quite easily, while some more than others may find communication challenging, if not often frustrating with cultures foreign to us. Uniquely, however, the forms of communication that take place around the world daily across the Internet and mobile digital networks have minimized the gap across physical and cultural expanses, making it easier to communicate than every before. However, at what cost comes our new-found ease?

The Disconnect:

Context, it would seem, is the price. Just think for a minute... how often have you felt misunderstood while engaged in networked communication over an instant messenger, perhaps on Facebook or some other social network, by the individual on the other side? How often these days do we all see – and laugh quite enthusiastically at – photos and depictions of other people's failed communication efforts across such a medium? (ref. "texts from last night" and other "fails", for quick examples) We may mean one thing when we type away, but the individual on the other side might read your words with a completely different meaning.

Ex.- You make a post on Facebook. A person who sees your post (and who is filled with a large sum of arrogance typical of a very large number of social network users today) believes that the post is about them for some reason, and/or in some way. They angrily reply – therefore making themselves look bad to the whole world – and you respond by posting a meme of a picture of Morgan Freeman and some text saying something to the effect of "Actually, my post wasn't about you. But if the shoe fits....."

Moran, Harris, & Moran (2011) point out that, "The context of an interaction is found in the interactive relationship between those communicating and the environment... Fundamentally dynamic, communication is truly contextually bound, and is influenced by current realities, and by historical events that brought the communicating parties to the current state of interaction" (p. 43). Effective communication is controlled by the attached meanings portrayed along with it, and as such today's leaders feel the pressure more and more of trying to portray context across the written word in such a way that the reader on the other side gets the same message. But try as you might, sometimes even our best efforts are crippled by errors. "These errors are sometimes referred to as noise or biases. The sender, for instance, might not encode enough meaning into the idea being conveyed" (PSU, 2015). Without enough information to accurately construct a novel image of our context, often our intended context is not received, leaving it completely open to personal biases and misconstrued destructions.

Finding the Balance:

It is not easy to communicate intended meanings across a format not actually considered language. After all, the written word is not language at all, but merely the graphical representation of a language, and therefore

something foreign we purposely engage in for the sake of completing a task that comes naturally in a biological way. Just as language is adaptive, so is the representation of language... TYPING IN ALL CAPS, FOR EXAMPLE, MIGHT GIVE THE MESSAGE OF YELLING, OR A RAISED VOICE... when in reality, neither would be the case, and the example shows how adaptation has occurred for the sake of culture trying to affix "context" to words. Perhaps you've read this and gained some kind of impression about the context in which it was written, and I would tell you that you're probably wrong, and while there was zero "meaning" behind those words, you probably also created a context from those words as well... and it was probably fed by personal biases of some kind.

Global leaders must remain aware that what they write may not be read with the same emotional attachments, and therein we must seek either the carefully crafted portrayal of something so small and overlooked as "context", or simplify our language and remove personal biases... yet even then, we might cross a cultural aspect where even this could be wrong. Guess even when trying to make them work together, we find the two are still oil and water.

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About the author



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AJ is a retired U.S. Army NCO who served in both the U.S. Navy and U.S. Army. He is a combat veteran, and has participated in contingency operations around the world. AJ is the Owner of Veteran Leadership Solutions, the Founder and Editor in Chief of The Warfighter Journal, and is a published Sociological Analyst, Researcher, Guest Lecturer, and Public Speaker. He is a graduate of Pennsylvania State University with a focus on Sociology and a science degree in Organizational Leadership, and is published in the field of sociology. AJ is an inductive analyst; public figure; researcher/writer; aviator; a certified advanced operational diver; professional instructor, trainer, mentor, and adviser; snowboarder; motorcycle rider; world traveler; he enjoys long distance endurance events, and much more.