

Communicating with Power: **Putting Leadership on Parade**

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Many of the defining characteristics needed for effective leadership – like having a vision, integrity, commitment and resilience – are innate. Happily, another quality, as essential for success as the others, can be learned. It is the ability to mobilize a fire-in-the-belly effort among employees to help the leader realize ambitious goals. This quality can be acquired by observing the behaviors of leaders who deploy these skills, by being coached or incrementally with “stretch” efforts by the leader to generate the needed employee commitment.

The power of the leader’s position alone cannot command enthusiasm and dedication from today’s workforce. Instead, employees must be convinced that the leader’s objectives are achievable, understand that meeting the goals will provide a personal payoff and be inspired to make their own full force contribution. To generate the needed support from everyone in the organization, the leader has to put his leadership on parade: He must be visible, crystal clear about his message and take every opportunity to demonstrate, live and in person, his passion for his goals. Unless he shows how deeply he cares, few others will care and his plan may be seen as another flavor of the month.

Some leaders believe it is sufficient to communicate their goals to the workforce through the organization’s internal media: employee publications, intranet, videoconferencing, etc. – the more sophisticated the technology the better. Many have become enamored with blogging because it makes possible instant communications with large number of employees, assuming they make the effort to log on.

All this is useful because it allows for repetition of the leader’s message, which is essential for making an impact. But using media is not a substitute for interacting with employees face to face. Media cannot convey the intensity of feeling the leader has for his plan nearly as well as human contact does. The very fact that the leader is there, that he has left the comfort of the office to communicate with employees, gives the message importance.

Make it Loud, Clear and Consistent

The leader must make his case loudly, clearly and consistently. He should seize every opportunity to speak from the heart in personal engagements with the employees. Doing this lets the leader express his message with absolute clarity and address any concerns the employees may have about it. There is an additional payoff: The workforce’s views about other company issues will come through unfiltered. (Reporting bad news at these meetings should be encouraged because it can be dealt with on the spot and not spiral out of control).

Personal interactions with the workforce can take many different forms. The leader can make presentations before large groups in auditoriums. There can be smaller, more informal departmental or function-focused meetings, where participants will feel freer to ask questions or present problems. When the leader appears at these meetings without the usual retinue of direct reports it signals that he is approachable and welcomes interaction.

The leader can also meet with a cross-section of employees in skip-level meetings [meetings where top leaders meet directly with the employees – not just with supervisors or “leads”], conduct spontaneous walkabouts to fill in the time between planned events, have lunch in the organization’s cafeteria, and drop in on the back office, the factory floor or a remote office where employees may have never seen the leader and will be particularly impressed. When a leader presents employee awards at presentation ceremonies the awards become particularly special. Praise from an employee’s direct supervisor is a strong motivator; from the organization’s leader is even stronger. Effective leaders are generous with their praise whenever it is deserved.

Presenting with Power

Putting leadership on parade does not come naturally to some leaders, particularly those who have led primarily by issuing directives. But presenting with power is a skill easily learned. Once learned, it becomes a habit and each presentation becomes increasingly effective. In any meeting, large or small,

the effective leader captures the listeners' attention immediately, holds it for the duration of the presentation, and creates the kind of energy that generates action.

The leaders should organize the message so it is clear and compelling. He appeals to both the heart and the head. He tells stories that involve the audience – and reveal his humanity, which is essential for establishing trust. The stories paint word pictures, with characters, settings and action. The leader makes deliberate use of wording, voice, posture, movement and timing. And his most powerful communications tools are his eyes.

Steady, warm eye contact conveys credibility. Failure to make eye contact can signal unease, defensiveness or perhaps lack of candor. When talking with one person, the leader looks at the other's eyes, then moves away to avoid causing discomfort. With a large group, he makes everyone feel included by making eye contact with one person in the audience for as long as it takes to express a thought, and then moves his eyes to someone else in a different part of the room.

When a leader is able to zero in with eye contact toward one audience member, surrounding audience members benefit too; studies have shown that all the audience members in the area around the person being addressed feel they're being spoken to directly. Using the eyes this way also alleviates whatever anxiety the presenter may be feeling because speaking one-to-one to an individual comes naturally. In contrast, nervous speakers scan the audience, never finding one focal point, which increases their anxiety because the brain has too much information to process.

Using the eyes appropriately is the singly most important factor for communicating effectively, it has been shown in an academic study conducted by faculty at the University of Akron's School of Communication. The study evaluated the relative importance of 10 different presentation skills factors in presentations made by participants in Communispond's presentations training course.

Get Out from Behind the Lectern

Leaders who are effective presenters do not use a lectern, a barrier that separates the leader from the audience. They have no need for lecterns because they do not read from a written text. They understand that presentations that are read are considered old news and, as such, detract from the spontaneity that creates energy in the audience rather than convey information.

Effective leaders showcase their passion by putting their whole body into the presentation. They support every statement with an appropriate gesture and make large body movements to underscore important points. They further accentuate these points with dramatic pauses or by raising or lowering their voice. Their choice of language demonstrates they are real because they avoid euphemisms, jargon and office speak.

Though the presentation may appear spontaneous, it has been carefully rehearsed. Extraneous content has been put aside. Questions that may be asked have been identified and succinct, persuasive answers have been prepared. As noted earlier, though an initial presentation like this may require serious rehearsing, the process becomes easier as the leader seeks out opportunities to continue presenting. A seasoned speaker who gets a deep sense of pleasure from presenting can become encouraged to present his views about significant issues on the national stage. This further helps cement leadership positioning.

Knowing Oneself and Organization

The "leadership on parade" process must begin with honest assessments by the leader of how the workforce perceives him and how he in turn views employees. Mistaken impressions can hinder communication and, with that, the leader's effectiveness.

A leader may misunderstand the workforce's values, particularly if he is new. He may have come from a company whose employees value making lots of money but his new culture emphasizes a concept like "do no evil." Judgments from trusted direct reports will be needed because even a small change that runs counter to the culture can have large repercussions.

The workforce may not have a good understanding of the leader either. The leader may have served for many years but has not been very visible. Unknowingly, the leader may be sending out contrary signals. With choices, leaders must project their true selves. This is not a call for the leader to improve his image. Image is artifice. For honest, effective communication there must be authenticity.