

# Great leaders know how to communicate

By Ben Ochs

"Why don't they just do what I want them to do? They act like they've never heard this stuff before. If only I could just say it once and forget about it, then I could really make some headway." These laments course through the minds of executives and leaders of all kinds. It drains them and distracts them from attending to more substantive business affairs.

Executives appreciate good help: trustworthy help that nearly reads minds, anticipates needs, tunes in to implied statements, understands directives and eagerly contributes relevant additional perspectives. Few executives enjoy the benefits of being surrounded by such help. The greatest influence on the phenomenon is communication.

Great leaders are effective communicators. They understand the art and science of it. They balance directness with diplomacy, provide clarity through simplicity and understand the necessity of repetition. They do all these things while respecting the intelligence of their audiences and maintaining their own sense of humility.

Directness is a gift. Diplomacy is a virtue. Either one without the other is like yin without yang. John Bolton, newly appointed as our country's United Nations ambassador, is a case in point. He prides himself on directness, even to the point of being blunt. His remarks, however unpopular and unpalatable, could be entirely true. But delivering them the way he does makes it difficult for many to work with him. His is a malady suffered by many executives and endured by countless subordinates.

Though you can't reach all the people all the time, there are things you can do to improve the odds.

Preparation, clarity, brevity and delivery are key components of effective communication. A difficult message requires careful thought and preparation. Is your audience in the same industry? Is your information critical to their personal or professional lives? Is it likely you will use references or jargon that are foreign to them?

Clarity in a message is usually the result of simplification. Enduring, impactful messages are rarely complex, lengthy or intellectual. Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address was delivered in less than two minutes. Few remember that Edward Everett preceded Lincoln to the podium. Even fewer can recall the subject of his speech. He spoke for over two hours.

When you compose a message designed to direct, inspire and reassure your employees, inventory the nebulous mass of everything your company represents. Look at what it has been, what it is and your vision for its future. Find the consistent elements that thread their way through all aspects of your company's image and purpose, then craft a short, clear statement in terms your audience will recognize and with which they will identify. The statement should be something against which everyone in your company can gauge their actions.

Once you have composed your statement, plan on giving it a workout. No one will fully comprehend or internalize your message having heard it only once. Your brilliant message must be reiterated through every medium and in every forum available. If you want everyone in your organization to speak with unanimity, each must hear you speak frequently and consistently to the points you want them to represent. Your one-line quotation that speaks to why everyone, including you, comes to work every day should be in the signature line of your e-mail, in the company newsletter, spoken at the start of every meeting, posted in everyone's work area and shared with the media at every opportunity. Your actions must model your commitment to your statement.

Use your influence as a leader to communicate so that everyone you support is inspired and aligned. You will be amazed at how much smarter they all get.

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