

Explicit Intentions: The essential ingredient for communication success

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The main reason communication of any kind fails to connect with key audiences and constituencies is the assumption that everyone knows what you are talking about, why you are talking about it, that most of it matters, and therefore they will pay attention. Once it becomes evident that those you are trying to reach or motivate are misinterpreting what is being said, or simply ignoring the new information, precious, expensive, irreplaceable time has been lost. There is then a need to go back, somehow regroup and start again, but the initial misunderstandings may persist and cause longer time lines and less than desirable outcomes.

It is very useful, from the constituent's point of view, that you or the leader begin your communication strategy with an explanation of your own behaviors and intentions. How else are they going to know? Before giving instructions or trying to explain to them how public relations works, or the importance of their listening or participating, it is essential to establish a mutual understanding of how your communication can accomplish something that matters both to you and to them. At the same time, you are sharing the ways constituents can engage in the process, if they choose to do so.

I call this process Communication Intentions. By describing these intentions clearly and carefully, and perhaps by putting them in a convenient place for public reference such as on a web site, you establish a contract with your audience to which they can hold you accountable. At the same time, this approach puts you in a much better position to achieve your objective more promptly and completely, while controlling the critics, bellyachers and other outside forces that are sometimes allowed to intervene because we fail to be clear about what we are doing, why we are doing it and how we intend to accomplish our objectives.

An interesting side effect of this strategy is how it controls outside interests, forces and players. To be successful, these groups find they must abide by many of your intentions,

or risk losing the interest and potential support of the audiences they need to defeat you or slow you down. Once these groups fall into this practice, their ability to intervene successfully and negatively is significantly reduced. Think of these intentions as the disciplines and the templates for communication success. Fail to adequately utilize or be guided by these concepts and the result is again trouble, misunderstanding, confusion and the need to go back and rework things, if there is time. Every element of your communication intention strategy has a name.

1. Candor

I define candor as “Truth with an attitude, now.” Disclose early. Announce good news or bad news as promptly as possible. Explain the reasons and the reasoning surrounding the information you are releasing or providing. Your failure to talk and explain promptly allows others to interpret your intentions and actions, and to forecast what they think you will be doing or saying. Often they will simply make things up.

Discuss the options and the alternatives you considered and provide helpful unsolicited information before someone else can do it in your place, or audiences have to ask for the information. Candor is among the most powerful behaviors for building and maintaining trust. Failure to be candid may be an early first sign that there are other undisclosed mistakes and errors in judgment with even graver consequences.

2. Openness and accessibility

Be available. Be willing to talk. One of the most common complaints from most constituencies, both inside and outside, is that when important things happen, especially negative circumstances or events, those responsible are somehow inaccessible or unwilling to speak or explain. This behavior, combined with lack of candor, damages the trust relationship.

Openness and accessibility reduce contention.

3. Truthfulness

Truth is very complex. Surely, whether it is a process, a procedure, an event or a circumstance, what happens, happens and facts are facts. However, finding the truth is often counterintuitive. Here's an example to illustrate the complexity of truth, and some important lessons about truth that validate this perspective and why it is so important to understand the nature of truth.

Imagine a minor car accident at a residential intersection. Within minutes, a traffic policeman arrives on the scene. She discovers that four people witnessed the accident, each one standing on a different corner of the intersection. She interviews each of them separately and discovers some interesting contradictions.

One pair agrees on how the accident occurred, but their account differs from the other two. A different pair agrees on the positions of the cars and the status of the traffic signals at the time of the accident, but their account differs with the other two. A different pair agrees on the traffic conditions at the time of the accident, but their account differs from the other two. As the police officer reviews her notes, she notices that on most of the other details of the accident, each of the four witnesses disagrees. Welcome to the world of eyewitness testimony.

What do we know about what the four people who witnessed the accident told the police officer? First, we know that they are all probably telling the truth. They have no reason to lie and nothing to do with the accident itself, so the information they are sharing can be relied upon. But wait a minute. If they are all telling the truth, why do their descriptions all differ so substantially? The answer, of course, is that they all saw the accident from a different point of reference. This is a tremendously valuable insight. Truth is always about point of reference. If you think about it, truth really is less about the facts and more about perception and emotion.

I define truth as 15 percent fact and 85 percent perception and emotion. This definition explains a lot. Why is it, for example, that when people are upset about something that really concerns them, they become even angrier when additional data is provided to convince them? The reason, of course, is that facts rarely matter as much as people's perceptions and emotional involvement in the situation itself. This is why victims often seem to ignore the facts, even when they are given in order to help the victim. In reality, the victims, like most audiences, are simply acting on the truth, as they perceive it. Truth is always much more about personal perception than anything else.

Ignoring multiple perspectives is the reason for many of the errors in news accounts of events witnessed by many people. The reporter tries to put together a composite of the events they witness. Other witnesses have only what they saw as their reference. The two perceptions are often at odds.

Along with truth comes the concept of honesty. To be perceived as truthful, there must be a perception of unconditional honesty in the relationship. Any kind of conditional approach that makes it appear that you are truthful only part of the time, and something else other times, calls into question your intentions, your truthfulness and the perception of whether or not you can be trusted.

4. Responsiveness

These comments are directed more to upper and senior management. When sensitive questions arise from outsiders or insiders there is a tendency to focus on who is doing the asking rather than on the important information that could be shared if the questions were answered. This is especially the case for the more senior people in an organization. As one's level in an organization rises, one's skin tends to be thinner (they suffer fewer fools gladly) and resistance to answering questions hardens. This behavior and attitude can cause devastating but avoidable consequences.

The lesson is that questions and their answers are what matter most. The failure to answer questions is often perceived as an intentional failure to communicate. Failure to communicate can have toxic consequences inside and outside an organization because the only way we communicate with others is by answering their questions. It is impossible to communicate with someone who has no questions. If they don't care, you can't communicate.

The crucial secret to success, especially in serious, dangerous, treacherous or negative situations, is answering every question and recognizing that it is the answers questions generate that matter rather than the status, education or qualifications of the questioner. What this means is that an organization and its leaders must recognize the communication power answering questions provides. To do this requires that questions are never taken personally. They come with the territory of leadership. Prompt response confers power and credibility on those who answer.

Failure to answer questions is the surest way to disturb your supporters and generate critics, negativity and opponents. Sometimes failure to answer also causes disappointment and anger. It is anger, combined with criticism, that facilitates recruitment or self-selection of new opponents. Answering questions relentlessly and positively is a strategy for reducing critics, opponents, plaintiffs and visibility. And most important of all, for every question you answer, six to 10 of your supporters, or those who may be worried, stop caring, talking and worrying, and get on with their lives. You win faster with fewer critics.

5. Empathy

Perhaps the most common definition for empathy is the notion of, "putting yourself in someone else's shoes," or "looking at something from the other person's perspective." On issues that matter, both of these definitions fall far short of what victims and those adversely affected expect. Also, these definitions are nearly impossible to truly and genuinely accomplish. Besides, they are mostly talk. My work in many cultures reveals that in virtually every one there is an equivalent to the English phrase, "Actions speak louder than words." To me, empathy is action. Talk without action is spin.

Empathetic, sensitive, prompt action illustrates concern, compassion and real sensitivity. When you act as though it had actually happened to you or someone you cared about, you are making a powerful statement without having to utter a single word. Yes, critics can complain that, "It's too little, too late," but the fact is you acted and they just talked. Empathetic behavior reduces criticism, litigation, news value and doubts about trusting you, and your honesty.

6. Transparency

To be credible, to be respected, to be relied upon and to be trusted all require that our behavior, our attitudes, our plans and even our heated discussions are carried out in

positive, unchallengeable ways, and in the open. This is because in a transparent world the stupid stuff jumps out faster than any other kind of stuff, and comes out at the worst possible time, in the worst possible light and in the most aggressively negative and damaging way.

The intention to be transparent means that our families and friends would be comfortable reading about our actions, decisions, discussions and plans on the front page of tomorrow's newspaper. In a transparent world there are no secrets. Now, more than ever before, there are more watchers and reporters just waiting to expose, disclose, humiliate and embarrass. In the web-dominated world, today's mistakes and misjudgments now last forever.

7. Engagement

The most powerful communication strategy at our disposal is the willingness, ability and self-imposed obligation to go face-to-face frequently and extensively. It is the approach desired by just about everyone. Those who challenge us most will require aggressive positive interaction, even if they vigorously refuse to interact face-to-face. Those in our base audiences, and those who give us permission to operate or proceed, expect us to deal with unconvinced and victims and angry people directly, frequently and compassionately, face-to-face. Direct, interactive response, even negotiation, empowers the initiator. Failure to implement a face-to-face strategy creates more critics and victims, and corrodes your credibility and the perception that you are honest.

8. Correction or clarification

Traditional journalism, newspapers, television and cable, and radio all face declining public trust and credibility, especially newspapers. The new media and social media are supplanting these older "Legacy Media." The opportunity is now available for you to more effectively and quickly control your own destiny.

Public surveys by organizations such as the Pew Charitable Trust indicate that public confidence in material that appears on the Web is growing rapidly. This is true even though almost everyone who uses the Web recognizes that huge amounts of this easily available information is made up, inaccurate, intentionally negative or wrong and unstoppable. At the same time, the Web also provides an extraordinary platform that enables us to present our views and opinions in full, free of editorial filters, media biases and other interference.

The Web also provides a powerful platform for correcting mistakes, errors, maliciousness and the mindless bloviating that has become so prevalent these days. In fact, I recommend that my clients commit to relentlessly correcting and clarifying their own record. At every opportunity, prompt, positive, constructive elaboration of the facts and correcting perceptions preempts critics and empowers employees, supporters and anyone who associates with us. Correcting the record allows even larger numbers of people who would rather go on with their lives than to worry about you, to do so.

For the last eight to 10 years we have shown our clients how to take information that was erroneous, misleading, mistaken or simply confusing and, through a side-by-side clarification technique, provide direct comparisons between what is being said or written about them and our client's own commentary, convictions and concerns.

Another way we provide correction and clarification is to record, digitally or on audiotape, all news interviews, public meetings, question-and-answer sessions and conversations where important issues are discussed or debated. We place both a transcript and the audio on the client's web site. This technique allows everyone who cares, including family members and other important but indirectly affected persons to listen and then make up their own minds, rather than relying on the 17 to 20 words the newspaper or news outlet chooses to use. And, this listening can be done when convenient. The Web is open 24/7.

We also urge reporters to post their notes on their web site for public inspection and understanding. Where there are discrepancies between what a reporter said to get an interview versus the nature of the story that was actually produced, we ask the reporter to provide commentary to help us better understand their real intentions. These notes often reveal whether actual deception took place in the construction of the story. It is very important for readers, viewers and listeners to understand the context in which stories are created—the mental state, behaviors and attitudes of reporters—just as much as it is to understand the content of the actual story produced.

Over the years, we have learned that deception rarely produces truth. In fact, deception whether through omission, commission, negligence or carelessness is a prime ingredient in reporting errors. Using the Web, we now have the opportunity to truly control our destiny by having the last word. Because it is electronic, we can select the precise audience and constituencies whom we know need to have this information and provide it to them directly, instantly.

In an era of increasingly ubiquitous social media, the ability to respond instantly, both from the source of information and to the audiences for that information, will be crucial to maintaining constituent relationships across the board, from employees to regulators, to customers and vendors, to neighbors, to public policy makers, to retirees—to those who regulate us, to those who depend on us and to those who view us as threats. Your destiny may well depend on the speed and directness with which you respond.

Communicate intentionally, explain your guiding principles, live by those intentions and you will control your own destiny. One other thing I have noticed is that many bosses and attorneys tend to like these approaches. While they are relatively peaceful compared to the adversarial approach of many lawyers and the clash of ideas that often drives executive decision making, it is clear that waging peace is ultimately a lot less expensive than waging war, and building friends, supporters and followers is far more desirable than creating critics, angry neighbors and victims.

More than ever before, whatever is communicated needs to be communicated by an operating person who is assisted, trained and coached by a communicator. The success of these communications depends on the audience knowing, in advance, the intentions of the person or organization talking or taking action. Every executive who undertakes to work using a set of explainable communications intentions gives the communicator better access to the inner circle and more influence over how the organization and those who run it will succeed.

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