

Leadership communications: planning for the desired reaction

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BP CEO Tony Hayward faced a crowd of reporters on a Venice, Louisiana dock on May 30, 2010, forty days after the company's Deepwater Horizon oil rig had exploded, killing eleven, injuring dozens and beginning a gusher that pumped five million barrels of crude oil into the Gulf of Mexico. The Deepwater Horizon disaster was the dominant story in the news media.

Hayward, clearly beleaguered and sleep-deprived, seemed frustrated with suggestions that BP – formerly known as British Petroleum – and its leaders weren't doing enough to stop the flow of oil and protect the Gulf ecosystem. In a tone of frustration, Hayward tried to show that he cared and took the situation seriously: "We're sorry. We're sorry for the massive disruption it's caused their lives. And you know we're – there's no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I'd like my life back." [1]

Hayward's statement had the opposite of its intended effect. The "I'd like my life back" quote sounded like self-pity. Critics pounced. From their point of view the real victims were the eleven rig workers, the dozens of injured, the thousands of workers on the coast whose lives and livelihoods were disrupted, but certainly not Haywood.

The media interpreted Haywood's gaffe as a demonstration of the callowness of BP's leadership. This one quote seems to have lost BP the battle for public opinion – for trust, support and the benefit of the doubt. It was a failure of leadership that would have dramatic consequences. For other CEOs, the takeaway should be that it was also a breakdown of communications discipline.

Communication as a leadership discipline

When corporate leaders misunderstand and mishandle communication in a crisis, there can be existential consequences: customer loyalty can be jeopardized, market share lost to rivals, the ability to achieve key goals compromised and perhaps a legal position undercut. Some leaders bungle communication because they are unaware of their own limitations. But they can likely avoid career-defining blunders if they learn to see communication as a critical professional competency and learn how the process works.

First, effective communication isn't about pushing information to an audience. It isn't about facts or data. It isn't about what sounds good in the moment. It isn't about spin. And it certainly isn't what makes the speaker feel good.

A good working definition of communication is: an act of will directed toward a living entity that reacts. The definition can be parsed into three parts:

1. **Communication is an act of will** ... Effective communication is intentional, goal-oriented and coherent with an organization's strategy. Communication is rendered ineffective when it's impulsive or self-indulgent. Effective communication isn't just about what one

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says. Associated actions and behaviors are also a critical part of the message. Communication includes any engagement with a stakeholder, including silence, inaction and action.

2. ... **directed toward a living entity** ... Stakeholders don’t simply receive messages, they have their own opinions, ideas, hopes, dreams, fears, prejudices, attention spans and appetites for listening. Most important, it is a mistake to assume that all audiences think and behave just as we expect them to. Understanding an audience’s preconceptions, and its disinclination to accept a message, is a key part of effective communication.
3. ... **that reacts**. If your goal in engaging an audience is to change something, then you should be clear about what reaction you want to provoke before you speak. Moreover, the words set expectations; a leader’s actions fulfill or betray those expectations. Trust arises when expectations are met and is lost when they are not.

Effective communication requires mastering a discipline with two key skills – gaining a current and thorough knowledge of the expectations and needs of audience and understanding how to craft a message to achieve a desired reaction. Then it requires saying and doing all that is necessary – and only what is necessary – to provoke that desired reaction. It also requires understanding the absolutely predictable intended and unintended consequences of words, silence, inaction and action.

Restraining an imperious executive

Most leaders are somewhat prone to see the world from the perspective of their own organization, but imperious leaders usually fail to consider – or even dismiss as irrelevant – the concerns of stakeholders. This hazard needs to be acknowledged and managed. *The Wall Street Journal’s* “Business World” columnist Holman Jenkins warned:

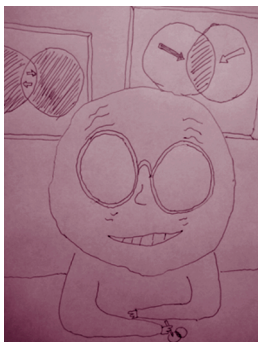
Organizations need defenses against their charismatic leaders. Otherwise such individuals can too readily bully or seduce others into supporting their vainglorious illusions.[2]

Among the vainglorious illusions some leaders harbor – whether they’re CEOs or religious leaders or politicians – is that they don’t need to take stakeholder concerns seriously. But they do if they want to establish long-term trust and confidence.

Losing face

As a case in point, in the fall of 2007 the social networking site Facebook introduced a new feature called Beacon. Facebook, then only three years old, was already changing the way people interacted with each other online. Beacon was intended to let Facebook users share information from its partner shopping sites with their Facebook friends. When a member made a purchase it would automatically be posted on the user’s news feed for the user’s entire network to see. But some users were concerned about sharing news of their purchases with their entire networks. What about surprise presents? What about privacy?

When Facebook launched the service, CEO Mark Zuckerberg, then only 23 years old, didn’t seem to understand the significance of the users’ concerns. Eventually, in response to complaints, Facebook apologized and made some adjustments to the service, but didn’t go far enough. Instead of responding to users’ concerns, Zuckerberg continued to tell them that if they just tried Beacon they’d be convinced. Users and critics pushed back more forcefully, and some Facebook members even created anti-Facebook Facebook pages.



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After months of trying to placate customers, Facebook finally added a universal opt-out function. Mr Zuckerberg wrote on his blog, “We’ve made a lot of mistakes building this feature, but we’ve made even more with how we’ve handled them. We simply did a bad job with this release, and I apologize for it.”[3]

In late 2011, in a blog announcing a Facebook agreement with the US Federal Trade Commission on new privacy standards, Mr. Zuckerberg referred to the 2007 Beacon controversy as a “high-profile mistake” that overshadowed much of the good work that Facebook had done.[4]

Taking stakeholders seriously

Taking stakeholders seriously requires respecting their point of view. It requires the curiosity to learn what matters to them, what actions will win them over and how to earn their trust and confidence. Effective leaders connect with stakeholders by speaking and acting only after thoroughly studying their needs and interests.

Consider all the market research about Apple’s customers that Steve Jobs distilled into a single, exciting phrase. On October 23, 2001 Apple Computer launched a new product that would forever change the world of music. It would eventually also change entertainment, computers and even Apple itself, which would later drop the word computer from its name. The newly re-hired chief executive officer introduced a new device. It was small. It could link with Apple’s Macintosh computer line. And it could play music.

As a computer company, Apple could have highlighted the engineering that went into the new device. Or the unprecedented power of its 5 gigabytes of memory. Or it could have focused on the elegance of its design, its ease of use, or even its price. But it didn’t. Rather, Jobs spoke a single phrase that captured customers’ attention; made them re-imagine what was possible when listening to music. He focused not on the product or the technology. Rather, he simply described what the product meant to the customer. “iPod. A thousand songs in your pocket.”[5]

Until that moment, most consumers couldn’t conceive of carrying one thousand songs in their jeans– the equivalent of almost one hundred CDs. People who had never imagined that they would want that many songs anytime anywhere suddenly had to have an iPod.

Job’s elegantly simple communication changed the way people understood their relation to music. And within ten years, through the iPod’s offspring, iPhone and iPad, Apple transformed the telecom business too.[6]

Most business leaders are not both genius marketers and natural communicators. But they can all learn the methodology of understanding what will get and keep an audience’s attention and earn the audience’s loyalty, trust and confidence. Here’s a simple checklist with three sets of questions for leaders to understand an audience and assess their own level of readiness to engage stakeholders.

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Audience checklist

For any given stakeholder group, a leader should seek answers to three questions:

- **What do we know about the group?** An inventory of current knowledge.
- **How does the group work?** Grounding to predict behavior.
- **How does the group relate to us?** The link between audiences and outcomes.

Mastering these questions is a good starting point to communicate effectively; the following elaborations can help:

1. The group

- Which stakeholder group(s) matter(s)?
- What do we know about the group's values, experiences, and level of sophistication?
- What don't we know that we should?

2. The influencers on the group's behavior

- What are the group's hopes, aspirations, and desires?
- What are the group's worries, concerns, and fears?
- How does the group (or its individual members) make decisions?

3. The group's relationship to us

- What does the group currently do, think, feel, or know about us?
- What changes in the group's actions, thoughts, feelings, knowledge or expectations would benefit our goals?
- What are the opportunities and barriers for those changes to take place?

Notes

1. Jessica Durando, "BP's Tony Hayward: 'I'd like my life back'," *USA Today*, June 1, 2010, <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/greenhouse/post/2010/06/bp-tony-hayward-apology/1>
2. Holman Jenkins, "Business world," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 19, 1998: A19. Print.
3. Mark Zuckerberg, "Thoughts on Beacon," *The Facebook Blog*, Facebook, December 5, 2007, http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?blog_id=company&blogger=4
4. Mark Zuckerberg, "Our commitment to the Facebook community," *The Facebook Blog*, Facebook, November 29, 2011, <http://blog.facebook.com/blog.php?post=10150378701937131>
5. Steve Jobs, Apple Music Event, Cupertino, California, October 23, 2001, Speech.
6. Apple Inc., *Apple Reinvents the Phone with iPhone*, *Apple.com*, Apple Inc., January 9, 2007, Web, www.apple.com/pr/library/2007/01/09Apple-Reinvents-the-Phone-with-iPhone.html

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