

## Communication Theory for Leaders - Failure to Communicate

"What we have here is a failure to communicate." – From the movie Cool Hand Luke.

You are the leader the next door and you have to give a speech, make a presentation, write an advertisement, or simply carry on a conversations in a social networking opportunity. How do you insure that you do not fail to communicate? What four simple actions will help you?

The first thing is to define what communication is and what it is not. Basic communication theory starts with a good definition. At the most foundational level you have three components. They are: 1) the Sender (you); 2) the Message (we will discuss it later); and 3) the Receiver. I'll refer to the receiver as the audience.

The audience is king!

In developing websites you will often here that "Content is king". That may be true in terms of search engine optimization, but in the end the audience is king. The audience has to receive the message.

The audience is not some passive couch potato, half-baked in a mindless stupor from the rays of the TV. With remote in hand, they will change channels at a moment's notice if they are disinterested, overwhelmed, or offended. This applies to more than TV. They have a mental and emotional remote that they use with speakers, writers, and conversationalists. You have probably used it yourself on occasion. You do not want to have it used on you.

The message is not information!

In discussions of communication theory, some experts describe communication as the transfer of information from the sender to the receiver. That may be true at a technical level but computers transfer information back and forth. That is merely cold science. There is a difference between information exchange and communication.

It is more helpful to define communication as a transfer of understanding. Understanding has the warmth of emotion and when combined with information turns the message into art. Carl Buechner said, "They may forget what you said, but they will never forget how you made them feel". As a leader you need to become a communication artist.

Defining communication as the exchange of understanding takes in back to its root meaning. Communication comes from the same root word as "community" and "common". The message must create an understanding that you as a leader

have in common with the audience. The message has the effect of creating a sense of community or commonality among you.

## The Role of the Leader

It has been noted that "the extent to which you are able to transform your self-concern into other-concern will determine your effectiveness in getting others to follow along." Often the role of the leader is to get out of the way. If, as the sender, you focus on yourself, it weakens the message and you disconnect with the audience.

The model of: Sender>Message>Receiver, works if all that is needed is information transfer; for example, when you go through a fast food drive-through. However, ordering lunch is a far cry from leadership. It is not creating any significant community between you and the restaurant employees.

Launching yourself into leadership may require a revolutionary way of thinking. What if the communication model for leaders looked like this: Message>Leader<Audience? This model shows you as the leader, serving both the message and the audience.

This model places the leader next door to the audience, i.e. in community with the audience. This works in situations where there is high value in the message. The message is visionary, it is mentoring, it is transcending. That is the difference between communication at the leadership level and ordering French fries at the local drive through.

Four simple ways to improve communication.

1. Always start with a written audience analysis. Break down the audience into segments, explore characteristics of each segment, and look for commonalities. Write down the characteristics of each segment. Look for things you may have in common with each segment. Write down what they may already know about what you are going to say.
2. Think about the audience as you prepare your messaging. There are probably certain points that you need to get across. You are the leader. You have the message. You need to deliver it. But you have to create understanding. With your audience analysis in hand, think about stories and metaphors that can create that understanding. Ask yourself what will make them care about your message.
3. Do an analysis of the benefits to the audience. Write down the benefits to the other person. This may emerge from the activity in the last step but it is significant for me to include it on its own. Do not limit the benefit analysis to

material things alone, but consider altruistic benefits. Make a list of all of the benefits and then narrow them down; maybe three to five of the most important. Don't just list the benefits, but weave them throughout your communication.

Balance your choice by selecting benefits that your audience will relate to and that you feel emotion about helping them to receive. If you truly desire that they receive those benefits, it will come through. It has been said that "communication is 20% facts and 80% how you feel about them".

4. "Be interested instead of interesting" as Dale Carnegie suggests in his timeless book "How to Win Friends and Influence People". Get yourself out of the way. Find ways to ask questions of the audience as you communicate. Margaret Miller said that "most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of a witness." When you present or write think about the audience rather than focusing on yourself. Avoid delivering monologues.

Use self-talk. When you meet someone, think to yourself, "I am interested in this person". Tell yourself that just the second before you greet them. When speaking in public, before you begin speaking pause for a moment to briefly scan the audience and think to yourself, "I care about them." It will change how you communicate and make you much more relaxed.

Doing these four things will improve your communication as a leader. It will help you become a builder of community with whatever audience you engage. When theory based communication is applied, it increases your ability to lead.

#### About the Author

Rick Hubbard - B.A. in Communication and Organizational Leadership and an M.A. in Instructional Systems/e-Learning He is a instructional technologist at a Florida university and does consulting in communication and instructional design. <http://www.ALeadershipRevolution.com>

Permission is given to reprint this article in its entirety and unedited if the reprint include "about the author" information.