

From:

The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader
By John C. Maxwell

C O M M U N I C A T I O N :

W I T H O U T I T Y O U T R A V E L A L O N E

Developing excellent communication skills is absolutely essential to effective leadership. The leader must be able to share knowledge and ideas to transmit a sense of urgency and enthusiasm to others. If a leader can't get a message across clearly and motivate others to act on it, then having a message doesn't even matter.

—Gilbert Amelio,
President and CEO of National Semiconductor Corp.

Educators take something simple and make it complicated. Communicators take something complicated and make it simple.

—John C. Maxwell

A GREAT COMMUNICATOR
IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

Many American presidents have made an impact on our country as great communicators. John F. Kennedy, Franklin D. Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln come to mind as outstanding examples. But only one president in our lifetime was called the Great Communicator, and that was Ronald Reagan.

Flashes of Reagan's talent for communication revealed themselves early in his career. He started out in radio. In his early twenties, Reagan quickly became one of the best-known announcers in the Midwest. He usually announced games live, but occasionally he would simulate the broadcast of a Chicago Cubs game using Western Union reports of each play. During one such game, the wire went dead while Augie Galan was at bat in a tough situation. Reagan deftly kept Galan fouling off pitch after imaginary pitch for *six minutes* until he could pick up the play-by-play again.

Throughout his career, Reagan displayed an uncommon ability to connect and communicate with people. Nowhere was that more evident than during his time leading up to and in the White House. While announcing his run for the presidency in 1980, he cast the vision for his campaign clearly and simply, saying, "At the heart of our message should be five simple familiar words. No big economic theories. No sermons on political philosophy. Just five short words: *family, work, neighborhood, freedom, peace.*"

During his campaign, Reagan successfully debated incumbent Jimmy Carter. The former California governor came across as a relaxed, likable, competent middle American. He won easily. Afterward when asked if he had been nervous debating the president, Reagan answered, "No, not at all. I've been on the same stage with John Wayne."

Whether he was speaking to a group, looking into a camera, or connecting with someone one-on-one, Reagan was able to communicate with maximum effectiveness. Even when he was shot and was being wheeled into the operating room, his goal was to put others at ease. His comment to the surgeons was, "Please assure me that you are all Republicans."

Reagan was a good executive because he possessed a clear vision, made decisions easily, and delegated very effectively. But he was a great leader because of his uncanny ability to communicate. When it came to leading the country, people knew who he was, where he stood, and what he wanted, and they couldn't wait to get on board with him. Communication made him the kind of leader that people wanted to follow.

F L E S H I N G I T O U T

Even if you don't have your sights set on leading the country, as Ronald Reagan did, you still need to possess the ability to communicate. The success of your marriage, job, and personal relationships depends greatly on it. People will not follow you if they don't know what you want or where you are going.

You can be a more effective communicator if you follow four basic truths.

1. Simplify Your Message

Communication is not just *what* you say. It's also how you say it. Contrary to what some educators teach, the key to effective communication is simplicity. Forget about impressing people with big words or complex sentences. If you want to connect with people, keep it simple. Napoleon Bonaparte used to tell his secretaries, "Be clear, be clear, be clear."

A story about a junior executive gives a blueprint for effective communication. The young man was invited to speak to a large group for the first time, so he approached his mentor for advice about giving a good speech. The older man said, "Write an exciting opening that will grab everybody in your audience. Then you write a dramatic summary and closing that will make the people want to act. Then put them as close together as possible."

2. See the Person

Effective communicators focus on the people with whom they're communicating. They know it is impossible to effectively communicate to an audience without knowing something about them.

As you communicate with people—whether individuals or groups—ask yourself these questions: Who is my audience? What are their questions? What needs to be accomplished? And

how much time do I have? If you want to become a better communicator, become audience oriented. People believe in great communicators because great communicators believe in people.

3. Show the Truth

Credibility precedes great communication. There are two ways to convey credibility to your audience. First, believe in what you say. Ordinary people become extraordinary communicators when they are fired up with conviction. Field Marshal Ferdinand Foch observed, "The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire." Second, live what you say. There is no greater credibility than conviction in action.

4. Seek a Response

As you communicate, never forget that the goal of all communication is action. If you dump a bunch of information on people, you're not communicating. Every time you speak to people, give them something to feel, something to remember, and something to do. If you're successful in doing that, your ability to lead others will go to a new level.

REFLECTING ON IT

Danto Manquez Jr., president of MVM, Inc., has spoken to the issue of a leader's ability to communicate: "A leader must get things done through others, therefore the leader must have the ability to inspire and motivate, guide and direct, and listen. It's

only through communication that the leader is able to cause others to internalize his or her vision and implement it.”

How do you rate your ability to communicate with others? Is communication a priority for you? Can you inspire and motivate people? Do you express your vision in such a way that your people are able to understand, internalize, and implement it? When you talk to people one-on-one, are you able to connect with them? How about with groups? If you know in your heart that your vision is great, yet people still do not buy into it, your problem may be an inability to communicate effectively.

BRINGING IT HOME

To improve your communication, do the following:

- *Be clear as a bell.* Examine a letter, memo, or other item you’ve recently written. Are your sentences short and direct, or do they meander? Will your readers be able to grasp the words you’ve chosen, or will they have to scramble for a dictionary? Have you used the fewest words possible? To a communicator, your best friends are simplicity and clarity. Write your next piece of communication keeping both in mind.
- *Refocus your attention.* During the coming week, pay attention to your focus when you communicate. Is it on you, your material, or your audience? If it’s not on people,

you need to change it. Think about their needs, questions, and desires. Meet people where they are, and you will be a better communicator.

- *Live your message.* Are there any discrepancies between what you communicate and what you do? Talk to a few trustworthy people and ask them whether you are living your message. Your spouse, a mentor, or a close friend may be able to see things that you are blind to. Receive their comments without defensiveness. Then purpose to make changes in your life to be more consistent.

D A I L Y T A K E - A W A Y

On April 7, 1865, President Abraham Lincoln made a burdensome decision, and he needed to communicate it to his general in the field. On it rested all his hopes and the entire weight of his leadership as president. Using all his considerable skill as a communicator, he wrote the following message:

Lieut. Gen. Grant,
Gen. Sheridan says, "If the thing is pressed, I think that Lee will surrender." Let the thing be pressed.
A. Lincoln

The president didn't allow the importance of a piece of communication to complicate its simplicity. Neither should we.