



The Leader as Communicator by Lovett H. Weems, Jr.

Effective leaders are good communicators. They understand the importance of communication in all its forms and spend much time at the task. This communication is always two-way, receiving as well as giving information and feelings.

One study of leadership analyzed how leaders spend their days, concluding "for formal leaders in organizations . . . the world consists of many activities (most of them of short duration), frequent interruptions, a large network of contacts extending far beyond the immediate work group, and a preponderance of oral interaction." (McCall, *Leaders and Leadership*, 9-10)

Indeed, there is no way for leaders to avoid communication. Even the absence of direct and planned communication sends a powerful message, almost always negative. If words are not being communicated, actions are. The question for leaders is not if they will communicate, but what to communicate and how.

Listening

"The successful leader will have not the loudest voice," says Warren Bennis, "but the readiest ear." While listening is as much an attitude as a set of activities, it is necessary to provide a structure for listening. Avenues for listening should be regular and frequent. Listening can and should take many different forms: one to one, groups, meals, forums, surveys, etc. Through such means, leaders receive good ideas, as well as early warning signals when things are not going well.

Listening is just the beginning. Leaders must complete the feedback loop, or risk losing much of the benefit of listening. When people can see results from suggestions, they respond in great numbers and with great enthusiasm. One pastor used a pew survey to learn church members' favorite hymns. The first year, only thirty of many hundred people responded. Over the next year, the pastor used the most-suggested hymns each Sunday just before the sermon. The next time the survey was taken, three hundred persons responded!

Listening involves not only hearing, but learning to hear selectively -- hearing not only what is pleasing or what fits the leader's predilections, but listening for clues about positive directions to take or about uneasiness that may be present. Everything said is not of equal worth. Listening is more than collecting data; it is searching for insights and clues. Most importantly, the leader must hear what is not being said. Some of the most important revelations come in what people choose not to say or in who does not speak.



Speaking

Studies of leadership show that the world of leaders is primarily oral. But very little of their oral communication involves giving orders or issuing instruction. Rather, it has to do with purpose, mission, direction, and values. Here are some guidelines for speaking:

- Keep it simple. Think in terms of a clear vision and some core values that you want to communicate at every opportunity, through many different means. The tune stays the same, but the verses keep changing. The tune must always remain simple if it is to be remembered.
- Make it memorable. Robert Greenleaf spoke of "inventiveness with language and avoidance of a stereotyped style" as important for religious leaders. Effective leaders use memorable phrases and metaphors. They paint pictures. They illustrate. They use symbols.
- Use every opportunity to tell the story. Tie many things to the central story and vision. See nothing as routine. One of his closest friends said that Winston Churchill spent a good part of his life rehearsing impromptu speeches.

Writing

Use all available channels for written communication. Writing for the bulletin, newsletter, or reports is not an obligation, but an opportunity to lift the vision. Find ways to practice what Tom Peters calls the "wholesale sharing of information."

The symbol of sharing information is often as important as the actual information itself. Few people will remember by Tuesday information about the collection reported in Sunday's bulletin. However, they will remember that financial information is shared with everyone. Posting board meeting minutes has symbolic value, even if few people actually read them. Announcing that the annual financial audit is available to any church member will result in increased confidence, even if few copies are requested. The presence of a mission bulletin board communicates a particular commitment of the church, even if few people can recall exactly what is on it.

Reading

While reading is not normally thought of as communication, it is essential to leadership. If a leader does not prepare through reading, he or she finally has nothing to communicate. To be successful, most people find it essential to have a plan for reading. Develop a simple plan that fits your needs, patterns, goals, and vision. Then stay with it. Again, there must be the ability to selectively "hear" what is being read. There is no way to remember everything, so one needs to be able to remember what matters.

Actions

Although actions are not ordinarily thought of as communication, they are the most powerful communication instrument available to the leader. When you are the leader, people are always looking at you. There are no "small acts" for leaders. Leaders must always be asking how their behavior represents the vision they are trying to articulate. How time is used, what questions are asked, what information is collected and shared, how the leader responds to people and incidents – all these things communicate what you are about. The message of one's actions must be consistent with what is being articulated in words.