



The Four Cs of Communication

BY MERYL RUNION

John may be a lot smarter than George, but George ended up at the top right where John wanted to be. Why? George made complex ideas simple. John made simple ideas complex.

John was intelligent and may even have been right, but he was unable to shape his message so that people could understand, commit to and follow him.

If information is unclear, people make stuff up. And when people make stuff up, they get anxious. People need clarity, and they support leaders who give it to them.

If you are open-minded, you can see the merits of multiple options. Clarity means narrowing those options down to actionable ideas. Have you ever been with a group that couldn't decide on a restaurant? Someone suggests Joe's, someone else suggests Friday's, but then another person mentions the biscuits at Red Lobster. The conversation goes around in circles until a decisive member of the group says, "Let's eat at India Gardens because it has a buffet and we'll get out of there fast."

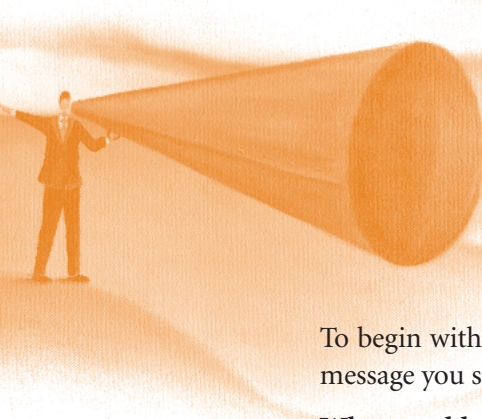
The whole group is immediately persuaded because finally someone was both clear and convincing. Good communication is all about clarity.

To begin with, clarity comes when you ask and answer the right questions. Consider the last message you sent your staff in light of these questions:

What would you want people to be thinking, feeling, doing, saying or wanting? Make your vision concrete to give yourself a clear picture of what you are mobilizing toward.

What is the current reality? Contrast the current world with your vision of the world as you know it could be.

What prevents the world from being like your vision? This is where you clearly define your enemies, which gives you something concrete to mobilize against. The enemies could be



Clarity

attitudes, the competition, ignorance or bad practices. Define those enemies.

What do you know that can help create your perfect world? What information do you have (or need to acquire) that would bring the world around from the way it is to the way you want it to be?

What beliefs do you have that are fundamental to creating your perfect world? Are there principles and values that drive you each day? What are they?

What do you need to do to create your perfect world? Are you doing those things? How do you translate your knowledge and beliefs into action?

What do you need to stop doing to create your perfect world? Are there things you do that send a different message from the one you intend?

If you do not feel a distinct sense of certainty regarding any of these questions, keep asking until you do. The first person you need to convince is yourself.

Finally—and this is the part where George ran circles around John—**how can you sum up each of your answers in short concise statements?**

THE CONVICTION OF CLARITY

George came across as a leader with conviction. John had conviction as well, but in his attempt to appease those who saw things differently, he compromised his convictions until few people knew what he stood for. So the majority of the people supported George. While compromise is a valuable and necessary quality in a leader, the leader who seems too willing to compromise is the leader who appears to lack conviction. John appeared to change his vision and message depending on what others said to him.

If you frequently adapt your message to the perceived expectations of others, you may not have achieved the clarity to convince yourself. Consequently, you won't be able to stand your ground or convince others of your position.

THE COURAGE OF CLARITY

Doubt undermines courage. Conviction cultivates it. Once you clarify your position to the point of complete conviction, courage automatically results. Think of the parent who risks his own life to save his child. He is clear that the child's life is his priority and has the conviction that comes from that clarity. This parent courageously does what he needs to do in order to protect his child.

Author William Arkin was asked why he was willing to risk his job by revealing information that he thought the public needed to know. He responded, “I can’t work somewhere that’s not going to support the notion of openness. You believe in openness or you don’t.” Arkin’s clarity gave him the conviction to take a risk that many others would be frightened to take.

If the courage of conviction does not direct you, review your level of clarity. If you are convinced that you have reached clarity and are committed to your message, then you should be able to act as if you have the courage of your conviction.

THE CANDOR OF CLARITY

Why would any courageous executive who sincerely believes in what he stands for ever opt for anything less than truthfulness? Once you are clear and have conviction, your courage can only lead you in one direction...candor. Anything else is a betrayal of your integrity, and anything else weakens your leadership.

While our world has seen numerous examples of leaders who have become embroiled in scandal because of their deceit, the leaders who withstand the test of time are leaders who employ candor. People want honesty and directness from the people they follow. Survey after survey has identified honesty as the number one quality sought in a leader. Jim Collins, in his book *Good to Great*, advises us to confront the brutal facts but keep the faith. When our vision is incorporated even into our mundane communication, when we are straightforward about the big picture that is our compass for everything we do and when our simplest decisions reflect the whole, as they should, the brutal facts are accepted without challenging the faith.

Say what you mean and mean what you say without being mean when you say it is a mantra that thousands observe to add candor to their communication.

THE CREATIVITY OF CLARITY

As a thought leader, make your message as accessible as possible. Fortunately, once you have your message clear, it is easier to uncover creative ways of presenting it. Here are some questions for you to ask yourself to get your creative muse flowing.

- ▶ How can I add interest?
- ▶ How can I add clarity?
- ▶ How can I add simplicity?
- ▶ How can I add inspiration?
- ▶ How can I add fun?
- ▶ How can I add relevance?
- ▶ How can I add interaction?
- ▶ How can I make my message more memorable?
- ▶ How can I make my message more succinct?
- ▶ How can I make my message more universal?

- ▶ How can I make my message more personal?
- ▶ How can I make my message more specific?
- ▶ How can I make my message more useful?
- ▶ How can I make my point so they get my point?

Collect stories and examples for every principle you champion. Find short exercises and quizzes that illustrate your point. Honor people who embody what you believe in with awards.

CONVICTION, COURAGE, CANDOR AND CREATIVITY IN EXECUTIVE COMMUNICATION

Each piece of the communication progression described here adds to the foundation of solid leadership. Can you skip a piece and still be a successful leader? Yes, but not without paying a price.

There are charismatic leaders who do not have a clear message, but they mesmerize others with their smoke-and-mirror razzle-dazzle style. Once the smoke clears, however, they are seen for what they are.

There are unscrupulous leaders who have clear messages that they don't believe in but that they promote to get what they want. These are the CEOs who talk corporate accountability when they are busy altering books to make their performance look good. They lack the impact of leaders who are sincere, and this type of deception usually catches up with them.

There are cowardly leaders who have so much fear driving them that, despite their clear message and conviction, they lack the courage to communicate courageously. Unless they face their fear directly, they will not have the impact of those who have found their courage.

There are guarded leaders who lack candor due to secrecy or omission. These leaders do not inspire trust as the candid ones do.

There are competent leaders who have all the clarity, conviction, courage and candor they could hope for, but their message is dry and boring. They may have a great message, but few will hear it.

Yes, you can skip a step in the communication progression, but you will lose impact, power and effectiveness.

Leaders who cultivate the use of all four Cs in communication clarity are leaders that people can understand, commit to and follow. It's not enough to be right. It's not enough to know what you want. It's not enough to be very good at what you do. You've got to, have conviction, be courageous, use candor and communicate creatively. [MW](#)

Meryl Runion is the author of PowerPhrases, How to Use Power Phrases and Perfect Phrases for Managers. She is the CEO of SpeakStrong INC and the managing director of the Center for Responsible Communication. For information go to: www.speakstrong.com