



Focus

A publication of Wagner Consulting Group

March 2012

Home

Mission

Services

Testimonials

Clients

About

Leaders: Talk More!

Goethe said, "No one would talk much in society if he knew how often he misunderstands others." I offer the following twist of Goethe's words for leaders:

Leaders would talk more if they knew how often
their followers misunderstood them.

Most of us think we do a better job of communicating our ideas than do our listeners. Leaders are particularly susceptible to this fantasy. If you doubt that, periodically ask your audience, whether one or many, to explain the gist of what you just said.

To understand why leaders often fail to adequately communicate, consider the three elements of communication.

1-Thought: A person conceptualizes an idea, and may spend considerable time defining alternatives and evaluating options. That's all good, but then the following pitfall may come into play: *I thought it, therefore I said it*. That may sound crazy, but it happens to busy leaders more often than you might imagine.

2-Encoding: Next the person translates his thoughts into words, written or spoken, and perhaps visual images when presenting in person. You know how tricky that can be if you have ever translated words from one language to another. Even when (if?) the author proofreads his work, he is reading it through his own communication filters. For leaders, that leads us to another communication pitfall: *I said it, therefore I did it*. Even *if* your people understand your intent, without follow-up the best laid plans usually fall short.

3-Decoding: Finally, each audience member translates words and symbols into a concept she can understand. This decoding process seeks to quickly identify what the speaker really means, interpreting all communication elements - words, sounds, and visual cues.

- The initial decoding uses a subconscious pattern-recognition process; think of this as opportunity/threat analysis. Context is dominant in this initial decoding. For example, the audience will be likely to jump to favorable conclusions in a safe and relaxed setting. In contrast, negative connotations may be dominant when people feel threatened, personally or by global events like economic uncertainty. Some cognitive scientists call this first response "System 1" thinking.
- Logical analysis of words follows the first response translation, and is often of secondary importance. The difficulty with logical analysis (so-called "System 2" thinking) is that it's **hard work**, and we have lazy brains. Consequently, we seek mental shortcuts in decision-making, and these may lead us to incorrect conclusions. Logic seldom trumps emotion, so the leader must take pains to ensure the audience's first impressions are consistent with the core meaning she wants to deliver.

This brings us back to the concept of intent, as in: Did your audience understand the desired outcome so that each person knows what he or she must do to achieve the objective? Folks, that might not seem like much (System 1 thinking, "Well, duh, of course!" rather than System 2 logic, "Show me how each person understands line-of-sight goals.") but it's actually a high standard.

One of the best ways a leader can communicate what he wants is to clearly describe where he wants to end up: a clear picture of the outcome, or end state. This clarity of results allows each person involved to make better independent, real-time decisions. When that happens on a regular basis, the leader has removed himself as a bottleneck and transformed his organization into a team capable of quick responses to a changing environment. And that's just wonderful for everyone!

Tom Wagner

As of last month, I had written 125 focus articles and used the word leader in the titles of 14. In contrast, the word communication only appears in three titles. That's an imbalance to which I will direct my future attention.

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