

A quarterly publication service
produced by
LIVE Consultants Inc.

January 2000
Number 95



Leadership Communication

From the Editor

One of the features of our website — www.liveconsultants.com — is something we call intellectual popcorn; kernels of wit ‘n wisdom that explode with fun and insight. There’s a new one every day. I find it is a good way to start the day because it causes me to reflect and, on some days, even laugh. A recent posting was a quote from Barbarella. It read: *A life without cause is a life without effect.* Pop!

From there, idea after idea exploded in my mind: find a purpose ... a purpose about which I’m passionate ... pursue it ... make a difference ... it’s not where I arrive, it’s how far I’ve come that matters ... am I getting the effects I want? ... who owns that? ... decide ... what do I want my contribution to be? ... focus.

The day started as it should. I was thinking: asking as many questions as I had answers.

In large measure, that’s what we at LIVE Consultants do when we work with our clients: prompt people to think, question, and test what they have always done.

Marilyn Baetz, editor

About the Author and the Article

A communication specialist once said to me, “Don’t communicate until you are understood: communicate until you can’t be misunderstood.” My hunch is that many people have heard this advice and come to the conclusion that the best way not to be misunderstood is to communicate often and at length: hence the hurricane of e-mails and attachments.

However quantity ought not to be a surrogate for quality; volume should not replace clarity.

Our author, Stephen Baetz who is a principal of LIVE Consultants, argues that leaders ought to be clear in four areas: about ideas, about purpose, about values, and about roles.



Stephen Baetz

I Want To Be Perfectly Clear

You won.

I didn't know I was playing.

Good. You were tough.

Was I? At what?

B.S. Bingo.

I take it B.S. stands for Brilliant Speech?

Not quite.

Basic Stuff?

Nope.

Balanced Suggestions?

Not even close.

Bull-

Exactly.

And it's a good thing that I won?

Yep.

How so?

We see a bunch of speakers over the year.

You all seem to have the same buzzwords.

We've created a card with 25 of the most used words of corpspeak and when the presenter uses one, we stroke the word off the list on the card. The speaker usually thinks we're keepers taking notes. When you have a full row or column, you put up your hand, ask a pre-determined question to signal Bingo, and you win the money in the pool.

Oh.

To make it interesting and for extra cash we sometimes place side bets on how long into the speech it will be before someone wins.

Really.

Usually 30 minutes, no more. But, you won!

You went two hours and we only got three.

D'ya want the cash?

I smiled, declined the offer, and then, out of curiosity, asked for the card.

Alignment, culture, strategic-anything, transformational, leverage, headcount, impacted, prioritized, integrated, *any*-TLA, drivers, parameters, optimize, threshold, appropriate-size, upside, innovative, reconfigured, equity, targets, niche, contingency, re-assignment, capitalize, network ... the usual list of suspects.

I assumed the fact that I had "won" was a compliment; at least I took it that way. The point was well-made: all too often the

language of leadership confuses rather than clarifies; jargon is nothing but noise that detracts from the possibility of mutual understanding.

Of course, the question that fascinates me is why leaders resort to the buzzwords. Is it designed to mask a weak message or minimize questions? Is it used as proof positive that the speaker knows the passwords of the club or is it simply a reflection of a limited vocabulary coupled with an inability to use stories, metaphors, or examples to ensure clarity? Who knows? Maybe it's some of those; maybe it's all of those.

One thing I do know for certain is that obscure language diminishes what leaders can accomplish and, in many cases, increases cynicism: witness B.S. Bingo.

The implicit and obvious argument is that clarity is a necessary condition for leadership success. Clarity about what?

Test my list against yours.

Leaders must have clear ideas.

Followers are attracted to leaders who have ideas. I suspect that Gandhi never attended charm school, never networked, never drafted a strategic direction for an SBU, and never worried about "prioritizing to optimize upside potentials." But he had ideas: ideas that shaped and stretched how people thought about power and independence. I'll bet Trudeau never did a 360 or attended a nifty two-day workshop on presentation skills. But he had ideas: ideas that obliged us to think about justice and the obligations of individuals and the state. I'll guess that Jean Vanier never did an MBA but he had ideas about the growth and development of individuals that have caused us to rethink what it means to be abled.

Ideas challenge tired thinking; ideas cause us to believe that another way is possible. Ideas point. Yes, ideas liberate.

Leaders worth following have more than a single idea — they know just as their followers do that there is nothing more dangerous than a person with a single idea or a solitary notion.

Leaders worth following dedicate time and

effort to make their ideas clear — so clear that they can't be misunderstood.

Leaders must be clear about purpose.

Leaders focus on the ends to be achieved and on why those ends are worthwhile. They do it with words that are simple, straightforward, specific, and uncompromising.

Leaders are not expected to know the precise detail of how the purpose will be achieved — that should be left to the fertile imaginations and ingenuity of team members — but leaders must be clear about what future is being pursued. They ought to provide clear images of what the team or the organization will be doing better, how people will feel, what they will know, and what they will want to achieve after that.

After hearing the definition, followers should feel like they are being drawn to a worthwhile future.

Here's a definition I heard not long ago and it is an example of what not to say. "We will, within the parameters and limitations of our resources, optimize our capacities and thereby improve our equity as a transformational leader within the industry."

Huh? Was that person even talking about purpose? My hunch is that the string of words was saying, "We'll do our best to change" which, of course, is not a definition of purpose.

Leaders dedicate time and effort to get the definition of purpose and the reasons for pursuing the purpose apparent and obvious to everyone.

Leaders must be clear about values.

Values are the moral benchmarks by which everyone on a team ought to assess their behaviour. They declare what is prized in the organization; they place limits on what means can be used in the pursuit of the goal.

Leaders who are worth following define what the values are, they provide examples of what is in-bounds and what is out-of-bounds behaviour, and they declare why the values are important to the organization.

They make no assumption that everybody knows intuitively what is valued. They not only use the words but they also provide definitions and examples so no one can misinterpret.

"Everyone knows what honesty is," one executive recently declared to me, "if they don't they shouldn't be working here." Do they? Is honesty merely telling the truth or does it also mean telling people what you don't know? And if it is merely telling the truth how do you know what the truth is? Is it what you know factually or what you know to be real?

Leaders are explicit about values so the debate about what is appropriate can happen before the fact rather than after.

Leaders must be clear about roles.

They know what contributions they will make and they know and communicate what contributions they expect others to make. They recognize that by doing this they minimize blame placing and finger pointing when projects and performance are being reviewed. Role clarity minimizes useless conflict and lets people debate the best way to serve the needs of customers or employees.

However, once roles and responsibilities are defined, they leave lots of room for people to determine what strategies are appropriate, how the tasks will be done, or what the timing ought to be.

The Reality Is ...

The marketplaces in which we operate are ambiguous. The argument for clarity is not an argument which asks you to pretend that this ambiguity does not exist. Ambiguities are puzzles that everyone should help to solve — from what is going on in the environment to what is the best way to design products and services. The position I am taking is that leaders should not confuse those important debates and arguments with language that is fuzzy, empty, and meaningless ... which is what happens when we surrender to the jargon of corpspeak.

Our customers have given us quite a reputation!

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