

Building Trust

Communicate effectively.



by Helio Fred Garcia

TWO YEARS AGO BP CEO Tony Hayward inadvertently got his wish when, in the thick of the Deepwater Horizon disaster, he told the press, “I want my life back.” He was soon sacked. In the battle for public opinion—for trust, support, the benefit of the doubt—Hayward lost. It was a massive *failure of leadership*. And it began with a *failure of communication* and a *failure of discipline*.

Hayward’s blunder should be a *wake-up call* to other leaders, to all whose leadership responsibilities require inspiring trust and confidence verbally.

Whatever else leadership may be, it is experienced publicly. While it may emanate from within, it is a public phenomenon. And however technically proficient you may be, if you don’t communicate effectively, you can’t lead well. Communication has power. But as with any form of power, if not harnessed effectively it can backfire.

After 33 years of helping leaders build trust, inspire loyalty, restore confidence and lead effectively, I conclude that *many leaders misunderstand communication*. As a result, their companies lose competitive advantage; NGOs find it harder to fulfill their mission; religious denominations lose the trust and confidence of their followers; nations diminish their ability to protect citizens and achieve national security goals.

Most leaders think they’re already good at communicating. They’ve been speaking since before they were one year old; reading since age four or five; writing since soon after that. Unlike other disciplines that leaders have had to master, they’ve been communicating their whole lives. It seemed to be no big deal. Leaders often are unaware of their own communication abilities.

Many leaders suffer career-defining blunders when they don’t take communication as seriously as they take other elements of their jobs. Effective leaders see communication as a *critical professional aptitude* and work hard to get it right.

Effective communication isn’t about pushing information to an audience. It isn’t about facts, data, spin, what sounds good or makes the speaker feel good.

I define *communication* as *an act of will directed toward a living entity that reacts*. Let’s parse this definition:

- *Communication is an act of will . . .* Effective communication is intentional, goal-oriented, and strategic—not top-of-mind, impulsive, or self-indulgent. It isn’t just about what one *says* but about anything one *does* or is *observed to do*—any engagement with a stakeholder, including silence, inaction, and action.

- *Directed toward a living entity . . .* Stakeholders aren’t passive vessels

who simply absorb messages. Rather, they are living, breathing human beings who have their own opinions, ideas, hopes, dreams, fears, prejudices, attention spans, and appetites for listening. It’s a mistake to assume that audiences think and behave just as we do. Most don’t. Understanding an audience and its preconceptions, and barriers that might prevent them from accepting what you are saying, is a key part of effective communication.

- *that reacts.* This element is lost on many leaders. The only reason to engage an audience is to *change something, to provoke a reaction*. Effective communication provokes the desired reaction; ineffective communication isn’t noticed, confuses, or causes a different reaction than the one desired. Tony Hayward certainly got his life back, but not in the manner he hoped.

Your audiences will compare your words to your actions and prior words. The words set expectations; the actions fulfill or betray those expectations. Trust arises when expectations are met, and lost when they are not.

Effective communication requires discipline, understanding the desired reaction among the groups to which you communicate, which requires knowing all you can about that group. And then it requires saying and doing all that is necessary—and only what is necessary—to provoke that desired reaction. And it also requires understanding the predictable intended and unintended consequences of words,

silence, inaction, and action.

Communication isn’t about telling our story. That’s undisciplined, self-indulgent, and often illusory. We can’t move an audience if we don’t meet it where it is. But that means knowing where the audience is; what it cares about, what it fears, what its expectations are, and what it values.

An audience is a living, breathing entity. It is a collection of human beings. Collectively, an audience tends to care about certain things in certain ways, and tends not to think at all about the concerns of those trying to influence it. And at any given time any member of any audience can be distracted, inattentive, unconcerned with others’ concerns, and focused only on his or her immediate interests.

Influencing an audience requires active engagements that cause the audi-

ence to take notice, in ways we want them to. This requires knowing what the audience feels, thinks, is capable of, and cares about. And it requires us to care about those same things.

Since the power of communication is getting audiences to listen, an effective communicator never starts with *What do we say?* or *How do we tell our story?*

but rather focuses on the goal: *What is the goal? How will things be different when communication has taken place? Who is the audience: What does the audience care about now; what do we want the audience to care about when we’re done; what prevents the audience from caring about it? How should we engage the audience so that it does care? What does the audience need to see us do, hear us say, or hear others say about us in order to care about what we want it to care about? How do we make that happen?*

Leaders must grasp the force that words (or silence) can provoke at a time when information is shared faster than it can be controlled. All communication must be *intentional, interactive, and intended* to provoke a reaction. Leaders need to build trust, inspire loyalty, and lead effectively through *communication*. Leaders are judged on the fulfillment of expectations. Leaders must resist saying what merely sounds good in the moment and creating a *say-do gap*. SSE

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ACTION: Close the say-do gap.

