

Excellence in Communications

Adding power to your oral and written communications is as easy as it is hard.

It's easy because there are only a few basic principles to follow. It's difficult because you must apply the principles consistently, and while you are learning to apply them you will make errors as we all do when we are learning.

Principle Number One:

You can only speak to one person at a time. This applies whether you are writing or speaking, because even when people read your words they understand and take in the communication as dialog.

You may be writing or speaking to two or two hundred people, but each person "hears" you as an individual – not as a group. This is an important concept to retain because too many of us write or speak to a large audience as if they were some sort of massive single entity. The result of communication not focused on the individual is that very few, if any, individuals will truly hear your message.

Powerful communication is communication which has the same impact as that which passes between two individuals looking into each other's eyes, and honestly expressing their beliefs, facts and ideas. Each of us can recall someone who spoke directly to you even though you were one of millions, thousands or hundreds listening or reading. Think and remember the quality of the message. The feeling you had and have now through your remembrance is that she or he was speaking to you as clearly as if you were facing each other.

Principle Number Two:

You must know the person with whom you are speaking. What does this mean and how is this always possible?

I have spoken with a number of very successful writers and artists about this. Most of them said that they found that they were always writing to or for the same person. One wrote tales of popular, and now classic, science fiction. He said he discovered, when he was about fifty years old, that he had been writing to his favorite aunt who had been dead for twenty years. He found that each of his successful stories had always been ones that he knew his aunt would enjoy reading.

Another author always pictured someone he knew as he wrote, so that the story would be written as if it were being told to that person.

The more I thought about this, the more I thought that I could use this technique when writing and speaking. As I have experimented with this, I have found that if one wants to reach a number of different types of people in the same speech or written communication, then you picture someone you know well, and like, while you're communicating, and everyone experiences it as an intimate dialogue with you. Can you see how this ties in with the principle above?.

Principle Number Three:

Give recognition to those with whom you are communicating

This is a very important concept. When you speak with someone, you need recognize their accomplishments and those of other individuals you bring into the dialog. Consider the following:

We have made great strides in our corporation this year. Everyone has done their share. The management is very pleased, and the stockholders are as well.

As compared with this:

I and the rest of the management team of Questor—Tony Briles, Jim Tonover, Jane Freem, John Green and Mary Silver are really proud of the accomplishments of each individual of our overall team. Tony's engineering team has worked with all departments to assist in providing our customers with a better and less expensive product line. Jim's manufacturing and assembly teams have worked wonders. One of his quality teams, The Double Q's (Questing for Quality), lead by Avram Herr, introduced an improvement in assembly which cut assembly time and saved us all about \$100,000 each year. Jane's office team has found more ways than I can mention now, of how to cut order processing time and to improve our billing process...

Even our stockholders have noticed how great the improvements have been. Gladys Knight, who holds 100 common shares, wrote recently that "I am very pleased with the improvements in handling service calls. I spoke with a Miss Jolly about my order and she took care of it right away. I am sure this will help the company's performance and will drive up the value of my stock. By the way, I didn't tell her I was a stockholder when I called."

One word of warning on this important point. **Do not**, I repeat, **do not, do not** recognize unless is justified. If someone's name, department, or whatever, is thrown in, people will recognize that it is gratuitous. When that happens, your credibility flies out the window. But **do give recognition**, do give recognition, give recognition when it is deserved and as acknowledgement that the person or department is valued.

Recognize me when I do something good and out of the ordinary.

Fran Tarkenton, former quarterback for the Minnesota Vikings, tells a very good story about the importance of recognition. Tarkenton related that he was in the middle of a game that was going badly for his team. He decided to call a play that would require him to block and knock down one of the opposing players. This is something he never did, but he felt that his teammates would be motivated by his throwing his 165 pound body in the way of a 250 pound opponent. The play came as a complete surprise to everyone and Fran made a good block that was key to its success. They scored and won the game. The following Monday morning as the team watched the films of the game the coach congratulated everyone individually as the film demonstrated that they had done a good job. When they got to the big play, where Fran had blocked out his opponent, the coach congratulated everyone but Fran. At the end of the meeting, Fran asked the coach, if he had seen his block. The coach said, "Of course, it was great! Without that block, the play wouldn't have worked and we probably would have lost the game." Well, why didn't you say something in front of the team? "Well, I didn't think I needed to say anything to you about that play. You're very self-motivated and everyone tells you how well you do as a quarterback — passing, running with the ball and calling plays." Well, Fran said, if you ever expect me to block again, you'd better recognize whether I did well or not because it's not something I do very often.

High performers need praise too!

The point. Give recognition in speech and writing to high performers and well recognized individuals when they do well at something that is not their normal duty or responsibility.

One final point in this section. When possible, give recognition to someone who has done well or is a consistently good performer, but doesn't expect to be recognized. In too many organizations, there are people who work in the less glamorous departments, do a fine job, but never get recognition because their department is not a high profile one.

Principle Number Four:

Use stories—personal tales and experiences—to communicate your purpose, values and message.

Each of us learns best, regardless of what it is we are learning, when it is in a story form. I won't go into all of the reasons for this, but I assure you that it is so. Think about the important lessons you have learned in your life from another. Think about how you know about the history and values or goals of your company, your family or your town. Imagine yourself at your workplace. You ask your supervisor, "Why don't we try doing it this way?" Your supervisor leans back in his chair and says, "Because we tried it once and it didn't work." You are young and new to the company. So you ask, "Well what happened—why didn't it work?" "Alright, if you must, I'll tell you what happened to Joseph when he convinced Mr. Ondan to try it..." You see, in such a situation you find out what went wrong and more importantly, you find out the the big boss was really upset and doesn't want to even be reminded about the incident. You remember that kind of story and apply it to many different kinds of situations while you are at that company.

So, if you can, try to use stories — bring actual experiences of people into your communication. You might talk about the people, or try to use their own voices or quotes when you can. When you do that, you are telling a story and your audience or single person can step into the story as a participant, just as he or she does when reading a book, attending a play or watching a movie.

Principle Number Five:

Let your audience know what is first in importance, what is second...

Look at your daily newspaper and see how they try to help you decide what to read first, second, third and so on. Notice that some items are set aside as part of the story, but not a part that has to be read first to understand the story.

The logic of weight and placement

Do you see the logic of a typical front page of a newspaper -- the photo draws you by saying "This Is An Important Story." The big headline tells you what the story is about and the smaller headline gives you an idea of what else will be in the story. The sidebar story contains some more interesting facts, but not ones that are necessary to understand the big picture -- the main story. You can translate this to reports, memos and speeches you might have to make. It doesn't mean that you have to hold up a picture to get the audience's attention, although that might work. What it means is that you have to first paint a picture with words, so the reader or listener knows what is coming and what to expect.

Where to put the small but interesting points.

It also tells us that, when writing or speaking, we need to give different weights to different parts of our communication. In some cases, it may lead us to not including an interesting aside or additional information in the main body of the speech or written communication. It indicates that we might add a note directing someone to the additional information, or having a handout which contains the extra information.

Remember, only a small part of your audience wants to know each extra interesting history or finer point. The whole audience is better served, if those points are not delivered with the same weight as your main points.