

Achieving the LOOK & SOUND of LEADERSHIP



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EXECUTIVE COACHING TIPS



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Messaging During Hard Times ▶ 12/11/08

Teresa led a global team that the senior leaders at headquarters rarely saw. When another round of lay-offs was announced she feared her team would be decimated. But Teresa fought valiantly for her team. She did pretty well, too: her team only lost two members.

But when I saw her she was anything but happy. The team's next conference call was two days away and she was dreading it.

"What do I tell them? I'm sure they're starving for good information. In the best of times they feel remote and disconnected. Now they must be dying to know what's happening and what's going to happen. I think it's my job to tell them, but I'm not sure I'm up to it. Plus I have the feeling they're pissed off already and anything I say is going to piss them off more."

A lesson in how to share bad news

I asked if I could use her computer. When she gave me her chair, I pulled up an audio archive of Franklin Roosevelt's first Fireside Chat. Delivered one week after his inauguration in 1933, Roosevelt's short speech is plain and unadorned. Humorist Will Rogers later said the president took "such a dry subject as banking and made everyone understand it—even the bankers!"

Roosevelt delivered his speech (which was only later called a Fireside Chat) at the end of an eight-day "bank holiday," which was a quaint term for the closure of every financial institution in the country. These were dire times. But the next morning, banks opened to long lines of customers who, for the first time in years, came to deposit rather than withdraw their money. The stock market opened at a record high. And Treasury bonds sold at their highest rate since World War I. All this from a 14-minute speech!

What did Roosevelt do that was so transformative to a nation where one in four people were unemployed?

Within the first fifty words of his speech he said this: "I want to tell you what has been done in the last few days, and why it was done, and what the next steps are going to be." Then he did exactly that in plain, simple terms.



A formula for conveying difficult information

Roosevelt's structure is a powerful formula for communicating a snapshot of any current situation.

Here's the formula in bullets:

- ▶ What has happened to date?
- ▶ Why did those things happen?
- ▶ What are the next steps for each of the stakeholders?

Teresa and I listened to the whole speech. When it was finished, Teresa observed that Roosevelt spoke for his audience over and over, as if he knew their thoughts. He said things like, "Another question you will ask is..." And "I know many people are worrying about..." By accurately giving voice to their thoughts, he began to forge a personal relationship with each of them that, over the years, made him deeply beloved.

I observed that he repeatedly assumed the goodwill of his audience—something Teresa wasn't yet able to do about hers. Within the first minute of his speech he thanked the American people for "the fortitude and the good temper with which everybody has accepted the inconvenience and hardships of the banking holiday. And I know that when you understand what we in Washington have been about, I shall continue to have your cooperation as fully as I have had your sympathy and your help during the past week."

Roosevelt didn't shy away from putting his own interpretation on things, either. For example, after explaining why hoarding cash was harmful to the country, he told America that "the success of our whole national program depends, of course, on the cooperation of the public—on its intelligent support and its use of a reliable system." Suddenly depositing money wasn't just patriotic, it was intelligent! Through his skillful use of all the techniques mentioned here, Roosevelt, who only a week earlier had told America the only thing it had to fear was fear itself, changed the course of the banking crisis in 14 minutes.

Six points to shape your messages

As you deliver your year-end messages, whether the times are difficult for your people or not, follow his formula. The first three bullet points below are what your listeners should hear in your thinking and your language:

- ▶ Listen to people who represent your audience, then speak their concerns
- ▶ Assume people want to help
- ▶ Be simple and direct



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The final three bullet points are the questions you should answer directly, without apology:

- ▶ What happened that got the group to this point?
- ▶ Why did those things happen?
- ▶ What are the next steps for each of the stakeholders?

Teresa and I crafted her comments using all six of those guidelines. By the time I left, she was looking forward to the conference call. Afterwards she let me know it had gone well. As proof, she told me her team, for the first time ever, had flooded her with emails thanking her for what she'd said. That was *The Look & Sound of Leadership*[™] in action.

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