

Leadership Qualities: Communication Skills

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Around the turn of the century, a wealthy but unsophisticated oil tycoon from Texas made his first trip to Europe on a ship. The first night at dinner, he found himself seated with a stranger, a Frenchman, who dutifully nodded and said, “Bon appetit.” Thinking the man was introducing himself, he replied, “Barnhouse.”

For several days the ritual was repeated. The Frenchman would nod and say, “Bon appetit.” The Texan would smile and reply, “Barnhouse” a little louder and more distinctly than the time before.

One afternoon, Mr. Barnhouse mentioned it to another passenger who set the oil baron straight. “You’ve got it all wrong. He wasn’t introducing himself. ‘Bon appetit’ is the French way of telling you to enjoy your meal.”

Needless to say, Barnhouse was terribly embarrassed and determined to make things right. At dinner that evening, the Texan came in, nodded at his friend and said, “Bon appetit.”

The Frenchman rose and answered, “Barnhouse.”

In his famous prayer, St. Francis of Assisi asked God to help him to “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” This principle is the key to effective interpersonal communication. Actually, the book of Proverbs offered identical advice ages before St. Francis penned this prayer. In Proverbs 18:13 we read, “He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame.” Earlier in this same chapter Solomon offers a pointed evaluation of those who would rather talk than listen: “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions” (18:2).

Learning to Listen

A leader who cannot communicate will not lead well or long. Most leaders spend vast amounts of time and energy developing other skills, such as long-term planning, time management and public speaking. But what about taking time to develop the skill of *listening*? Those who wish to be good leaders will develop this skill. My friend Arthur Robertson, founder and president of Effective Communication and Development, Inc., wrote his book *The Language of Effective Listening* based on the premise that “effective listening is the number one communication skill requisite to success in your professional and personal life.”¹

Dr. James Lynch, co-director of the Psychophysiological Clinic and Laboratories at the University of Maryland has documented that an actual healing of the cardiovascular system takes place when we listen. Blood pressure rises when people speak and lowers when they listen. In fact, his studies show that blood pressure is actually lower when people are listening than when they are silently staring at a blank wall.² According to Dr. Lynch, listening skills aren’t just essential for good leadership; they’re essential for good health!

A man goes to the doctor and says, “Doc, my wife’s hearing isn’t as good as it used to be. What should I do?”

The doctor replies, “Here’s a test so you can find out for sure. The next time your wife is standing in the kitchen making dinner, move to about 15 feet behind her and ask her a question. If she doesn’t respond, keep moving closer and asking the question until she hears you.”

The man goes home and finds his wife in the kitchen. So, he moves to about 15 feet behind her and asks, “Honey, what’s for dinner?”

There’s no response, so he moves closer. “Honey, what’s for dinner?”

¹ Arthur Robertson, *The Language of Effective Listening* (Scott Foresman Professional Books, 1991), p. xv.

² Adapted from James J. Lynch, *Language of the Heart* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), pp. 122-124.

Still no response, so he steps even closer. “Honey, what’s for dinner?”

Nothing. Now he’s standing directly behind her. “Honey, what’s for dinner?”

“For the fourth time, I said chicken!”

It’s important to practice such active listening techniques as maintaining eye contact and rephrasing what you hear to be certain that you have understood correctly. George Bernard Shaw once said, “The greatest problem with communication is the illusion that it has been accomplished.”

The Most Disobeyed Commandment

Closely tied in with the skill of listening is the ability to express oneself in a nonabrasive and affirming manner. After all, “Reckless words pierce like a sword, but the tongue of the wise brings healing” (12:18). We may teach our children to say, “Sticks and stones will break my bones, but words will never hurt me,” but it’s just not true. Words can hurt. Words can cut. In fact, at the root of our word *sarcasm* is the notion of cutting flesh. Anyone who has ever been on the receiving end of sarcastic speech knows the accuracy of that idea.

Once again, this is simply evidence of how much unbiblical pop psychology we have imbibed. The world would have us believe that since it’s unhealthy to keep our emotions bottled up, we should allow ourselves to “vent.” Unfortunately, this means we often use our words to vent anger, irritation, disappointment, impatience, stress, insecurity, guilt or whatever negative emotion we may be feeling at the time. Usually, those who are standing closest to us at the time are the ones who are wounded in the blast. Dietrich Bonhoeffer spoke of the need to practice “the ministry of holding one’s tongue”: “Often we combat our evil thoughts most effectively if we absolutely refuse to allow them to be expressed in words.... It must be a decisive rule of

every Christian fellowship that each individual is prohibited from saying much that occurs to him.’³

On the contrary, wise leaders think before they speak; in so doing they select words that nurture rather than destroy. When faced with hostility they speak gently, so as to subdue anger rather than stoke it (15:1). In his New Testament epistle, James tells us, ‘My dear brothers, take note of this: Everyone should be quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to become angry, for man’s anger does not bring about the righteous life that God desires’ (James 1:19-20). Those three commands (quick to listen, slow to speak and slow to anger) may be the most frequently disobeyed commands in the whole Bible. If observed regularly, however, they can radically change a person’s life and help bring about the righteous life that God desires.

Your degree of ability to communicate will either evoke trust or distrust in those you lead. It will instill either confidence or fear. It will determine to a large extent how eagerly your followers will follow you.

The God Who Speaks

After he wrote the book *The God Who Is There*, Francis Schaeffer wrote several follow-up volumes including *He Is There and He Is Not Silent*, which was written to deal with the most fundamental of all questions: How we know what we know? Schaeffer’s answer to that question is simple: The God who is both infinite and personal not only exists but he exists as a communicator. The foundational assumption of Scripture is not simply that God exists, but that he has communicated with us through the prophets and apostles, and most decisively through the personal revelation of his incarnate Son. As a personal and relational being, God is a communicator. William Barry and William Connolly write, “Our faith tells us that God

³ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Life Together* (New York: Harper & Row, 1956), pp. 91-92.

communicates with us whether we know it or not.... He shares himself with us even when we do not know that he is doing so.... We are being 'spoken to' continuously.'⁴

Psalm 19 contains a description of two ways in which God has communicated with us: *general* revelation and *special* revelation:

The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands. Day after day they pour forth speech; night after night they display knowledge. There is no speech or language where their voice is not heard. Their voice goes out into all the earth, their words to the ends of the world. In the heavens he has pitched a tent for the sun, which is like a bridegroom coming forth from his pavilion, like a champion rejoicing to run his course. It rises at one end of the heavens and makes its circuit to the other; nothing is hidden from its heat.

Psalm 19:1-6

The first six verses of this wisdom psalm present God's general revelation to us through the power, order and beauty of nature. This revelation is general because it is available to all people. Without speech or language, the stars eloquently point beyond themselves to the One who created and sustains them. Therefore no one is really ignorant of God's existence; his "invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse" (Romans 1:20).

In verses 7-11, David moves from general to special revelation, from nature to the written Word:

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple. The precepts of the Lord are right, giving joy to the heart. The commands of the Lord are radiant, giving light to the eyes. The fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever. The ordinances of the Lord are sure and altogether righteous. They are more precious than gold, than much pure gold; they are sweeter than honey, than honey from the comb. By them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

⁴ William Barry and William Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1993), p. 33.

God's Word richly blesses and empowers those who learn from and follow it. God communicated with us in Scripture not merely to *inform* us, but also to *transform* us. The New Testament writers are in full agreement with this sentiment:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

2 Timothy 3:16-17

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

Hebrews 4:12-13

There are benefits attached to consistent exposure to the God-breathed Word. The Holy Spirit speaks through the pages of Scripture into our hearts if we will only come with open hearts and open Bibles into his presence. The Bible isn't merely a book; it is a letter from God to us. In it, he communicates who he is, how he wants to know us, how we can respond to his gracious offer and the best way to order our lives according to our inherent design. The Bible is a map to the abundant life God offers us as his children.

I came to faith in the early part of the summer of 1967, but I had been exposed to the Bible before that night. I had learned Bible verses as a child, but they never meant anything to me. It was like memorizing bits and phrases of Shakespeare or quotes from Mark Twain. They were useful to season a conversation with, but they were far from life-changing. After I became a Christian, however, it started to become clear to me that these Bible verses are qualitatively different from Shakespeare and Mark Twain. The concepts found in the Bible have the potential to radically alter the course of a person's life. I knew almost immediately that I needed to go somewhere to devote a good portion of my life to learning the Bible. Within six months I went

from being a graduate student in Berkeley, California with long hair to being a student at Dallas Seminary. I was willing to cut my hair and wear a coat and tie to class every day (a real culture shock for a former hippie) just so I could learn everything I could about God's blueprint for my life.

But as great as the Bible is, God's highest form of communication is his *personal* revelation through Jesus Christ:

In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word.

Hebrews 1:1-3a

Jesus Christ came to make it possible for us to know the Father. "All things have been committed to me by my Father. No one knows the Father except the Son and those to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). Because God has taken the initiative, he has made it possible for us to know him, and he invites us to communicate with him personally through Scripture and through prayer.

The Tricky Tongue

Because we have been created in the likeness of God, we are personal, relational, communicating beings. The issue is not *whether* we will communicate, but how effective and appropriate our communication will be. Our speech can be a source of blessing or injury to others as James points out in his epistle. James is the wisdom book of the New Testament, and, like the book of Proverbs, James says a great deal about the words we speak. Chapter three underscores much of what we already know through long and painful experience: The tongue seems to be more difficult to bring under control than any other part of our being.

We all stumble in many ways. If anyone is never at fault in what he says, he is a perfect man, able to keep his whole body in check.

When we put bits into the mounds of horses to make them obey us, we can turn the whole animal. Or take ships as an example. Although they are so large and are driven by strong winds, they are steered by a very small rudder wherever the pilot wants to go. Likewise the tongue is a small part of the body, but it makes great boasts. Consider what a great forest is set on fire by a small spark. The tongue also is a fire, a world of evil among the parts of the body. It corrupts the whole person, sets the whole course of his life on fire, and is itself set on fire by hell.

James 3:2-6

Our speech is not neutral territory; it is informed and shaped by our character. The art of listening well and speaking in appropriate ways is rarely taught in the classroom, but these special skills are nevertheless essential to effective leadership.

Notice James' conclusion about our inability to control the tongue: "All kinds of animals, birds, reptiles and creatures of the sea are being tamed and have been tamed by man, but no man can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison" (vv. 7-8). But notice that he doesn't leave us as dangling, helpless victims of our uncontrollable tongue:

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such "wisdom" does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

vv. 13-18

Two sources can animate our speech: wisdom that is earthly or wisdom that is heavenly. Jesus told his followers,

"No good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit. People do not pick figs from thornbushes, or grapes from briars. The good man brings good things out of the good stored up in his heart, and the evil man brings evil things out of the evil stored up in his heart. For out of the overflow of his heart his mouth speaks."

Luke 6:43-45

The key to taming the tongue is not the tongue itself, but the heart. The Apostle Paul concurs:

There is no one righteous, not even one; there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one. Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips. Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood; ruin and misery mark their ways, and the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes.

Romans 3:10-18

According to Paul, of all the ways we allow our inner wickedness to ventilate, our speech is primary. Our tongue is the initial manifestation of inner depravity and worthlessness. Sinful hearts produce sinful speech.

One of the ways parents know if their children are really ill is the smell of sickness on their breath. Evil speech patterns are the smell of sin-sickness in our mouths. We don't just need our mouths washed out with soap; we need to have our hearts washed clean with the water of God's Word. We need more than mouthwash; we need to take care of the sickness and inner wickedness that motivates the sin proceeding from our mouths.

The Bible is clear that communication is as much an issue of character as it is a skill. No one can tame the tongue. It will speak out of what fills the heart. Joseph Stowell offers this helpful observation:

James wrote, "No one can tame the tongue" (3:8). This statement is not intended to cause despair or to justify continued failure, but rather to let us know that self-initiated effort is worthless.... In our desire to transform the tongue from a hellish fire to an instrument of constructive communication, we find ourselves up against a task of supernatural proportions.... Therefore, transforming our tongue requires supernatural strength.⁵

It is not possible for us to tame our own tongues, but it is possible to surrender our tongues to the lordship of Christ. As a godly leader, you want to pursue heavenly wisdom and fill your heart

⁵ Joseph M. Stowell, *The Weight of Your Words* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1998), p. 16.

with the love of God so that his wisdom and his love flow from us like an unceasing stream of water.

Beyond Speaking and Hearing to Understanding

Effective communication involves more than just speaking and hearing. Real communication only takes place when both parties move beyond speaking and hearing to understanding. Speaking and listening are means, not ends. People who feel better because they “spoke their mind” or think they fulfilled their obligation because they “heard him out” inadvertently communicate a message that they don’t really want to communicate!

Suppose Jack and Jane, a married couple, have recently been in an argument. If Jack offers an eloquent bit of advice or articulately expresses love to Jane, and Jane doesn’t listen or understand, why should Jack feel better? The purpose wasn’t for Jack to *say* it; the purpose was for Jane to *understand* it. Yet this routine goes on every day. Or, if Jane courageously explains to Jack why she is angry enough to strangle him, and Jack in turn makes some unrelated comment, then Jack has not heard Jane out. He has not fulfilled his obligation to Jane as a fellow human being, let alone as a husband. In either situation, has this couple established greater mutual understanding? No.

God forewarned Isaiah at his commissioning that he would face similar communication problems throughout his ministry: “[God] said, ‘Go and tell this people: “Be ever hearing, but never understanding; be ever seeing, but never perceiving””’ (Isaiah 6:9). The people would hear his message, yet they wouldn’t understand it. They might allow his words to pass briefly through their conscious minds, but they wouldn’t permit those words to take hold in any meaningful way. God’s message through Isaiah would go in one ear and out the other. Were

they to hear and understand the message, “they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts, and turn and be healed” (v. 10).

The parables of Jesus were like this. They were designed to reveal truth to those who would receive it and conceal truth from those who would reject it. If a person’s heart is right, he will hear the teachings of Jesus and respond and be healed. But if the heart is not right, he will only hear a story.

Two-Way Communication

No one would disagree that communication is essential to effective leadership. But we may be surprised by the extent to which open, honest, two-way communication can actually benefit leaders and their organizations. Solomon warns his readers to be on the alert for one-sided communication: “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions” (Proverbs 18:2). John Stott tells a wonderful story about Joseph Parker, who served the City Temple in London at the end of the 19th century. As Parker climbed into the pulpit one Sunday morning, a woman threw a piece of paper at him. He picked the paper up and read the word “Fool!” written on it. Dr. Parker turned to the people and said, “I have received many anonymous letters in my life. Previously they have been a text without a signature. Today for the first time I have received a signature without a text!”⁶

This look at communication skills has come full-circle. We began by saying that responsible communication demands interaction. We end it by saying the same thing. Ted Engstrom observed this kind of one-sided communication in the one place where it shouldn’t have happened: a seminar on communication. He writes,

⁶ John R.W. Stott, *The Contemporary Christian* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), p. 112.

The seminar leader, well known as the chairman of the department of communications at a state university, had failed to communicate. He knew all the proper language and theories. He projected facts, but not understanding.

Communication is blocked when emotions do not coincide with another's feelings or when there is selective listening on the hearer's part. An appreciation of these factors will enable leaders to take better steps to guarantee effective communication in their own group.

The issue can be put another way. Do you communicate without trying, or do you try without communicating?⁷

Proverbs 18:2 demonstrates that the one-sided communicator comes off looking foolish. But look now at verse 13: "He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame." A leader must also hear before answering – that's essential. But in order to be truly effective, that leader must also listen and respond with a mind that is open and searching for a fuller meaning. Then and only then can effective two-way communication begin to take place.

⁷ Ted W. Engstrom, *The Making of a Christian Leader* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1976), p. 153.