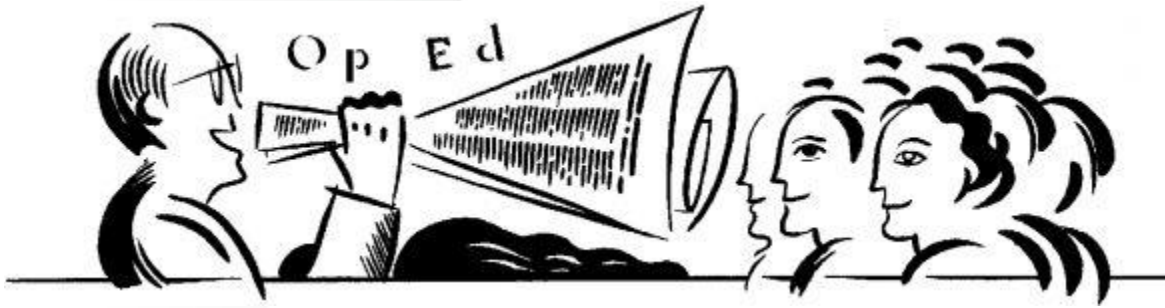


4 Key Communication Skills for Business Leaders

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By Ken Haseley

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The ability to communicate effectively is frequently ranked the No. 1 skill to achieve success by business leaders worldwide. In one survey, U.S. executives earning more than \$250,000 a year were asked to cite the primary factors in achieving success. First on their list was communication skills.

Ironically, one executive who would probably agree with this ranking is someone whose own communication skills left a lot to be desired: former BP CEO Tony Hayward. After BP's disastrous oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico in 2010 was finally contained, Hayward acknowledged in a BBC interview, "If I had done a degree at RADA [Royal Academy of Dramatic Art] rather than a degree in geology, I may have done better."

Business leaders do not need to enroll at this prestigious drama school in London, but they do need to master these four communication skills:

1. The ability to communicate in a crisis

In the past, most executives didn't see crisis communications as part of their job description. Some kept a low profile during a crisis, preferring to let others speak for them or waiting too long to speak for themselves.

During its massive tire recall in 2000, the chief executive of Japan's Bridgestone Corporation, Yoichiro Kaizaki, remained silent as public outrage mounted and the company's value in the Japanese stock market dropped by half. It took nearly a month after the crisis surfaced for Kaizaki to speak publicly.

Although President Vladimir Putin is not a corporate CEO, he responded in a similar fashion when the nuclear-powered submarine Kursk, with 113 sailors aboard, sank in the Barents Sea in 2000. Putin kept quiet for five days and remained at his holiday resort, instead of going to the Kremlin or the port from which the submarine sailed.

Crisis communications is no longer a spectator sport. Here are some new rules:

- CEOs must assume the role of communicator-in-chief. They must communicate more, not less, in an active, visible manner during a crisis.
- Executives must put themselves in direct contact with the media and know how to conduct news conferences.
- Executives must be able to express concern and compassion and to apologize to the public and any injured parties.

2. The ability to communicate with the media

Despite popular opinion to the contrary, traditional media, both print and broadcast, are still important communication vehicles. So it is critical for business people to have a working knowledge of the media, including how to talk to reporters.

Let's say you get a call from a business reporter who follows your industry and would like your perspective on a particular issue. Declining such interview requests is common practice but may be a mistake. People like doing business with industry leaders, and speaking for your industry is one way to demonstrate leadership. Seeing or hearing your views expressed publicly, customers gain reassurance that their purchasing decision was correct. Former customers may re-evaluate their decision to go elsewhere, and prospects may take a closer look at you.

Talking to business reporters is a way to shape the discussion of key issues within your industry.

What's more, some media interviews are opportunities to obtain information as well as provide it. Trade and other business reporters regularly talk to various sources. As a result, they uncover a wealth of information, not all of which is reported. They may be willing to share some of that information but only if asked.

Establishing a dialogue with business reporters is an investment, one that can deliver results at lower cost and with greater credibility than advertising and other forms of sales promotion. Be sure you know how to succeed in print and broadcast interviews, including "remote" or satellite interviews.

3. The ability to deliver an effective presentation

Most business people have poor presentation skills. On a regular basis, audiences are subjected to boring, poorly designed and delivered PowerPoint presentations.

Business leaders today can no longer expect employees and others to hang on every word they utter. Like anyone else, executives face audiences with short attention spans, a desire to be entertained and a tendency to "multitask" — read: check text messages and read email — during the presentation. Your presentation has to be more interesting than the listeners' emails and text messages. What's more, today's audiences are more prone to be judgmental, and they are judging your presentation by what they saw compelling on television the night before. In short, they expect you to perform brilliantly.

Here's what you must be able to do:

- Feel comfortable in front of both large and small groups and in a variety of venues — from behind a lectern and without one.
- Know how to deliver verbatim from a prepared text or TelePrompter and how to speak fluidly using bullet points or other notes.
- Deliver impromptu remarks as if you had rehearsed them.
- Know how to craft a presentation with a powerful opening and a strong closing and one that contains memorable stories, analogies, examples, anecdotes, illustrations or compelling data.
- PowerPoint can be an effective presentation tool but should not be overused. Avoid using visuals that are crammed with too many words.
- Field questions succinctly and with ease.

4. The ability to use social media

During one of our assignments in Canada briefing a company's top executives on crisis management, we asked how many of them were familiar with LinkedIn, Facebook or Twitter. Some responded with blank stares. Others said they thought Facebook and Twitter were for their teenagers.

Social media are now mainstream in business, and business leaders must understand and use these new tools of open, transparent, non-hierarchical, interactive and real-time communication. These tools provide several compelling benefits: They are a cost-effective way of promoting awareness and understanding of your company to external and internal audiences. They enable you to engage quickly with large and small audiences — especially with the younger generation. And they can help you obtain valuable information.

Social media represent a significant shift in the way people communicate. Therefore, you should do the following:

- Learn the basic social media networks, their language and how they work.
- Decide whether you want a personal or professional online presence or both, then regularly devote time to using these tools.
- Know the risks of using social media.
- Be sure your organization is using social media.

Like golf and other sports, communication is a skill — and skills can be taught, learned and improved. Business leaders who can communicate clearly, concisely, confidently and charismatically will get others to listen to, understand and act on what they say. They will also have lots of job security. Therefore, to be successful you should perfect your communication skills.