

ESSENTIAL QUALITIES OF GREAT LEADERSHIP: COMMUNICATION

We've probably all heard the statements, "Who you are speaks so loudly I can't hear a word of what you are saying" or "I can't hear what you are saying because your actions (attitude, perceptions) are speaking much louder than your words."

While communication for a leader may seem to be a skill rather than a quality, when we understand what it means to truly communicate, or commune, we realize it requires strength of character to communicate well. The word communication comes from the Latin word *communis*, meaning "the sharing of life."

Communication is absolutely essential to relationships, being the cornerstone of the foundation upon which relationships are initiated and built, and leadership is all about relationships.

This ability to relate experiences, ideas, knowledge, and feelings to others, whether through speech or gestures, is one of our most uniquely human ones. Second only to physical survival is our need to connect with others. We are born with a desire for communication, or the sharing life, and seek it out. Interacting effectively with others enables us to satisfy our emotional, social, and biological needs. Furthermore, we bring to communication a psychological need to be understood, valued, affirmed and appreciated. When we experience the feeling of being understood, we feel we have communicated well.

Effective communication is based on timeless principles, and practicing them allows us to express warmth, affection, respect, and interest in others. It goes way beyond merely talking to include feelings – about both the other person and the message. And without it, quality of life is diminished.

How we communicate, or our tendencies to react to people, tells much about our internal environment and how we feel about us, others, and the world we live in; therefore, it's important to recognize how we generally respond to others. During a lifetime of painful encounters people acquire an extensive repertoire of defensive strategies which are most clearly observed under stress. We may move toward others with affection or approval, against others in pursuit of our own self-interest, or away from others through expressions of independence, self-sufficiency, or avoidance behaviors.

A leader able to respond to others with warmth, acceptance, and respect will be much more effective and his or her potential to influence will be greater. Yet, genuine communication remains a great need today, because communing, or the sharing of life, requires one to be transparent and truthful – a delicate balance.

We are all familiar with communication breakdown and its consequences. It all started with the first man and woman. In the familiar garden story, the communication with God and between Adam and Eve was broken when they fell away from God's perfect plan for them. Instead of repentance and trust, they reacted by telling half-truths, shifting blame, hiding, and attempting to cover up shame and guilt. They began to experience the agony of severed relationships, especially the ones that really counted.

They developed a tendency to hide. Their perceptions became perverted and distorted. They like men ever since began to wear masks to fashion a façade to hide behind. We hide no better behind our masks than they did behind their fig leaves!

Behind the breakdown and the hiding lurked pride. They looked inward to focus on the big "I." It is the root of our communication problems. It seeks to hide what we don't want others to know about us. Unfortunately, we get so used to hiding that we hide even the positive. The more we hide the less we share, causing us to withdraw from others. The more we blame and criticize others for our own imperfections the more they withdraw from us. It's a vicious cycle that requires humility, love, acceptance, honesty and transparency to break. Both hiding and attacking contribute to our alienation. What we demand of ourselves and can't deliver we demand of others who cannot deliver. It's a failure to communicate!

When we fail to communicate from the heart with a delicate balance of truth and transparency, we hurt both others and ourselves. Instead of seeking to understand and create synergy, we alienate those we most need. We cut off the flow in which all parties can be nurtured, empowered, and blessed. We withhold the good we have to share and all suffer the loss.

The best leaders, knowing that communication is a two-way process, encourage those they lead to share. They listen to them and invite them to express their thoughts, feelings, knowledge, opinions, etc. However, the leader sets the tone. If he or she is hiding and unapproachable or defensive and critical, people will not feel comfortable opening up. The only way to build a strong, cohesive team is to foster an environment in which people feel understood and believe others are receptive to hearing what they have to share.

While we need to develop our communication skills and have opportunities to hone them, character communicates the loudest and clearest. Leaders without the inner strength that comes from character and adherence to values based on timeless, universal principles will be inconsistent and apt to create confusion and mistrust. You can't feel the need to hide and be transparent at the same time. Open and honest communication engenders trust and promotes team unity.

As part of our development as leaders, we must consider what messages we are actually conveying. Is it possible that our internal environment and perceptions are distorting the message and sabotaging the results we hope to achieve through communicating? If we aspire to great leadership, it's in our best interest, as well as of those we serve, to tune in to our own hearts and the ways in which we communicate. Are we communicating clearly and honestly? Are we getting our message across?

Beverly A. Najt
4Ekselans
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