



By Joe Byerly

Ten years ago, I received the best advice I've ever received on communication. My boss said, if no one else sees your vision, it's just a hallucination. In other words, if you can't communicate the thoughts in your head in such a way that others understand them, they're useless to the rest of the organization.

Since then, I've worked in numerous organizations and I've found his maxim still rings true. I've also learned that the best leaders are master communicators who understand how to turn their ideas into action.

Leadership and communication go hand in hand. Our ability to lead effectively becomes more difficult as we climb the organizational ladder. As the organizations we lead expand and become more unwieldy, communication challenges intensify as our messages are translated down the hierarchy, like a childish game of telephone. Within these organizations, our vision, our ideas, and our intent can easily become hallucinations if we lack the ability to communicate with clarity, precision, and purpose.

Telephones, wrong turns, and too much noise

Most of us have played the game of telephone at some point in our lives in which the first person in line whispers a secret into the next person's ear and so it continues until it reaches the last person in line. By the time the original message is received by the last person, it's distorted to such an extent that it's unrecognizable to the person who thought of it. Most of us still play a version of this game in our organizations today.

I've watched commanders deliver messages in meetings that were so distorted by subordinate leaders once the meeting ended that the subsequent actions of NCOs and soldiers actually conflicted with the Commander's original intent.

We still play a version of this game as adults because of the filters that exist within our own subconscious. When we listen to someone, if we are not mindful of this filter, we autotune them through our own experiences and education; our biases and heuristics at play in our ability to properly perceive the original intent. Add in our ego and instead of asking for clarification or treading back to the original message, we leave the room confident in our perception and we embark on a similar game with our subordinate leaders.

Sometimes, the message is more than distorted, it's completely lost, as if we put the message in the backseat of a car with a random driver who is unaware of its intended destination. This error in translation usually occurs when we voice an idea or vision without clearly articulating the key points or repeating ourselves frequently, with the expectation

the idea will magically turn into action and implementation.

Finally, in some instances, we communicate in such a way that no one even hears our message. We tack a policy letter to a bulletin board or send out a carefully crafted email. The operational tempo of most organizations makes this approach the equivalent of whispering in the middle of a hurricane. Everyone is so busy, they don't take the time to stop at the bulletin board or read past the email's subject line. If they do stop to peruse the board or happen to click on your email, in today's world of 280-character maximums, your lengthy text falls into the category of TL:DR (Too Long: Didn't Read). Often, many of us have great messages but they are drowned out by all the other noise that is a mainstay of the current environment.

Clarity, repetition, and authenticity

If you want to avoid the telephone trap, your message needs to be clear and concise. This requirement may sound easy, but it is much harder in practice. Too often, we speak off the cuff without thinking through our guidance or vision deliberately, or without writing it down before we give it a voice.

Some of the best communicators I know write out their ideas on a whiteboard or piece of paper before they ever open their mouths. This point is underscored by author Stephen King, who said writing is "refined thinking." In our minds, our thoughts are clear but real clarity doesn't come until those thoughts are solidified in writing.

Next, it helps to repeat your vision or message not once or twice but multiple times. One of my previous commanders repeated his focus areas over and over and over again. His habit of repetition constantly reinforced his narrative and ensured it took root within the large organization under his command. He once told me, "When the organization starts talking about your focus areas, it means it has become their focus areas." After a while, he no longer had to repeat himself, because everyone else was doing it for him with accuracy and

reflecting his proper intent.

Finally, your message must be authentic. It should come directly from you rather than a diligent staff initiative, leaving the message stripped of your voice. Over the years, I have worked in multiple staff positions. The most effective commanders refused to let me draft their intent for operations orders. They owned the commander's intent. At the time, I didn't understand why, thinking it was one more staff drill I could handle for them; that they had better uses for their time. As I gained experience, I realized this practice was the best use of their time. It allowed these commanders to refine their own understanding and visualization and to properly craft their intent to reflect their voice and leadership approach. Most importantly, this personal involvement in the process signaled to the masses the commander's personal involvement in solving the organization's most pressing challenges.

Quit hallucinating and start communicating

Leadership is tough business and it is even harder when you lack the gift of communication. However, the best part about your ability to communicate is that it can be practiced and refined. With the right amount of focus, your messages can be clear and concise and reflect your authentic leadership style, breaking through the noise of the daily grind to become more than your own hallucination.

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