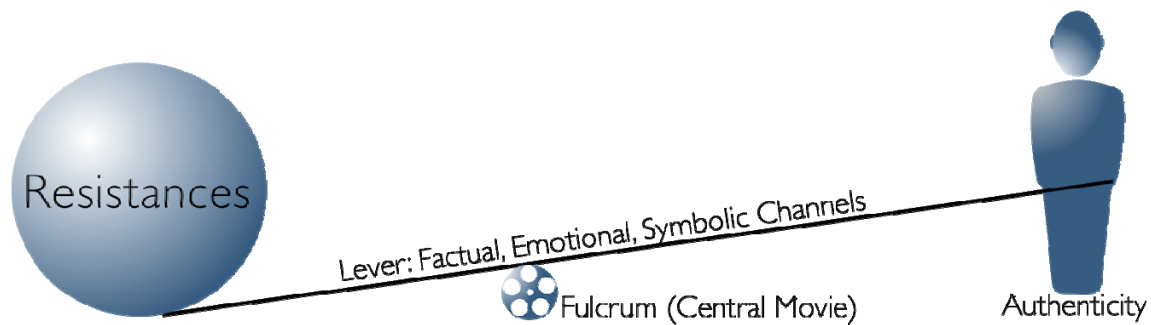


Leveraging Your Voice



Archimedes once announced, "Give me a lever long enough and a fulcrum upon which to place it, and I shall move the earth." Turning Archimedes insight into a method of examining your voice can provide a simple mechanism for understanding and retaining a bulk of what my research has to offer. Using the basic components of leverage, I will show how they could apply to the study of leadership communication.

Resistances

The first chronic communication obstacle a leader must overcome can be demonstrated by this repetitive study. Take a scale from "very ineffective" to "very effective" communication with an average spot on the continuum. Ask managers which side of the average line they fall on and you will find that roughly 80% report they are above average. Most of them do not place themselves at the extreme end of effectiveness, but most place themselves above average. The results are a form of confirmation bias. It occurs in nearly all populations of individuals surveyed about their communication ability. We all believe we are better than we are. We all believe if there is a communication problem it lies somewhere else, not with our communication ability.

Ask constituents to rate their managers using the same scale and the bias is expressed again. Constituents regard roughly seventy percent of their managers at or below average. This is also confirmation bias, meaning constituents blame ineffectiveness on others. But there are thirty percent of managers who are judged to rise above these biases. Researching these individuals has helped form a great deal of the basis for this book.

The second chronic communication obstacle you must overcome is congeniality bias. The stronger your beliefs about important ideas such as business, politics, religion, education, marriage, etc., the more resistant you are to hearing information contrary to your beliefs. Individuals will look for information that bolsters their beliefs at twice the rate they will look for and evaluate evidence that goes against them. We will start discounting contrary evidence the

moment we encounter it when it comes to our most fervently held beliefs.

The third chronic communication problem leader's must overcome is what my late partner, Boyd Clarke, and I termed the Four Fatal Assumptions. In some ways these are the results of the first two problems. After a leader communicates he or she will often automatically and unconsciously assume that constituents will understand the communication, agree with it, care about it, and know how to act upon the communication. These are insidious and dangerous assumptions and in our fast-paced world. We commit them everyday.

These three chronic obstacles must be overcome everyday, in every situation. For many day-to-day situations, the context of the communication exchange is familiar enough that even when one of the obstacles obscures a communicator's intent to a degree, the constituent can use their own experience and sensibilities along with the familiarity to override the obstacle. To count on this is dangerous. Many a communication error has occurred when one party hears what they believe to be a familiar utterance, only to later find the communication was either different from the usual or meant to be different.

Central Movie (Fulcrum)

We are bothered by questions of why. Why do I exist? Why do people do the things they do? Why do I work at this job? Why do I have these relationships? Why is my society not living up to its ideals? The neuroscience behind this incessant attempt to answer the "why?" indicates our brains will constantly scan for these answers or invent answers to satisfy this fundamental brain activity.

One of the main purposes of the leader's central movie is to answer why questions. Central movies offer an explanation of the main context, the big ideas, the meaning behind the activity. They answer the questions why we have decided to go to a certain destination and why the selected route has advantages over other routes. They answer the question of how we will not only conserve valued principles, but perhaps enhance the principles to new levels of understanding. Central movies are how individual leaders, during their short lived tenures, put voice to enduring ideological issues that generally outlive any one person.

History is littered with examples of memorable sound bites that attempt to etch in memory some of the answers to why questions. During Margaret Thatcher's tenure as Britain's Prime Minister, one of the principles she constantly had to challenge was gender equality. She would often use a phrase such as this one, "You may have to fight a battle more than once to win it." She embodied the struggle for gender equality, which was furthered by her election and tenure.

Nelson Mandela—tough, visionary, savvy, and practical—led from a jail cell and then as an elected official in South Africa. "Education is the most powerful weapon which you can

use to change the world,” he once said, and in a variety of ways he has both embodied this ideal (having earned his law degree while in jail) and promoted it as a primary method for uplifting everyone to a higher plane of moral purpose and relationship building.

Ho Chi Minh is not a name often cited in American books on leadership since he was on the opposing side of a bitter conflict. But having studied his speeches and life, I now understand that the most powerful theme of his general central movie, the theme that held his nation together during a long and brutal conflict that started well before U.S. involvement, concerned national pride. “We have a secret weapon – it is called Nationalism.” Minh’s rhetoric often leans on the ideal that what the Vietnamese most wanted was their own freedom from the French, the Chinese, and the Americans.

Ronald Reagan often said things like, “Man is not free unless government is limited.” Reagan’s central movie is laced with argument that the Federal government of the United States impeded more than it helped and offered a constant reminder of this point of view.

John F. Kennedy is remembered for a variety of reasons, but one of the most important parts of his central movie concerned public service for the betterment of mankind. His quotes, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country,” and “If a free society cannot help the many who are poor, it cannot save the few who are rich,” are memorable sound bites that express an important tenet of his central movie.

And as a final example, Aung San Suu Kyi, the long imprisoned social leader who fights against the destructive military government of Myanmar, often says, “Fear is a habit, and I am no longer afraid.” Her learned ability to face great fear with peace and passive resistance earned her a Nobel Prize and has helped her central movie to be heard around the world.

I have purposefully chosen these well known political and social leaders for three reasons. First, they are individuals with generally well-known histories. Secondly, each of them took a stand for ideals and attempted to influence others who already believed in these ideals to take action. And lastly, each of them has moved constituents to more fully consider their personal beliefs, world views, and actions concerning their ideals. This is what a well-trained voice can do. Through the power of developing a strong central movie, that may have four or five major components, leaders create powerful messages that cause others to reconsider their own minds.

At its core, the four or five components of your central movie are the fundamental ideas you know you will need to communicate over long periods of time. You will reference them during emails, one-on-one conversations, while conducting group meetings, and certainly as you address audiences outside your organization.

Levers (FES Channels)

The primary result of ten years of research revealed the best communicators, the ones who overcame all three resistances in a regular fashion, used three channels of communication: facts, emotions, and symbols. Research shows that the best leverage leaders have is to use the three channels in concert all the time. When leaders over-rely upon one or two of the channels rather than using all three in well-developed ways, they shorten their leverage. And as Archimedes and others have demonstrated, the best place to stand, coupled with a great fulcrum, will still not move a group to action if the lever is too short.

The good news is that most people use all three channels, whether they think about their communication in those terms or not. The best leaders have learned to use these channels better than others. The intention of my work and workshops is to help anyone improve their leverage as a leader.

Authenticity

A credible expert may simply offer testimony to the validity or accuracy of a set of circumstances or a body of knowledge. A family member, neighbor, or employee who tells the truth, remains sufficiently honest and open can gain your trust, which lends them credibility. In neither of these cases do you necessarily place this credibility in a leadership context. Trustworthiness and expertise are the building blocks of credibility, but credibility alone does not confer leadership status.

Leadership authenticity requires us to consider two dimensions in addition to basic credibility. Leaders serve and support groups who are committed to a cause. The causes can range from political liberation to maintaining a small business; but until you serve a cause you are merely hired help. The third dimension of leadership authenticity is that you demonstrate you are in it for the cause, not just the money.

The fourth dimension of authenticity for a leader is dynamism—the direct link to your voice. Leaders who serve a cause with honest hard work and good expertise can move a group towards their goals. Those who develop the dynamic qualities of their voice to unite and engage others in the cause they serve ignite performance to higher levels.

Bill George, former Medtronic CEO and Peter Georgescu, former CEO of Young & Rubincam have written books on leadership and the effects of the authentic leader. Their long term experience and observation support the research concerning absolute trustworthiness and expertise. They further the argument in interesting ways. George suggest learning who you really are and learning to remain authentic as a leader is your greatest asset. Georgescu echoes this and goes as far as to suggest that customers now demand this from leaders, so even if your social intelligence doesn't sway you, your commercial sensitivity should.

Other authorities have informed my understanding of leadership authenticity as well.

Two who have summed distinctions in eloquent phrasing share the same surname. John W. Gardner, former Secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare, founder of Common Cause and the Independent Sector and the most knowledgeable person on public sector leadership I ever met once told me in person that, "communication between leader and follower is at the heart of everything."

As I got to know Gardner better through personal contact and reading his books on self-renewal, excellence, and leadership, I found he brought a thoughtful and persuasive perspective to the subject of leadership authenticity. His insights were no doubt the product of his own personal education as a psychologist and his tenure as a public sector leader. The essence of his insights has been ratified by scientific research. In his book, *On Leadership*, he wrote, "A loyal constituency is won when the people, consciously or unconsciously, judge the leader to be capable of solving their problems and meeting their needs, when the leader is seen as symbolizing their norms, and when the image of their leader (whether or not it conforms to reality) is congruent with their inner life of myth and legend."¹

While Gardner cast his thoughts in a language reminiscent of the age in which he matured, just before and after World War II, he touches on three essential ingredients. Leaders must be seen as competent in their role, they must uphold the values of the constituent body, and they themselves must serve as a living example of the central movie they promote and constituents embrace.

Adding to these basic ideas is Howard Gardner, MacArthur genius grant recipient, Harvard professor of psychology, and prodigious author of numerous books on how modern neurology informs the behavior we witness in a wide arena of life experience. Howard Gardner, one of the main proponents of the multiple intelligence theory of the mind has written extensively about individuals in leadership roles. He concludes, "The formidable challenge confronting the visionary leader is to offer a story, and an embodiment that builds on the most credible of past syntheses and revisits them in the light of present concerns, leaves open a place for future events, and allows individual contributions by persons in the group."²

Combine the two and the general thesis is complete. Leaders must offer a story that goes along with their personal authenticity, which is rooted in their personal credibility and adherence to normative values. This story, which I suggest is better represented as a central movie, is how they will represent the group's noblest intentions and act as a strategist, visionary, and motivator of the group for the purpose of helping everyone move towards a desired destination. They simply do not analyze and act. They put voice to the story, the inspiring vision, the central movie. We expect a great deal of different competencies from leaders, but the primary ones we demand are that they offer a coherent story of the future and then embody the elements of that story themselves. It is simply insufficient that a leader

be a trustworthy person with great expertise. They must offer and become an embodiment of the vision and values the group represents and put a well-trained voice to the task of elevating the group's consciousness, conviction, and commitment to the movie they already serve.

From this general outline of offering a movie of the future, which is cast in an arc that includes the past and present, being an embodiment of the vision and values, possessing competencies for the task at hand, and serving those who are already committed to a cause, we can derive the essential elements of the popular topic of executive presence.

At its core, executive presence is the visible representation of the leader committed to the proposed central movie. A leader may be judged honest, competent, and a believer in the cause. What brings this to life, what causes others to experience presence is the leader's ability to leverage the energy from where the leader stands to the group. This requires a dynamic, well-trained voice. All the research conducted on executive presence shines a laser on the singular ability of a leader to communicate in a sincere, confident, and inspiring manner whether the leader is addressing a single person or the entire constituency. At its core, executive presence concerns possessing and using a well-trained voice. And the well-trained voice must follow the principles of leverage. The leader must have a place to stand, which is personal authenticity and the visible embodiment of constituent values, the proffering of a story which is the central movie, and the ability to convey that movie via the best communication leverage which is grounded in the science and art of facts, emotions, and symbols.

I respectfully take a departure from my late mentor, John W. Gardner, and tend to side a bit more with Howard Gardner in one respect. Leadership is not about gaining a loyal constituency, for that makes leadership a power based enterprise rather than a service oriented ideal. Leadership is about uniting and engaging those committed to a cause to remain vigilant about their values, remain open to future courses of action, to believe in and act upon the goals of the central movie, and lead others in a similar manner. The most inspiring leader is the one who best embodies the movie we already believe in and who moves us to higher levels of commitment and performance through the power of voice.