

Administration 101: What Do You Have to Do to Become a 'Great Communicator'?

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Image: Kevin Van Aelst for The Chronicle

Professors always believe their own fields are central and vital to education — and to life. So I can be forgiven for pointing out that a great deal of evidence supports the idea that superior communicators succeed disproportionately in every profession. For example, when Google identified the "eight habits" of its best managers, the first seven were communications skills. Only the eighth was technical knowledge.

Communication skills are no less vital for academic leaders, given how much time we spend building consensus and gaining genuine support. But it's not just a matter of possessing robust skills. You also need the situational awareness and flexibility to know which communication skills work in different settings and with diverse audiences.

This month, the Admin 101 series — on how to become, and succeed as, a top administrator in higher education — explores what you need to do to be a proverbial "great communicator."

Adjust to your audience. While living in Louisiana, I learned a lot about Huey P. Long, who, perhaps, should be no one's role model as either a leader or a person. However, he famously had the great communicator's knack of being able to "talk lawyer to the lawyers and farmer to the farmers." Likewise, as a campus leader, your speech, tone, style, body language, and presentation format might be variably successful with different audiences.

A case in point is the high-ranking administrator at a Southern university who recently conducted a town-hall meeting with a group of minority students. I heard about it from both the administrator and one of the student leaders. The latter praised the administrator for not falling back on carefully crafted slogans about "cherishing diversity" or on canned talking points about "how much the administration has done for minority students." Instead, the administrator spent most of the meeting listening, acknowledging specific problems, admitting that he had no easy solutions, and pledging to work with the students. The student leader declared: "He was sincere. He humanized himself. He didn't lecture us. He said, 'This is hard, but we have to figure it out.' "

In contrast, I use an entirely different style of communication during annual budget meetings at my university. My audience is typically the president, provost, chief financial officer, and assorted vice presidents and vice provosts. Accompanied by my department chairs, associate deans, and senior staff members, I present a compendium of how we spent the previous year's budget and make the case for next year's funding. We sweat for months to prepare a huge binder full of material that details where every penny went, the return on investment for the university (both qualitative and quantitative), and, most of all, our data-driven case for future investments in our program. Each section of the report is backed up by what my staff and I call the "voluminous appendices" (mostly spreadsheets), and fronted by a clear infographic that sums up the contents.

To be an effective leader requires you to think about the *how* of communication delivery, not just the *what*.

Listen as well as you speak. No job candidate or sitting administrator has ever admitted to being a bad listener. Yet good listeners are rare in academe. The origin of that dearth may well be that many academic leaders, after all, come from the professoriate, where they spent decades honing various one-way communication skills: declaiming, lecturing, presenting, advising, and writing papers or reviews. Few academic fields (psychology, anthropology, journalism) train people to be patient listeners and sensitive observers of other people.

But you can become a good listener. One habit to develop: Suppress your natural instinct to answer a question before someone has finished asking it. As teachers we hear a lot of familiar questions, to which we know the answers cold. We assume that responding quickly shows we are attentive. But cutting people off before they've finished indicates we aren't really listening at all. And that goes down especially poorly when you're an administrator speaking with highly intelligent, self-directed faculty members.

Indeed, as I have found in my 10 or so years of administration, many people don't want an instant response or solution — they want to be heard, to vent, to remonstrate, to rant. If you pay attention while they fully express their thoughts, you are much more likely to gain their trust and find a receptive ear. In addition, letting people have their full say will often expose nuances that you need to know before you respond. Good listening constitutes not only good manners but also good management.

Be precise and avoid vague speculation. Early in my administrative career, a well-meaning president and friend cautioned: "Say as little as possible" and, moreover, "Don't write those columns for *The Chronicle*." He held to an ancient and wise principle: The less you say, the less rope people will have to hang you with. Clearly, I didn't follow that advice. But I value the prudence behind it, for two reasons:

- Once you have any power, people will interpret everything you say as authoritative. So your musing about changes in budget, hiring, or curriculum is not just idle speculation but is heard as, conceivably, the preliminaries to taking action.
- Second, and relatedly, we humans have a tendency to hear what we want to hear (or want to get upset about). A department chair I know recalled a faculty meeting in which, as an aside, he mentioned the possibility that some summer classes might need to be converted into an online format because of restrictions on physical space. Within a week he had to squelch the rumor that "the chair wants to make all of our summer classes online only!"

Such situations present a real challenge because, in order to make the best decision, an academic leader needs to work the problem — i.e., spin different scenarios (more on this in a future column).

To minimize overreaction among your listeners, use precise language about choices, ideas, trial balloons, and options. Repeatedly bookend any line of speculation with, "This is not what we are necessarily going to do, but is one of the things to think about before we decide." Make clear that spinning scenarios does not constitute reaching a final decision.

Confirm the details ... in writing. As research has shown, humans are terrible eyewitnesses at crime scenes. We may be even worse at budget meetings.

Few people intentionally lie about what they heard or said in a discussion, but a group of people reviewing a complex issue may come away with different versions of what happened. Worse, as time passes, selective memories harden, and maybe no one remembers exactly what took place.

The simple expedient I employ is to make sure — in two ways — that I have some level of confirmation as to what was said and, more important, what actions were expected out of any meeting or exchange:

- First, I always try to take notes during a meeting, jotting down the essentials and highlighting my to-do list.
- Second, whenever a meeting has resulted in next steps, I send a follow-up email — in the vein of, "Just to clarify and confirm: At our meeting this morning, we agreed that I would do this and you would do that." This method also yields a time/date stamp for agreed-upon actions.

Becoming a good communicator is vital to your success as an academic leader. Unfortunately, many of us attain leadership posts without any formal training in public speaking, one-on-one interviewing, or small-group communication theory and technique. Worse, we may have picked up habits that worked fine in limited settings of disciplinary peers or lecture halls but fail when dealing with wider constituencies, like alumni, parents, or faculty members in other fields. It is crucial to spend time thinking about what you want to say to any individual or group and about the best way to say it.

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