

# Leading Through Language

## Communicate your way to the top

By Dr. Thomas D. Zweifel

Communication is the medium of leaders; it's the currency they use to purchase respect and success. On the other hand, bad communication causes problems all over the place: Companies go down, mergers fail, wars break out, and families break up because people have stopped communicating. A commission investigating the August 2003 power blackouts of close to 50 million households in Canada and the northeastern United States reported that better communication between the electrical grid operators could have prevented the disaster. But the issues don't have to be mega ones. Effective communication can help student leaders tackle day-to-day situations, from resolving a team's interpersonal struggles to helping a member try a new approach to a problem.

To be successful communicators, leaders should follow the **Communication = Results Pyramid** below. The pyramid shows the building blocks of effective leadership—leadership that gets results. Without systematically working each level of the pyramid, you cannot build substantial—or sustainable—accomplishments.

### Level One: Relationship

Whether you've just won your Student Government election or uncovered a new issue on campus, you have to build the ground floor of **Relationship** before anything else. "I think with each senate and student senate president, there's a different relationship with the administrators," says Daniel Morin, student senate president at the **University of Maine—Farmington**. "I had a very good relationship. I met with the university's president about once a month."

The relationship level may sound trivial, but too many student leaders bypass it altogether and try to get right down to business. Those who do appreciate its importance often think that having a few beers with group members after hours is enough. True relationship goes

much deeper: it's about building partnership and trust with the allies you need to get the job done. Heather Gibbons, Student Government Association president at **Hofstra University** in New York, says cultivating relationships throughout the school hierarchy is crucial. "Sit down with those higher up, let them know how you work, and learn how they work," she says.

To build strong relationships, you need to ask, "Who are you? Who am I? Who are we?" You have to be genuinely interested in the other person: Where do they come from (and we're not just talking about birthplace)? What are their values and intentions? The deeper the foundation of relationship, the higher you can build the pyramid of accomplishment.

### Level Two: Vision

Once you've built a solid partnership, you can move to the second floor: **Vision**. Here you ask, "What are we here for? What's possible? What do we want?" Communications to create vision should avoid censorship or evaluation of ideas (these belong to the next level). Pretty much anything is

possible at the vision stage, but the key is that the vision must be shared.

When Chris Curtis ran for student body president last year at **Southwest Missouri State University**, he recognized the problem of illegal file-sharing on campus and wanted students to be involved in the solution. "Part of our campaign platform was to offer the new Napster program to everyone," he says. While many schools punish students caught downloading music or use firewall "band-aids" to stop the activity, Curtis and his team wanted "to offer a positive alternative." The student body shared their vision and later elected Curtis and his running mate.

### Level Three: Strategy

Curtis talked with Napster for three months before the election and soon realized that he needed to move into the realm of **Strategy**, getting "as many details as I possibly could." Strategy is where all the skeptics and nay-sayers (who had to keep their mouths shut at the vision level) ask tough questions like: "What could go wrong?" To get at strategy, you ask: "How will we get it done?" Think your project through from the beginning to the end result—timelines, budgets, assignments, and follow-through—to assure sustainability. Keep in mind that some people are reluctant to commit to a vision unless and until the "How?" is clear to them.

At **Rhode Island College**, the Student Community Government came up with a strategy to combat an ongoing student concern: the lack of parking on campus. To prove they were serious about solving the problem, SCG officers presented the university president with petitions signed by fellow students and worked hard with administrators to create a feasible, detailed plan. The painstaking work paid off. "After three years of hearing complaints, this past school year brought a new parking lot and blueprints to have other parking lots tarred," says April Arnold, SCG vice president.

### Level Four: Action

Only once the planning is complete and your team is clear on the "How?" is it time to move into **Action**. Here, you make specific commitments



and requests, and every word you say is geared toward catalyzing specific results. Marcio Canedo, a student at **Columbia University's** School of International and Public Affairs in New York, had a project to set up a restaurant "Where East Meets West" in New York City's Upper West Side. To make it happen, he needed to make some bold promises (for the business plan, menu, and location) and requests (for an architect, training the restaurant staff, and funding: a whopping \$200,000.)

At the action level, problems can be caused by not stating clearly what you want. If you leave things hanging, you and your team end up baffled by unintended outcomes. Instead, come up with a clear request—for a specific action or outcome, as measurable as possible, and in time, such as: "Will you please call me tomorrow at noon so that we can discuss changes to the budget?"

In climbing the pyramid to action, be sure to pay attention to other key aspects of communication—the stepping stones along the way:

### The Art of Powerful Feedback

Imagine you're running an SG meeting. How do you keep other student leaders from being late, goofing off instead of doing their fair share, or dominating the group? What if there's one team member that really riles you? Putting up with him in public but then bashing him privately isn't the answer.

Gossiping about someone who isn't there is understandable—after all, having your friends agree with you is much easier than confronting the culprit—but gossip can destroy teams and even organizations. A key leadership skill is knowing how to give productive feedback. If you have an issue with someone, talk to the person who can do something about it. "If one person happens to be out of line, we would start out with a personal conversation," says Michael Lofton, SGA vice president at the **University of Dayton** in Ohio. During your discussion, remind everyone of the group's focus and try to get them back on track. "I would talk to them about what our objective is, what we're trying to accomplish, and let them know 'This is what's not happening,'" says Michelle Richards, Associated Students activities vice president at **Snow College** in Utah.

When you give feedback, do everyone a favor: avoid complaining or hurling accusations (like "Why do I always end up doing all the work?"). Blaming and complaining are no-no's—communication that points to the past and only reinforces the very reality you want to change. "I believe that there are many ways to communicate, and I believe that one can do it without being abrupt," says Salma Siddick, 2003-2004 Associated Student Government vice president of student affairs at **Bellevue Community College** in Washington. "If that still didn't work, then I would honestly say 'Look, you know people are doing their job, but



### The Five Steps of Good Feedback

1. Don't barge in. Unless they're open to your feedback, you're wasting your time. Ask: "Do you have a moment? I'd like to tell you something."
2. Don't talk about what they did wrong but about your experience. Avoid characterizations. "You're selfish!" is unlikely to get you what you want.
3. Clarify the consequences of their behavior: "When you don't show up for the mailing, I end up saving the day, but it costs us time for fund raising."
4. Ask if they're open to working out a mutually acceptable solution.
5. Thank them.

you're not pulling your weight, and it's kind of pulling everyone else down."

### Listen Up!

What if you're on the receiving end of other student leaders or members who confront you with uncomfortable feedback? "I personally will take what the students say and either see it as a way to improve Senate or see if it's something that can be brought up so everyone knows about it," Morin says.

Besides being honest about mistakes, be sure you open up your ears. "Listening is extremely important because everyone has ideas, and you never know who's going to come up with an idea that will just take the cake," Morin says. But although listening is a fundamental skill, we aren't taught how to do it. How-to books and listening courses are rare. There are debating clubs and championships, but no Oscars for excellent listeners. No wonder: When we see leaders on TV, they usually talk. Listening is invisible and under-researched, while talking gets the attention.

Yet listening produces real results. You can make or break people by the way you listen to them. The Chinese character for listening encompasses the symbols for "eyes," "ears," "you," "undivided attention," and "love." Listening with these attributes may be an important lever for shaping the future. If

### Learning to Listen

- Focus on them, not on yourself.
- Put your tendency to evaluate on hold.
- Mentally recreate what they're saying. Take notes if necessary.
- See things from their point of view.
- Listen for the "gold"—not the garbage.
- Listen one minute longer than may be comfortable.
- Experiment with listening. What results could you cause purely by the way you listen to other people? What if you produced three times your current results simply by listening?
- Remember: Your advice is noise in their ears.

you listen up, amazing things might happen.

And the great thing is, listening is virtually free—you can do it right where you are. "When your friends come up to you and complain about something, I think, 'Can I do something about that? Yeah, I can,'" Gibbons says. "It's all about having your finger on the pulse of the university."

You can also institutionalize listening on campus through suggestion boxes and hearings. "We keep boxes all around campus for anyone to write in suggestions for us," Richards says. "Anything goes, and every single response is answered."

Siddick says that listening goes hand in hand with democratic leadership. "It's extremely important because we're elected by students, and we represent students. If we don't listen, we're not representing the students that elected us, so basically we're not doing our job. It's a two-way situation. Nobody has anything to lose by listening to someone."

### How Do You Say It When Cultures Clash?

Some communication breakdowns stem from cultural clashes on increasingly multicultural campuses. In classes at Columbia (where students come from some 100 countries), typical American students have no problem expressing opinions vociferously. But Maria Castro, a Colombian who came to study in the United States, was amazed that "students here disagree" openly with professors. Back in Latin America, "you aren't supposed to disagree on what they think." Castro's classmate Leticia Sanchez quoted a Japanese student as saying that in his country, only "fools" would dominate a conversation. The "wise" person stays silent, except for a "profound comment at the end."

Such cultural communication barriers can affect student participation—in class and in campus activities. But there are ways to make sure that all students get involved, regardless of their backgrounds. "We have a minority affairs division in SG," Lofton says. "We have three unity chairs, directors of campus unity. We have a very, very diverse voice." And multicultural events can be fun. "Next year we'll be having a sports night where people from different cultures can teach other students their sports. It's a chance to get to know other people on an individual basis," Richards says.

The bottom line: communicate, communicate, communicate. "Each year holds a new battle for SCG as new students arrive," Arnold says. "Communicating with the student body is a task that will never be complete." **SL**

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