

Symbolic Leadership: The Symbolic Nature of Leadership

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Excellent leaders communicate, communicate, and communicate.

—Gen W. L. Creech
Commander, Tactical Air Command, 1978–84

The test of a leader lies in the reaction and response of his followers. His worth as a leader is measured by the achievements of the led . . . the ultimate test of his effectiveness.

—Gen Omar N. Bradley

Present and potential leaders are frequently admonished to “communicate.” In an essay on “Guidelines for Leadership,” for example, Gen Robert T. Herres, then vice chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, listed *communicate* as the first of six guidelines he posited for would-be leaders.¹ Air Force Pamphlet 35-49, *Air Force Leadership*, provides leaders with 10 “ways of increasing . . . personal and position power,” the fifth one of which is *communicate*: “Unless a leader can communicate a vision or purpose, followers cannot be empowered to act.”² Such counsel is not limited to military sources. In their book on leadership for the American Management Association, for example, J. W. McLean and William Weitzel propose six leadership skills, the second one being *communications*.³ They list it only second and in the middle of their text, despite their assertion that “success in putting into practical use the principles and techniques of leadership . . . described in this book will be directly dependent upon [the] ability to communicate.”⁴ Is communication merely a “skill,” important to be sure, but just part of one of the numerous “guidelines” offered today to leaders and would-be leaders in most writings on leadership? No.

Communication is not one of the skills—or tools—of leadership; it is the very process by which leadership itself

is exercised, without which neither leaders nor leadership would exist.⁵ That should be apparent from even a cursory examination of typical definitions of the terms. *Communication* is most often defined today by professionals in the field as *symbolic interaction*—that is, the sending and receiving of messages in the form of verbal and non-verbal symbols⁶ to generate meaning.⁷ Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson put it this way: “Communication is based on the transfer of symbols. This transfer allows for the creation of meaning within individuals.”⁸ *Leadership* is most typically defined today by professionals who study it as *noncoercive influence*—that is, the exercise of interpersonal influence in a given situation, directed toward the attainment of goals or objectives.⁹ Robert Hogan and others note that “leadership involves persuading other people to pursue a common goal that is important for the welfare of the group. . . . Leadership [,indeed,] is persuasion.”¹⁰ How does one seek to persuade—to influence—others? Without resorting to coercion or, say, extrasensory perception, there is but one way to do so: symbolic interaction— that is, communication.¹¹ Accordingly, communication is the process by which leadership is exercised and *not* merely a tool of erstwhile leaders or something leaders do or do not have at their disposal, such as their IQs, heights, personalities, or skills with word-processing equipment.

Viewing leadership *as* communication and perceiving the currency of its realm to be symbolic interaction have important ramifications for leaders and those people they seek to lead. A few of these ramifications are noted and briefly discussed below. They are considered in the context of oral communication because most leaders expend most of their leadership currency listening and talking (and in that order).¹²

- *Leaders cannot not communicate.* Just as delaying or refusing to make a decision *is* a decision, so is *not* communicating with another who expects to be communicated with an act of communication. Thus it is that virtually everything leaders say or do that becomes

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known to others is communication.¹³ For every symbol—verbal or nonverbal—stimulates meaning in people who encounter it.

- *Leaders communicate in four contexts.* All human communication occurs in one or more of four overlapping contexts:

1. *Personal (intrapersonal,* which is tantamount to thinking, for symbolic interaction with one’s self *is* thinking; and *interpersonal,* which is symbolic interaction with one or a few who don’t comprise a group).

2. *Group* (symbolic interaction with three to 12 persons—a small group—which is typical of most leadership groups. A large group consists of more than a dozen or so).

3. *Organizational* (symbolic interaction within one or more networks, formal and informal, of persons in a relatively structured, ongoing entity with a purpose).

4. *Public* (symbolic interaction in nonmediated, “live” settings featuring a “speaker” and an “audience,” and in mediated settings such as those characteristic of “mass media of communication”).

Each of these contexts places different demands on leaders and the led, and few leaders are unusually successful in each. That is so in part because the response of listeners to symbols varies with the context—that is, the “same message” sent in each one will not produce exactly the same responses in listeners. Wise leaders seek to maximize the number of opportunities to function in the contexts in which they are most successful.

- *Leaders are affected by the conditions inherent in the use of symbols.* Conditions inherent in the use of symbols include the following:

1. *Symbols are arbitrary.* No necessary relationship exists between a symbol—say, the word *quality*—and its supposed meaning: that for which the word stands. That fact is especially the case of such other abstractions as “leadership” and “communication.” To communicate with another person, therefore, all affected users of symbols must associate in their minds something similar, regardless of one’s insistence that his/her own association is the “right” one. Besides, no “right” association exists—only appropriate or agreed-upon associations.

2. *Symbols are ambiguous.* By their very nature, symbols have more than one meaning. As Roger M. D’Aprix has observed, the average adult in the United States uses about 2,000 words from day to day. The 500 *most frequently used* words have a total of 14,000 dictionary definitions!¹⁴ Such commonly shared, so-called objective, *denotative* meanings of verbal symbols—which are *described*, not *prescribed*, in dictionaries—are but one of four types of meanings relevant to making sense of a given set of symbols. The other three types of meaning of symbols are (a) *connotative*, the more personalized, so-called subjective meaning; (b) *contextual*, the meaning derived purely from the context in which symbols are used; and (c) *relational*, the meaning generated about the presumed relationship between the users of symbols—a critical but perhaps underappreciated aspect of communication, particularly in the military. A useful way to remember these four aspects of meaning is to think of the meaning of a communication as having two components: *reportorial* or *content* (denotative- and connotative-based meaning) and *relational* (context- and relationship-based meaning).

If the meaning of any given verbal or nonverbal symbol has such multiplicity, it is apparent that it and the symbol are not the same. As Hackman and Johnson observe, “Communication is based on the transfer of symbols”—*not meaning*. This transfer allows for the creation of meaning within individuals; indeed, it requires that meaning

be created there.¹⁵ This is why communication—the generation of meaning via symbolic interaction—is a collaborative process. Because it is, *anticipation* of meaning and *attribution* of intention may overpower the actual exchange of messages in a communication situation, creating an otherwise inexplicable “failure to communicate.”

3. *Symbols are alterative.* Symbols, verbal and nonverbal, can create and alter reality. Merely by labeling someone or something, a leader can affect the way others react to either. That is the basis of the well-known Pygmalion Effect (the powerful effect of the expectations of others on one’s performance) and the Galatea Effect (the similar effect of self-expectations on performance).¹⁶ It is also the foundation of the analysis in most modern leadership texts of the transforming power of “visionary” and “empowering” communication of organizational leaders. As Hackman and Johnson write, “Viewing organizations [themselves] as the product of symbol using [as many modern writers do,] suggests that organizational leaders play an important role in the creation of organizational meaning or culture. In particular, the organizational leader is actively involved in ‘symbolic leadership’ by using symbols to determine the direction of the organization.”¹⁷ In the case of the US Air Force, many of the most important symbols are givens, but not all of them are—a fact that gives leaders opportunities to select many of their own.

Thus, leadership has been called a “language game,” because what leaders do is “manage meaning,” as described by L. R. Pondy:

The effectiveness of a leader lies in his ability to make activity meaningful for those in his role set—not to change behavior but to give others a sense of understanding what they are doing and especially to articulate it so they can communicate about the meaning of their behavior. . . . If in addition the leader can put it into words, then the meaning of what the group is doing becomes a social fact. . . . This dual capacity . . . to make sense of things and to put them into language meaningful to large numbers of people gives the person who has it enormous leverage.¹⁸

- *Leaders must rely upon symbols to cause change in organizations.* The “leadership challenges” confronting contemporary leaders are numerous and at times numbing. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner’s book on the subject provides the following fivefold list of “leadership behavior that [based on empirical research,] emerges when people are accomplishing extraordinary things in organizations.” These behaviors, they write, account for more than 70 percent of the behavior and strategies in executive respondents’ personal “best case” studies and interviews:

1. *Challenging the process* by
 - a. searching for opportunities and
 - b. experimenting and taking risks.
2. *Inspiring a shared vision* by
 - a. envisioning the future and
 - b. enlisting others.
3. *Enabling others to act* by
 - a. fostering collaboration and
 - b. strengthening others.
4. *Modeling the way* by
 - a. setting the example and
 - b. planning small wins.
5. *Encouraging the heart* by
 - a. recognizing contributions and
 - b. celebrating accomplishments.¹⁹

This list is not much different from other enumerated challenges to leaders, especially to people who desire to be “transformational leaders,” as James McGregor Burns calls those who embody these behaviors.²⁰ To engage in such behaviors (or even to order others to act in specified ways) is to become a symbolic leader, for one can engage in none of these behaviors without resort to the process of communication. The most successful—that is, the most effective, efficient, and ethical—leaders in and out of the military intuitively understand or learn that *communication and leadership are thus inextricably intertwined*. Nevertheless, they still may forget that fact, particularly when they find themselves in totally new (to them) communication contexts. For example, this author has seen on more than one occasion during the past three decades the difficulty with which a retired, decorated military officer of high rank and demonstrated leadership skills makes a transition to academe, where some symbol-meaning associations differ markedly from those in the military context.

Most “leadership failures” are not “failures to communicate,” as the warden in the motion picture *Cool Hand Luke* says to Paul Newman’s character. Leaders cannot fail to communicate for the same reason that communicators generally cannot not communicate: Whatever they do or do not do in a given context *is* communication. It is thus the failure of leaders to communicate successfully (i.e., ethically, efficiently, and/or effectively) that results in “leadership failure”—not their “failure to communicate.”

Why do leaders fail to communicate successfully and thus fail to that extent in the exercise of leadership? They fail to learn, or they forget the symbolic nature of communication. It hardly matters what aspect of leaders’ responsibilities one examines: It will be dependent upon or otherwise related to communication—symbolic interaction. Whether one is concerned with what J. Kevin Barge refers to as the “five basic functions that lead to effective decision making” by leaders²¹ or with the six “resources” that G. B. Graen and T. A. Scandura say leaders have access to in their “exchanges” with followers for “performance,”²² the perceptive and ultimately successful leader is perforce required to focus on symbolic interaction. Yet, too many of the latest additions to the estimated 10,000 published works on leadership continue to treat communication as something leaders merely engage in (or not) at their peril rather than something inherent in the nature of leadership itself.²³ There is a difference in the perspectives, and the difference can explain why some leaders are more successful than others and why the responses of some leaders’ followers are different from those of other seemingly similar followers.

Notes

1. Gen Robert T. Herres, “Guidelines for Leadership,” in AU-24, *Concepts for Air Force Leadership*, ed. Richard I. Lester and A. Glenn Morton (Maxwell AFB, Ala.: Air University Press, 1990), 390.

2. Cited in Dewey E. Johnson, “Leadership: Some Thoughts after Twenty Years,” in AU-24, 353.

3. J. W. McLean and William Weitzel, *Leadership: Magic, Myth or Method* (New York: Amacon, 1992), 138. Well-known management/leadership consultant Warren Bennis does much the same thing in his essay on “The 4 Competencies of Leadership,” in AU-24, 347–51. He posits the competencies of “management of attention,” “meaning,” “trust,” and “self,” describing the “management of meaning” as communication of vision—this, despite the fact that communication is required to manage attention, trust, and self as well. The latter, for example, he defines as “knowing one’s skills and *deploying them effectively*,” 350 (emphasis added).

4. McLean and Weitzel, 138. See also, for example, Genevieve Capowski, “Anatomy of a Leader: Where Are the Leaders of Tomorrow?” *Management Review*, March 1994, 16.

5. That is why several recent textbooks are based on the assumption that “leadership is best understood from a communication standpoint.” Michael Z. Hackman and Craig E. Johnson, *Leadership: A Communication Perspective* (Prospect Heights, Ill.: Waveland Press, Inc., 1991), 6. (The author uses this text in his group discussion and leadership class.) Note also J. Kevin Barge’s statement that “leadership is best explained by communication skills,” in his *Leadership: Communication Skills for Organizations and Groups* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1994), vi.

6. Technically, communication is said to involve the sending and receiving of signals, signs, and symbols, which are different—albeit related. For present purposes, that distinction is being ignored. Note that a symbol is anything that stands for or represents something other than itself, and a *verbal* symbol refers to *words*—oral or written; a nonverbal symbol refers to every other kind—from eye contact, facial expression, gestures, posture, and tone of voice (in cases of oral communication) to form and formatting, “style,” and type size (in cases of written communication).

7. See the definition of *meaning*, below.

8. Hackman and Johnson, 6. Note that only *symbols* are transferred. Meaning is not, for it cannot be: it can be generated only *within* persons.

9. In his recent essay on “Leadership for a Quality Organization,” Richard I. Lester writes, “Leadership is the art of influencing people to accomplish an organization’s purpose.” *The Journal of Leadership Studies* 2 (1995): 6.

10. Robert Hogan, Gordon J. Curphy, and Joyce Hogan, “What We Know about Leadership,” *American Psychologist* 49 (June 1994): 493. This summary analysis is highly recommended.

11. Other writers have made the connection explicit: “Leadership *is* a social interaction” (emphasis added). Roger Ayman, “Leadership Perception . . .,” in Martin M. Chemers and Roger Ayman, *Leadership Theory and Research* (New York: Academic Press, Inc., 1993), 140. Similarly, Jay A. Conger writes, “If we think of leadership as essentially a process of influencing others, then language becomes a key means of social influence.” *The Charismatic Leader: Behind the Mystique of Exceptional Leadership* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1989), 70.

One should note in passing that some scholars in the field of speech communication use the term *symbolic interaction* to refer to communication generally and *symbolic inducement* to conscious attempts to communicate persuasively.

12. A variety of studies has documented the fact, each of which reveals that college students and/or adults generally spend most of their “waking time” in these communicative activities: listening (45–55 percent), speaking (16–30 percent), reading (13–17 percent), and writing (8–14 percent). See Joseph A. DeVito, *Human Communication*, 6th ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 78.

13. A useful reminder of just how complicated this aspect of communication can become—regardless of intentions—may be found in the humorous essay of Lt Col William S. Pine and Lt William R. Bauman, “Effective Communication: ‘If Anything Can Go Wrong, It Will,’” in AU-24, 269–70.

14. Cited in McLean and Weitzel, 139.

15. Hackman and Johnson, 6. Actually, to be accurate, meaning is *jointly* created by the parties to any act of communication, which makes communication a truly *collaborative* activity.

16. *Ibid.*, 159–66.

17. Ibid., 147.

18. L. R. Pondy, "Leadership Is a Language Game," in *Leadership: Where Else Can We Go?* ed. M. W. McCall Jr., and M. M. Lombardo (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1978), 94–95.

19. James M. Kouzes and Barry Z. Posner, *The Leadership Challenge: How to Get Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 310.

20. James McGregor Burns, *Leadership* (New York: Harper and Row, 1978).

21. Barge, 21. The functions are said to be (1) establish a set of operating procedures, (2) analyze problems, (3) generate solutions, (4) evaluate solutions, and (5) determine methods for implementing solutions. A much more useful framework for decision making, developed by the author while

he was studying at the Harvard Business School, is available by writing him c/o the Department of Speech and Theatre, Troy State University, Troy AL 36082.

22. G. B. Graen and T. A. Scandura, "Toward a Psychology of Dyadic Organizing," in *Research in Organizational Behavior IX*, ed. B. Shaw and L. L. Cummings (Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, 1987), 175–208. They identify the "resources" as (1) influence in decision making, (2) information, (3) valued task assignments, (4) latitude to perform tasks, (5) support, and (6) attention (concern for the other's professional development).

23. Robert E. Kelley, *The Power of Followership: How to Create Leaders People Want to Follow and Followers Who Lead Themselves* (New York: Doubleday Currency, 1992), 17.