Principles of Strategic Communication

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MEMORANDUM FOR SEE DISTRIBUTION

SUBJECT: Principles of Strategic Communication Guide

Strategic Communication has been viewed as an emerging and extremely pertinent joint concept in recent years. Several important review panels have addressed Strategic Communication (SC) and the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff has designated Strategic Communication as one of the CJCS Special Areas of Emphasis for joint education in 2007 and 2008.

Despite the interest and attention, Strategic Communication is still a developing concept. Contributing to the challenge is the lack of approved policy and doctrine.

As part of a larger DoD Strategic Communication education initiative, the Department held the first Strategic Communication Education Summit in March 2008, at the Joint Forces Staff College in Norfolk, Va. One of the most significant outcomes was the development of "Principles of Strategic Communication" to help standardize Strategic Communication education until policy and doctrine are published.

Through the collaborative efforts of DoD, State Department, and civilian educators and practitioners, the Principles initially developed in the Strategic Communication Education Summit have been refined into this guide. The purpose of this publication is to provide a tool to assist dialogue and instruction promoting understanding Strategic Communication.

As the Strategic Communication concept continues to mature, these Principles will be reviewed every two years until they are incorporated into formal doctrine. Comments are welcome and should be addressed to the Office of the Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Joint Communication.

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Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary
of Defense for Public Affairs

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Principles of Strategic Communication

Definition of a principle: *A fundamental tenet; a determining characteristic; an essential quality; an enduring attribute.*

Strategic Communication (SC) has been described as the orchestration and/or synchronization of actions, images, and words to achieve a desired effect, yet there is more to understanding the concept.

As the joint force and agencies of the U.S. Government have begun executing Strategic Communication processes, common fundamentals have emerged. Through the collaborative efforts of DoD, State Department, civilian educators, and Strategic Communication practitioners, those common fundamentals have been consolidated and refined into nine principles of SC, described below. These principles are provided to assist dialogue and instruction promoting understanding of Strategic Communication.

Figure 1 below lists the nine principles of SC, with a short description of each. A more detailed explanation of each principle follows. The principles are not listed in any order of precedence.

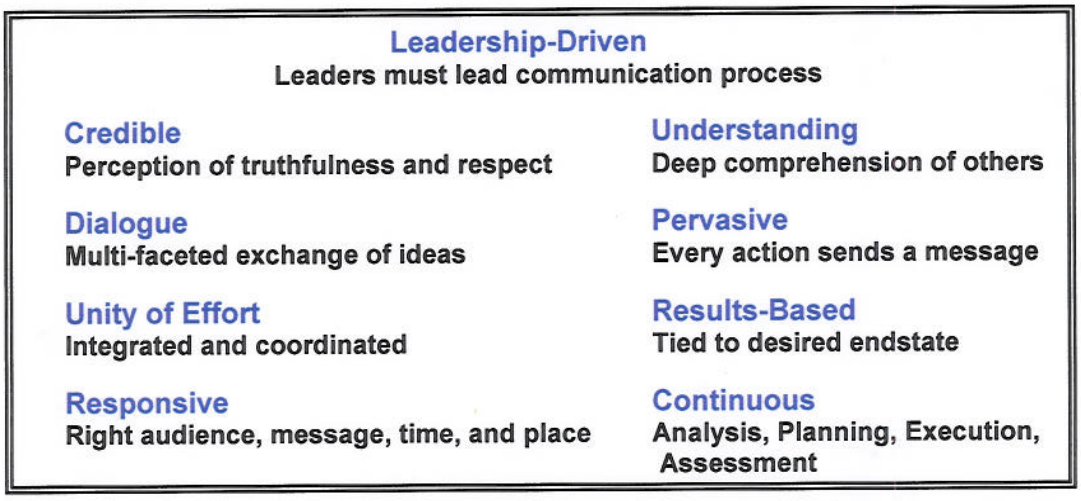

Figure 1. Principles of Strategic Communication

Leadership-Driven. Leaders must decisively engage and drive the Strategic Communication process.
To ensure integration of communication efforts, leaders should place communication at the core of everything they do. Successful Strategic Communication – integrating actions, words, and images – begins with clear leadership intent and guidance. Desired objectives and outcomes are then closely tied to major lines of operation outlined in the organization, command or joint campaign plan. The results are actions and words linked to the plan. Leaders also need to properly resource strategic communication at a priority comparable to other important areas such as logistics and intelligence.

Credible. **Perception of truthfulness and respect between all parties.**
Credibility and consistency are the foundation of effective communication; they build and rely on perceptions of accuracy, truthfulness, and respect. Actions, images, and words must be integrated and coordinated internally and externally with no perceived inconsistencies between words and deeds or between policy and deeds. Strategic Communication also requires a professional force of properly trained, educated, and attentive communicators. Credibility also often entails communicating through others who may be viewed as more credible.

Understanding. **Deep comprehension of attitudes, cultures, identities, behavior, history, perspectives and social systems. What we say, do, or show, may not be what others hear or see.**
An individual's experience, culture, and knowledge provide the context shaping their perceptions and therefore their judgment of actions. We must understand that concepts of moral values are not absolute, but are relative to the individual's societal and cultural narrative. Audiences determine meaning by interpretation of our communication with them; thus what we say, do, or show, may not be what they hear or see. Acting without understanding our audiences can lead to critical misunderstandings with serious consequences.

Understanding subjective impacts of culture, language, history, religion, environment, and other factors is critical when crafting communication strategy for a relevant population. Building relationships and collaboration with the interagency, coalition, host nation, academic, non-profit, and business communities can facilitate better understanding of audiences.

Dialogue. **Multi-faceted exchange of ideas to promote understanding and build relationships.**
Effective communication requires a multi-faceted dialogue among parties. It involves active listening, engagement, and the pursuit of mutual understanding, which leads to trust. Success depends upon building and leveraging relationships. Leaders should take advantage of these relationships to place U.S. policies and actions in context prior to operations or events. Successful development and implementation of communication strategy will seldom happen overnight; relationships take time to develop and require listening, respect for culture, and trust-building.

Pervasive. **Every action, image, and word sends a message.**
Communication no longer has boundaries, in time or space. All players are communicators, wittingly or not. Everything the Joint Force says, does, or fails to do and say, has intended and unintended consequences. Every action, word, and image sends a message, and every team member is a messenger, from the 18-year-old rifleman to the commander. All communication can have strategic impact, and unintended audiences are unavoidable in the global information environment; therefore, leaders must think about possible "N^{th}" order communication results of their actions.

Unity of Effort. **Integrated and coordinated, vertically and horizontally.**
Strategic Communication is a consistent, collaborative process that must be integrated vertically from strategic through tactical levels, and horizontally across stakeholders. Leaders coordinate and synchronize capabilities and instruments of power within their area of responsibility, areas of influence, and areas of interest to achieve desired outcomes. Recognizing that your

agency/organization will not act alone, ideally, all those who may have an impact should be part of communication integration.

Results-Based. Actions to achieve specific outcomes in pursuit of a well-articulated endstate.
Strategic communication should be focused on achieving specific desired results in pursuit of a clearly defined endstate. Communication processes, themes, targets and engagement modes are derived from policy, strategic vision, campaign planning and operational design. Strategic communication is not simply "another tool in the leader's toolbox," but must guide all an organization does and says; encompassing and harmonized with other functions for desired results.

Responsive. Right audience, right message, right time, and right place.
Strategic Communication should focus on long-term end states or desired outcomes. Rapid and timely response to evolving conditions and crises is important as these may have strategic effects. Communication strategy must reach intended audiences through a customized message that is relevant to those audiences. Strategic Communication involves the broader discussion of aligning actions, images, and words to support policy, overarching strategic objectives and the longer term big picture. Acting within adversaries' decision cycles is also key because tempo and adaptability count. Frequently there will be a limited window of opportunity for specific messages to achieve a desired result.

An organization must remain flexible enough to address specific issues with specific audiences, often at specific moments in time, by communicating to achieve the greatest effect. All communication carries inherent risk and requires a level of risk acceptance within the organization. Leaders must develop and instill a culture that rewards initiative while not overreacting to setbacks and miscues. While risk must be addressed in the form of assumptions in planning, it should not restrain leaders' freedom of action providing it has been taken into consideration appropriately.

Continuous. Diligent ongoing research, analysis, planning, execution, and assessment that feeds planning and action.
Strategic Communication is a continuous process of research and analysis, planning, execution, and assessment. Success in this process requires diligent and continual analysis and assessment feeding back into planning and action. Strategic Communication supports the organization's objectives by adapting as needed and as plans change. The SC process should ideally operate at a faster tempo or rhythm than our adversaries.