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COMMUNICATION

Good Leadership Is About Communicating “Why”

by Nancy Duarte
In an ongoing crisis, clear communication is more important and more difficult than when things seem normal. Employees and customers are hungry for information, so we’re tempted to pull together presentations and communicate with urgency instead of with careful planning. But if we present without addressing our audience’s core questions of what, how, and why, we’ll sow more confusion than we bring clarity.
At my company, we rework thousands of talks each year for large brands and high-powered executives. When their communications are high-stakes, most of our clients come to us prepared with what needs to happen and how, but they’ve rarely answered the question why.

So, why answer why?

Let’s put it this way: If your boss comes to you and says, “I need you take on this additional project on top of your current work load,” what is your first question going to be? It probably has nothing to do with setting your alarm, re-arranging your schedule, or any other version of how you’re going to get the extra work done. When someone asks you to alter a current behavior, your first question is usually why? Because you’re not going to try something new or hard unless you’re motivated to do so.

Your audience is no different. If they don’t know why a new action is necessary, they won’t be motivated to help you. They’ll continue with their current comfortable behaviors, thank you very much.

Communicators often overlook answering why for two key reasons:

• They assume explaining what and how is the fastest way to influence their audience.
• They think the answer to why is so self-evident it doesn’t need unpacking.

Think about a difficult situation where it’s critical for people to rally and align. Something as simple as a team-defining internal initiative or something as grand as pulling out of the economic crisis we’re in right now. Let’s say you are confident that if your audience executes your plan, your company will pull out unscathed. You know how to do it. You pour all those insights into a passionate presentation. You get a smattering of applause and then…nothing happens.

Have you been there? You’ve worked through your scenarios, planning, research, validation and poured energy into communicating “what” needs to happen and “how” to do it. You’ve walked away disappointed by the lack of response from the very people whose lives will be improved if they would simply do “what” you said “how” you said to do it.

Let’s dissect this example a bit more.

Leaders explain the what of their insights and the how of applying the findings. This is how most leaders approach their talks, especially professionals who are deep subject matter experts. They focus on the content they want to share. Many leaders don’t even consider the why from the audience perspective because it seems so self-evident to them, they think it’s obvious to everyone.

On the other hand, let’s say you inject your talk with a compelling why — “We can reduce secondary infection rates by 40%, saving thousands of lives” or “We can reach more people and help them
advance their careers if we release our content for free.” Answering “why” often leads to a human, who will benefit from the action you’re asking people to take. It suddenly matters.

There’s a good chance your why won’t be as clear cut as the example above. So here are three strategies to help you get to the heart of the why in your next presentation.

**Ask some good what questions.**
The answers to why often hide in our subconscious, and you may have to coax them out. Sometimes, you can get to why by asking yourself a few good “what” questions such as: What is at stake if we do or do not do this? What will the future look like if we get this done? What would the state of the human condition be if we did or didn’t do this? Another way to get to why is to have someone else ask you “so what” until you can’t answer it anymore. That’ll get you to the root of “why.”

**Follow up with because.**
Just considering the why isn’t enough — you have to clearly articulate the why. Think about what action you’re asking your audience to take, and then follow it with “because.”

For example, “We need to improve our process, because ___.” Whatever reason follows a “we need to ___, because _____.” Whatever that second blank is, will answer the question of “why.”

**State alternate perspectives.**
Address skeptics and resistance by addressing potential perspectives you’ve eliminated. It might sound counterintuitive to reveal anything other than the action you’re influencing them to take, but you can better persuade an audience by sharing ideas you abandoned and, you guessed it, “why” you’ve eliminated them. By sharing the ideas that you considered, explored, tested, and then abandoned, you’ll demonstrate that you’ve thought through all the possibilities.

Answering why is an act of empathy and adds a layer of persuasion to your communications. When people know why they’re being asked to do something, they’re much more likely to do it.

In times like these, your customers and your employees need your wisdom and leadership more than ever, and you have a unique opportunity to move them forward in the midst of uncertainty. As you seek to inspire and motivate them to do the next right thing, don’t forget to include the why.

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