

The 10 Commandments of Communication

How to speak like a leader.



1. **Listen generously.** Emerson said: “First seek to understand, then to be understood.” How do you listen to an audience? Do your research. Find out who they are, what they need and want, and what they expect from you. When you step to the lectern, pause and listen. Are they ready to hear you? During your speech, keep listening. Pay attention to them. Are they leaning forward, backward or on each other? Be willing to depart from your prepared remarks to recover your rapport with them. Ask questions. Even something as simple as “Is that clear?” can reestablish contact.
2. **Say what you mean and mean what you say.** Aren’t these two phrases the same? No indeed: “Say what you mean” is about telling the truth, “Mean what you say” is about making a commitment, keeping your promise, honoring your word. Have something meaningful to say. Step to the lectern with the intention of making a difference to your audience.
3. **Use the fewest words with the fewest syllables.** I run afoul of this one all the time. It’s the main reason I rewrite so often, looking for big, two-dollar words I can swap for a single 10-cent syllable. Delete *therefore*, insert *so*. That’s real economy in writing. Remember that the basic unit of communication is not the word but the idea.
4. **Align with your audience.** We may consider it our task to speak to the audience, but it is sometimes more important to speak for them. Express those thoughts and feelings that you share with them. Even if you think they are wrong and you are the advocate of sweeping change, you must first understand and articulate *their* feelings. Great leaders know that leadership begins with the pronoun *we*.
5. **Be specific.** Use stories, anecdotes, parables and examples rather than generalities and abstractions. This is a tough one for some people. They love to wander through a topic in the abstract, scattering generalities as they go. The great teachers and speakers pepper their talks with vivid, detailed examples. “He seemed upset as he left” is general. “He blew his nose, kicked the dog and slammed the door” is specific.
6. **Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.** Don’t say “I’m glad to be here” while looking at your wristwatch. Be aware of your non-verbal communication. Your gestures, posture, facial expressions, energy, tone of voice, and a thousand other tiny, unuttered elements actually carry the true and specific meaning of your communication. We can understand the words “I love you” well enough. But their true importance, their actual meaning, is all wrapped up in how they are spoken, and by whom.
7. **Structure your speech.** One valuable way to make your talk memorable is to speak to a structure and make your listeners aware of it. Share with them the form of your

thoughts as well as the content and they will be able to follow more complex ideas. It will be easier for you to remember, too. People appreciate the scenery more with a glance at the road map every now and then.

8. **Speak to be understood.** Have the courtesy to develop your voice so that all may hear you. You groom your appearance, so why not cultivate your voice? With a little effort it can be strong, crisp, clear and various in texture, color and range. It's sad when speakers expend their energy to create a vivid, well-constructed talk and then whisper, mutter or mumble.
9. **Speak for the benefit of others.** Serve your audience well by keeping their interests foremost in your mind. This is the golden rule of speaking. As an audience member you can easily tell when a speaker is self-serving. Nothing communicates more clearly than intention.
10. **Speak from your highest self.** The highest self is where hope resides. To lead effectively requires a courageous, positive, optimistic view. As any astronaut will tell you, if you get high enough you will be in perpetual sunshine. There must be a caveat attached to this rule, however: Beware of elevating yourself with a high horse. Be humble. Having an opinion is a meager accomplishment. On most occasions a modest demeanor improves communication.

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