

BUSINESS LEADERS NEED STRONG COMMUNICATION SKILLS

Colin Powell once remarked that leadership is about people. Certainly organizations – large and small – reflect the importance they attach to leadership by paying ‘those at the top’ more than rank and file employees. *The* singular differentiator of successful leaders may be finely-tuned communication skills.

Nanci Raphael, Principal of Leadership & Executive Development, LLC, (www.keyleaders.com) based in Philadelphia, PA, consults with business leaders and business teams from entrepreneurial enterprises to Fortune 500 companies – to help them become more successful. She emphasizes that one of the key steps to building success is communication.

Raphael works with leaders and teams to enhance or rejuvenate their communication skills. One crucial ingredient is the willingness to be open to looking at oneself in a new way. She reports this can require that an individual’s ego be ‘put to sleep,’ so new information may be assimilated. Individuals intensely focused on ‘being right’ may need to give up ‘being the star’ for a time – thereby allowing change to take shape.

Raphael uses Tiger Woods as an example for the need to examine what is and isn’t working. Despite incredible success, Woods continues to actively use coaching to stay at the top of his game. It is just too easy, Raphael points out, to be myopic – to *not* see outside of ourselves and identify what may be out of alignment. The bottom line is to identify what is serving the leader or team, and what isn’t.

Nanci Raphael admits that embarking on a fresh approach to communication can seem overwhelming. The answer is captured in the Chinese proverb: “A journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.” That first single step is often an internal search – what are one’s personal obstacles? Perhaps inertia has resulted from continuing to do things the same way as in the past – while circumstances have changed. To emerge from the circle of frustration, the leader’s thinking and approach simply have to change as well.

Business authors James Collins and Jerry Porras addressed the power of communication in their 1994 bestseller, *Built To Last: Successful Habits of Visionary Companies*. They coined a jazzy acronym, BHAG, to identify the creative envisioning of highly successful leaders. A BHAG is a Big Hairy Audacious Goal. BHAGs involve (often big!) risks; BHAGs create a vision of what will be. Their research repeatedly revealed that companies with long-lasting success were stimulated for periods of ten – thirty years by a clearly articulated BHAG.

For instance, in 1907, Henry Ford articulated his company's astonishing goal: "To democratize the automobile." He proclaimed the company vision:

To build a motor car for the great multitude...It will be so low in price that no man making a good salary will be unable to own one – and enjoy with his family the blessing of hours of pleasure in God's great open spaces...everybody will be able to afford one, and everyone will have one. The horse will have disappeared from our highways; the automobile will be taken for granted.

At about the same time, another distinguished leader emerged with an unprecedented aim: to serve the unique educational needs of mentally retarded students. She was Helene Devereux, a native of Philadelphia. By 1911, her pioneering work was underway. When challenged, Devereux declared:

The Devereux aim must always be to innovate and build programs so forward-looking that they will never reach completion – but which will perpetually pioneer in developing improved insights and solutions.

Both of these distinguished leaders worked tirelessly to create the future they envisioned. Their efforts guided the achievement of that which did not yet exist. Working in the present, their initiatives and activities captured what was to be – decades into the future. Communication skills may, indeed, be the singular ingredient required for moving businesses forward. As cowboy comedian Will Rodgers succinctly quipped, "Even if you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just stand there."

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